

*Domina I.*  
*Åsö adult education school, Stockholm,*  
*the Kingdom of Sweden*

## **INTEGRATING GENDER AND NORM CRITICAL PERSPECTIVES INTO TEACHING AND SUBJECT CONTENT OF UNIVERSITY**

**Introduction.** This article presents project of The Swedish University of Agricultural Sciences [1], whose aim was to introduce gender and norm critical perspectives in teaching at a natural science university. The purpose of the project was to establish new ways of working towards more gender equal education by offering a course for university teachers.

**Context.** Sweden is rated the fourth most gender equal country by the Global Gender Gap Index of the World Economic [2]. Despite this, research shows that Sweden has a very gender segregated work market [3]. Sweden still do not have equal pay for women and men, and women make up only 17% of the professors at the universities [4]. Additional research shows that academia does not provide equal opportunities for women and men [5] neither for students or staff. These inequalities were the point of departure for this project [6].

The Swedish University of Agricultural Sciences (SLU) is primarily a natural science university with research and education programs such as biology, soil sciences, forestry, agronomy, and veterinary medicine. Research with a gender perspective is rare and can mainly be found in the interdisciplinary or social science oriented disciplines such as Environmental Communication, Rural Development and Landscape Architecture.

**The project.** The project described here was funded by the Swedish government through the Delegation for Gender Equality in Higher Education (Delegationen för jämställdhet i högskolan), its focus was on creating gender equal study environments. Swedish policy goals for gender equality include breaking stereotypical education choices. At SLU there are heavy imbalances in certain programs, such as a female bias in the veterinarian program, the landscape architect program and the animal husbandry/agronomy program. In, for example, the forestry programs there are a heavy male bias. The University has explicitly said that this imbalance between the sexes is negative and stated the need to work towards achieving a balance in the programs. Rather than focusing on strategies for making the gender balance even in the classrooms, this project focused on promoting norm critical and gender aware approaches in teaching. The assumption behind this approach is that gender equality is not a matter of counting bodies [7]

and that a classroom with 50 per cent women and 50 per cent men can still provide an unequal study environment. Therefore project developed to focus on ameliorating the study environment through gender and norm critical pedagogy. Also, as Riley and Claris [8] discuss, focusing on transforming pedagogies for teaching can create new ways of looking at science. They argue “that any resistance to prevailing power dynamics offers an opportunity for transformation via an appreciation of more complex epistemologies”.

Scientists use the concept of norm critical pedagogy as used by the Queer Pedagogical Network in Scandinavia [9]. Norm critical pedagogy, rather than focusing on those who are perceived as deviant, aims to make visible the norms in teaching and in society in general, question these norms and the power relations implicit in them in order to change oppressive practices. Focusing on norms creates an opportunity to question the same norms that create and maintain power relations when they arise in the classroom.

Making norms visible makes possible new ways of relating to them, and ways to avoid locking persons into specific roles, thereby opening possibilities for everyone. In norm critical pedagogy, emancipatory pedagogy's critique of power is combined with an understanding of identities and gender as already intersectional, that is that various forms of oppression are interwoven: such as sexism, racism, homophobia and classism [10]. This is the basis for understanding how oppression is shaped, stigmatization is formed and how change can occur. In practice that means, that challenging and expanding the basis for norms, by including more voices, experiences and examples that break exclusionary practices and disrupting and interfering with power reproducing norms: in the selection of literature, in the selection of teaching themes, in classroom interactions and responses and in the practice as a teacher. The norm critical pedagogy approach has been the leading principle for the course lecturers in order to introduce it to the participants of the course.

