Book Review

Informing the Disciplines: Women’s Studies across the University Curricula
Jacqueline Reid-Walsh


© Jacqueline Reid-Walsh, 2002 & 2014
Reprinted from: http://www.queensu.ca/music/links/gems/past/No.%201/reviews.htm

Copyright Notice: The policy of GEMS is that authors will retain copyright to their materials.

This edited anthology of essays about how Women’s Studies has informed the various disciplines across the spectrum of the university is a laudable and ambitious—perhaps too ambitious and too multi-purpose an undertaking. The "Foreword" and "Introduction" provide a useful perspective as to why and how this collection emerged, the latter being more specific and useful than the former. The "Foreword" unintentionally evokes irony by stating that their title "invoke(es) the modest (!) rubric of transformation" – unfortunately Women’s Studies practitioners may be weary of the (mis)use of this term at conferences and the shocking reality of Women’s Studies programmes, in many cases still struggling to survive. The "Introduction" clearly describes a potentially wide audience including Women’s Studies instructors, undergraduate students and lay people. The book, however, suffers from being intended to be both a "primer" and a text that instructors typically located in a single discipline can pick up and use to discover some of the main ideas and contributors to other fields. Indeed, the book is useful to an instructor who needs a brief summary of other fields in order to further her knowledge and identify references that
need to be consulted in order to develop a well-rounded, comprehensive course. For example, an instructor with a background in literature can read the brief history of music by Canadian music historian Ursula Rempel to learn about the trajectory of major European women composers, and discover through the bibliography basic names and references for further research. Or, alternatively, an instructor outside the professions would find the discussion of women in architecture by Jean Halgren Kilde conceptually interesting (although why an architecture professor did not write the essay is puzzling). The most useful sections for an introductory course instructor, however, are the succinct introductions to each section: to the humanities, to the social sciences, to the natural sciences and to the professions. The questions at the end of each introduction provide a useful rubric with which to consider a field and perhaps offer a "map" to the vexing interconnections and contradictions between them. This can be helpful when addressing questions from students that suggest Women's Studies is "owned" by one particular discipline or field, or that want to know more about the relationship between the humanities, the social sciences, and the natural sciences.

Whether the book could be or should be useful as an introductory "primer" when the essays are all ten pages or shorter is doubtful. Also, there is a widespread unevenness in tone and approach, that while interesting to read, is incompatible with the needs of introductory students who may be bewildered enough by the plethora of names, dates, concepts —yet alone writing styles. Ultimately, while I would recommend this book to a University library and perhaps a Women’s’ Studies resource collection, I would not recommend it as a course textbook.