Dating and Gender: Articulating Pedagogy
Author(s): Karen Kus
Published by: The Department of Historical Studies, University of Toronto Mississauga
Stable URL: http://jps.library.utoronto.ca/index.php/prandium/editor/submission/21846/
Gender influences toward the dating culture have been (sub)consciously practiced throughout history, reproducing social binaries and stereotypes. Through an analysis of the start-up of relationships (initial stages of the development of relationships) in the Western context, one can critically observe the gendered expectations of dating rules. It can be argued that these socially expected dating norms and rules of courting reproduce gender inequalities in intimate relationships.

Traditional attitudes towards dating and sexual activity remain ongoing as sheer scripts of gendered based social expectations. These cultural expectations commonly influenced individuals to serve gendered behaviours and actions as formulas to finding love. The romantic ideal of what dating “should be like” is not simply a current notion projected by mainstream media of “chick-flicks” and novels, but rather a mirroring of historical trends of ‘ideal’ love. Classic narratives of pursuing romance, including stories of calling upon a lover to their balcony, are continuously re-played throughout historical idealism of dating as gendered geared bargaining. Canons of Western literature have conveyed guidelines and strategies to find love (geared largely towards women), displaying a utopic ideal of what dating “should be like.”

Bringing attention to these dating constructs through a feminist theoretical lens has been underexplored in the curriculum. This inspired me to organize an event for students that captured feminist insights on the dating culture though a historical overview, bridging critical application of the personal to the political. Challenging social norms of the dos and don’ts of dating, the event aimed at deconstructing how the dating culture perpetuates inequality and heteronormativity. The event titled What’s Love Got to Do With It? Dating and Gender, hosted on March 20th, 2014, was publically open, though specifically geared for Women and Gender Studies undergraduate students. With a layout of a brief lecture, round table discussion groups, and a panel, the turnout was successful with approximately forty-five attendees.

What initially sparked the need for this event was noticing a gap in the curriculum in the course I was teaching. In the “Women in Families” (WGS250) course, a prime focus was on theorized notions of marriage and families examined through a historical and transnational context. Large volumes of literature identify the barriers women experience in marriage and the pressures of social conformity to become married due to hidden social constructs of normalized gender roles. Unraveling these notions of gendered constructs in class incited student interest, questioning the whys of existing barriers. To respond to these questions required an exploration of the root of the barriers and how social factors feed the soil. Driven by the curious student demands as to why these barriers exist in marriages, I
noticed a key component of analysis was underexplored— what happens before marriage, i.e. during the dating stage? Enthusiastic, I anticipated an event would be an ideal way to cultivate the need for this subject and to elaborate and introduce WGS pedagogy for students.

Welcoming an open environment for knowledge exchange, the event was organized so that students may have the opportunity to proactively engage and discuss the content presented. Beginning with a lecture by myself, Karen Kus, key topics were raised for analysis, including; heteronormative romantic rituals, courtship in the 1950s, hierarchies of race and class institutionalized throughout romantic ideology, dating and popularity, sexual double standards and expected gendered behaviour, virginity and gender, cultural coercion, economics of dating, and rules and tactics to find love. This lecture was designed to ignite student participation by raising critical questions, with the opportunity to discuss them further in work groups. After the lecture students were asked to elaborate on the topics presented, addressing how the dating culture reproduces socialized inequalities. Alongside a list of key topics and questions for discussion, each table of students had a collection of contemporary so-called love manuals: self-help books and popular movies on dating. Conversation was soaring as students shared their perspectives, expanding from the lecture content. The expertise of Dr. Victoria Tahmasebi-Birgani and Jeff May, both professors in the Women and Gender Studies program, brought educational value to the event serving as panelists, including myself. The panelists concluded the day by capturing the objectives of the event through their responses of the ongoing topics discussed throughout, offering their valuable critiques and opinions.

To measure the success of the event, an anonymous evaluation was distributed for participants. The feedback revealed that the students enjoyed the opportunity to discuss these issues in a less formal, but still academic, environment and having their own lived experiences heard and discussed. A question on the form asked students what they learnt and whether they were able to make an academic connection between the contexts of the topics. The responses revealed these discussions had an important impact on both their academic studies and personal lives. Comments included student feedback of lived experiences with the topic, as one student wrote, “I have worked with these topics/issues during my experiences working with many organizations on campus. It was interesting to openly discuss these issues today.”

An inexplicit goal was to create a space where participants felt comfortable to discuss sexuality in an anti-oppressive environment. Constructive dialogue flowed in the room, unfolding contemporary means to approach personal topics and promote diversity. In the evaluations one student stated, “It made me feel less shameful about discussing my sexuality.” The mandate to ensure students a safe environment for knowledge exchange was organically manifested as students were willing to learn about various approaches toward the subject matter.

Pedagogically sound, students had the opportunity to access knowledge that bridges their academic studies to their personal lives of intimacy and dating. Reaffirmed by the high volumes of positive and fruitful feedback, it was undeniable that students were hungry to learn more about gendered constructs and its’ influence towards dating. The successes of the event unveiled the demand for the topic as potential application toward curriculum and future feminist-based endeavours.