**Methodology.** The project of The Swedish University of Agricultural Sciences uses an action research methodology. An action research process is part of a desire to change a situation which is perceived as problematic by different actors in that situation “(it) seeks to bring together action and reflection, theory and practice, in participation with others, in pursuit of practical solutions to issues of pressing concern to people, and more generally the flourishing of individual persons in their community” [11]. They were utilizing the methodology of action research because they aimed to inspire and create change in teaching with the goal of a more gender equal and inclusive study environment and to document and follow the change process as a research project. To establish a starting point for the

project, scientists needed to know what students and teachers considered as problematic in their education and what they wished to change. They used methods such as focus groups, interviews, surveys, discussions and meetings to talk about the present situation. University teachers, students and others linked to education (such as pedagogy specialists and people responsible for education development at the University) took part in these activities. This diverse group of actors enabled identification and development of ideas and ways to proceed in a reflexive manner. The outcome of the planning phase was essential to motivate and to ground the project and its activities in the organization at different levels.

**Project execution.** The activities during the planning phase included:

- the operational group consisting of the project leader, the course leader, one consultant senior gender researcher and a pedagogical developer met regularly to plan the project;

- a reference group consisting of university teachers, students and representatives of the University leadership was appointed. This group consulted on the project execution;

- presentation of preliminary project plans and discussions with the committees for different education programs;

- the project was communicated at meetings with educational steering boards, university boards well as through web pages and interviews in the University magazine;

- focus group interviews with students and university teachers;

- a survey with questions about the current extent, need and possible suggestions for integrating gender perspectives in education;

- a structure for reporting back to established university structures and committees to ensure the integration of the project's results into the University's education development.

The outcome of the planning phase was the development of a course package about gender and norm critical pedagogies. The picture emerging from the surveys was that there was a need for the University to take on issues of gender inequality, segregation based on sex, norms of how women and men "are" and ideas about how they might be expected to act in different situations. Some of the female students spoke about how they, as a stark majority of the students in the programs focused on, felt answerable for their education choices since they experienced an implicit and explicit wish for more men in their programs. There was a mix of answers, but many of the students said that the small number of men in the programs obtained many advantages in terms of being heard and seen. While some students were aware of gender issues in education and gave explicit

examples of sexist jokes and lack of gender perspectives, other students declared their resistance towards integrating gender perspectives. The students also expressed worries about decreasing salaries as the veterinarian profession has become female-dominated and related to this how to best to prepare for dealing with discrimination in their working lives. Veterinarian students pointed out a norm about women taking care of small cute animals and men dealing with "real" production animals. Furthermore, the university teachers brought up questions of how to handle very sex-biased classes and were worried about falling into the trap of treating the students differently depending on sex.

Discussions with the reference group exemplified the importance of which role models/invited examples of a profession are presented to students. One student representative in the reference group described how during the initiation week her class on the landscape architect program was presented with a charismatic male architect working as a well-paid consultant with creative freedom and a female architect working in the municipality with very small means. She reflected on how this experience had influenced her expectations: "Is this the gendered working life awaiting us?" Because of limited time that teachers had for participating in the course, the course consisted of four half-day workshops which combined discussion seminars, assignments and literature reading. To connect the course to the teaching practices, the assignments were aiming at reflection and inspiration to continue working with gender and norm critical pedagogy after finishing the course.

The themes of the four half-days were:

-the first workshop concerned questions of what gender is and how it is relevant in academia and teaching;

-the second workshop concerned norm critical pedagogy which allowed the university teachers to reflect on what norms and values they take with them to the classroom and how these norms play out in the interactions with the students;

-the third workshop focused on gender perspectives in evolutionary biology, as an example of how gender perspectives can be applied in the natural sciences. The way we frame our research questions, what methods we use and how the results are interpreted may be affected by cultural conceptions of gender [7];

-the last workshop was, through the use of 'Forum Theater', actively practicing how norms play out in educational or work situations, and how they may be counteracted.

In preparation, the invited lecturers/facilitators of the course were provided with the surveys and updated information on course participants' interests and the

course progress. The course ran three times with a total of 55 university teachers attending.

**Project outcomes.** To follow-up on the project scientist have conducted eight interviews and one survey with course participants. Evaluations from the course have been positive, and new ideas and initiatives have followed as a result of participating in the course.

