

The CWLU: Communicating a Radical Vision Before the Internet and Social Media

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ABOUT THE MODULE

Suggested Use

The CWLU: Communicating a Radical Vision before the Internet and Social Media is a three-part teaching module for use with a course on 'Second Wave' feminism, the history of feminism, and/or feminist culture. It focuses on the historical period of the second wave in the 1960s and 1970s.

The Chicago Women's Liberation Union (CWLU), formed in 1969, played a leading role in the women's movement in Chicago during much of the 1970s. The CWLU - a citywide organization made up of chapters meeting in multiple locations and work groups running projects - worked toward a radical vision of a society free of sexism in education, the family, the media, employment, health care, and all areas of social life.

As the CWLU and similar organizations developed, the ideas of women's liberation that they advocated began to receive media attention, virtually always confused and often hostile. Early on CWLU activists realized the need to develop effective means of directly reaching wider audiences of women with the CWLU message of liberation. In this period there was no internet use (except by the military).

Communications among members occurred through phone banks and mailings. Women outside the organization often had little idea of what women's liberation was or how to find a women's liberation organization. For these women it was often chance that led them to a newspaper article that named NOW or CWLU as women's liberation groups, a lucky find in a phone book, or even word of mouth. This module explores the three ways in which CWLU worked to reach those women and talk with them about women's liberation.

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1 CLASS 1: THE LIBERATION SCHOOL FOR WOMEN

1.1 INTRODUCTION

At the time the CWLU was founded, abortion was illegal. Women were largely relegated to the background in history books. Few women artists could be found in art museums. The ranks of the medical profession, the legal profession, and academia were heavily male. Women reporters were largely absent from newspaper and TV journalism. In general, women were seldom to be found outside of nursing, teaching (especially elementary school), clerical and secretarial positions, and, of course, work as wife and mother in the home. Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique* (1963) had raised critical questions about what the role of women was or should be. In reality, however, women were educated – trained and tracked – to avoid science and math, medicine and the law, artistic and literary careers, let alone careers in business beyond secretary or, perhaps, “girl Friday” executive assistants.

As news about the Chicago Women's Liberation Union and “women's lib” began to circulate, the CWLU office began receiving calls from women wanting to know more. This stream of calls, before women's studies programs were in existence, led to the creation of the CWLU Liberation School for Women, guided by the motto “What we don't know we must learn. What we do know, we should teach each other.”

The Liberation School for Women was the longest-lasting CWLU program. Started in 1970, it continued until the CWLU's disbanding in 1977. Courses covered topics related to women's daily lives, like prepared childbirth, self-defense, and auto mechanics; women's history and literature; political issues from lesbian liberation to rape to health care; and CWLU's political perspective. The Liberation School was in many ways the precursor of women's studies programs today.

1.2 READINGS

Read about the CWLU Liberation School for Women here: (attach Lib. School mod ver)

Documents from Liberation School such as sample course lists.

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2 CLASS 2: WOMANKIND

2.1 INTRODUCTION

When the CWLU was established, most people received the vast majority of their news through established newspapers or through TV network news - ABC, CBS, and NBC. There were few women reporters on newspapers beyond those assigned to the women's pages, at the time largely devoted to social events. Beyond "weather girls," women news reporters on TV were extremely rare.

Given that, it is not surprising that newspaper and TV coverage of "women's lib" was generally inaccurate, and often mocking or hostile. Reports of bra-burning – that may never have happened – are an example of the way in which media reporting trivialized women's issues.

In this setting, and determined to develop an effective way to communicate its vision of women's liberation to women outside of the immediate CWLU circles, CWLU decided early on to launch its own outreach newspaper, *WOMANKIND*.

In the era before the Internet publication of a newspaper like *WOMANKIND* required not only writing and editing articles, but also printing them either on a mimeograph or a printing press - there were no programs to easily create a PDF file that could be distributed online - there was in fact no online. It also meant that, in order to get the issues to women outside the movement, the newspaper had to be distributed to bookstores, community centers, and schools by members of the work group.

The first reading describes the newspaper, how it was produced, the topics covered, and the strenuous efforts to develop an effective distribution system. It concludes by noting the tensions that ultimately led the CWLU to discontinue its publication. Additional readings include sample issues of the newspaper.

2.2 READING:

(attach *WOMANKIND* mod ver)

Documents – sample issues

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3 CLASS 3: THE SPEAKER'S BUREAU

3.1 INTRODUCTION

As news of the Chicago Women's Liberation Union spread, and as newspaper and TV grew interested in covering "women's lib," the CWLU began to get increasing requests to provide speakers or to make statements to the media (at the time, "media" generally meant major newspapers or network television). Initially CWLU activists preferred to ignore such requests or to respond in an ad hoc manner. Gradually, however, especially as media coverage appeared to be consistently confused and too often hostile, the CWLU decided to develop a way to respond to requests that would be effective in presenting its views while also being consistent with its anti-elitist, democratic principles. The CWLU Speaker's Bureau was the result, with both policy and practice that evolved over time in an effort to meet those twin goals.

As the Speaker's Bureau grew, speakers were chosen first by rotation among work groups and chapters and later based in part on the topic and how it related to CWLU work. Speakers were requested by a wide range of people including high school teachers, community organizations, college professors, men's groups – even the Chicago police academy. They spoke on lesbian and gay liberation, abortion and reproductive justice, job discrimination and equal access to public resources, including women's sports.

Speakers' trainings were held by the Liberation School so that speakers felt ready to take on what might be hostile audiences. Members were often unused to speaking in public, as well, and so when possible speakers were sent in pairs to provide mutual support.

Such speaking engagements and interviews with the 'mainstream' media were an important way to reach beyond those already involved in the women's liberation movement.

3.2 READINGS

(the piece on the web now is only 8 pages, so I think we could use that directly)