As part of the follow up course evaluations were sent out and a summary of responses from participants suggested that the course:

- contained a good balance between theory, discussions and working with their own project plan;

- contained inspiring lectures and discussions;

- has increased the awareness of the effect of discrimination according to sex and other forms of discrimination and of norms in everyday life as well as in education and academia;

- has increased the awareness of gender perspectives on subject content in natural sciences;

- had a useful course assignment that impels putting theory into practice;

- the auscultations gave opportunities to reflect on the teacher's own and other's teaching practices and to discuss them with colleagues

**Conclusions.** The results from this project show that students and university teachers had experience of and reflected on gender aspects in their teaching situations, before the project started. They were also willing to explore norm critical ways to develop their teaching and learning that was offered by the project. Projects initiated by the university teachers following the course includes: a workshop on norm critical pedagogy for librarians, analyzing text books from a gender perspective, a project reflecting on how to incorporate students' perspectives into teaching practices, a project plan to abate sexual harassment, a study of gender perspectives on the working environment, planning for a workshop on gender perspectives on teaching and gender equality for a team of teachers, and reflecting on gender perspectives on examination practices.

## References

1. S. Powell, M. Ah-King (2013). A case study of integrating gender perspectives in teaching and in subject content at a natural science university in Sweden, <http://connection.ebscohost.com/c/case-studies/87527813/case-study-integrating-gender-perspectives-teaching-subject-content-natural-science-university-sweden>.

2. World Economic Forum (2012). The Global Gender Gap Report 2012, [www.weforum.org/reports/global-gender-gap-report-2012](http://www.weforum.org/reports/global-gender-gap-report-2012). Retrieved February 26, 2013.

3. Löfström, Å. (Ed.) (2004). Den könsuppdelade arbetsmarknaden. Swedish Government Official Reports (SOU) (Report No. 43). Stockholm: Fritzes. Retrieved from <http://www.regeringen.se/content/1/c6/01/72/89/fe0a5c7f.pdf>.
4. Högscoleverket, (2011). Universitet & högskolor. Högscoleverkets årsrapport 2011. (Report No. 8R), Stockholm: Högscoleverket (Swedish National Agency for Higher Education). Retrieved from <http://www.hsv.se/download/18.27d86368130216405a680002479/1108R-universitet-hogskolor-arsrapport-2011.pdf>.
5. Huusu, L. (2001). Sexism, support and survival in Academia. Academic women and hidden discrimination in Finland. University of Helsinki: Social Psychological Studies 6.
6. Powell, S. (2008). På väg mot ett genusintegrerat SLU. (University report SLU No. 255-278) Uppsala: Swedish University of Agricultural Sciences: Sweden.
7. Ah-King, M. (2010). Gender and queer perspectives on Evolutionary Biology. In Blomqvist, M. & Ehnsmyr, E. (Eds.), Never mind the gap! Gendering Science in Transgressive Encounters (pp.143-168). Centre for Gender Research, Uppsala University.
8. Alvesson, M. (1997). Kroppsräkning, konstruktion av kön och offentliga organisationer. In E. Sundin (Ed.), Om makt och kön. I spåren av offentliga organisationers omvandling (pp.312-339) Stockholm: Fritzes.
9. Riley, D. & Claris, L. (2009). From Persistence to Resistance: Pedagogies of Liberation for Inclusive Science and Engineering. *International Journal of Gender, Science and Technology, North America*, 1(1), 36-60. Retrieved from <http://genderandset.open.ac.uk/index.php/genderandset/issue/view/1>.
10. Bromseth, J. & Darj, F. (Eds.) (2010). Normkritisk pedagogik. Makt, lärande och strategier för förändring, Uppsala: Uppsala universitet, Centre for Gender Research, Crossroads of knowledge 14.
11. Bromseth, J. (2010). Förändringsstrategier och problemförståelser: från utbildning om den Andra till queer pedagogik. In Bromseth, J. & Darj, F. (Eds.), Normkritisk pedagogik. Makt, lärande och strategier för förändring (pp. 27-55) Uppsala: Uppsala universitet, Centre for Gender Research, Crossroads of knowledge 14.