Forty years of SCUTREA: untangling the gender threads

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Introduction and context
The forty years since SCUTREA was founded have seen far-reaching social, economic, cultural and political change in gender relations and gender politics in the UK, especially in relation to education and lifelong learning. 1970 saw the first National Women’s Liberation Conference take place and the passing of the Equal Pay Act. Three years previously, abortion was de-criminalised in England, Wales and Scotland; and male homosexuality de-criminalised in England and Wales – it remained illegal in Scotland, Northern Ireland, the Merchant Navy and the Armed Forces for several decades longer. It would be two years before transsexual pioneer James Morris made a public transition to Jan Morris. Five years later, in 1975, the Sex Discrimination Act, precursor to the wider discourse of equality and diversity shaping the Single Equality Act (2009) became law. The establishment of the Women’s Research and Resources Centre testified to the emergent discipline and practice of Women’s Studies. During the late 1970s and 80s Women’s Studies, and the feminist pedagogy and epistemology underpinning it, grew in influence and impact across the whole education spectrum.

By the 1990s feminism’s once radical tenets had become sufficiently naturalised within western culture for a backlash to develop – in relation to education this took three forms. First, a concern with the participation and performance of boys, who were seen to be failed by the feminisation of education (West 1995; Epstein et al 1998). This was mirrored by concern about men’s participation in adult and community education (McGivney 1998). Second, wider engagement with issues of diversity and equality sometimes assumed competitive hierarchies of oppression which challenged gender as a category of subordination. While gender and feminism had been a ‘hot topic’ in the 80s (Zukas 97: 483) a decade later it was becoming distinctly unfashionable at a time when innovation and change was the survival strategy for adult education. Finally, changes in the structure and purpose of higher education began to separate research from teaching and to value research above teaching. This produced a situation in which theory generally, and post-structuralist and later post-modern theory in particular, became central, if contested, features of intellectual life (Taylor, Barr & Steele 2002). Feminist theory, often in an uneasy relationship with feminist praxis, held its ground, in part through its affinity with the post-modern focus on identity and subjectivity, But, as Miriam Zukas (1997) observed from within this process, feminism itself was rarely addressed despite providing ‘intellectual impetus ‘ and ‘theoretical dynamism’ to the field of adult education research. Feminism, too, became ‘history’, as post-feminism (rather than post-patriarchy) held sway in academic and popular cultures.
By the 21st century, work with women and feminist theorisation of practice within the UK is noticeable by its absence, and beleaguered where it can be found. An anecdotal example from the Universities Association for Lifelong Learning illustrates this. During a recent Women in Lifelong Learning Network seminar, one speaker introduced her contribution (based on a funded research and development widening participation project) by saying she had not considered its gender dimensions until invited to do so by the network. This same network is currently debating whether to change its name – from ‘Women’ to ‘Gender’ and clarifying the boundary lines between itself and the Social Inclusion and Widening Participation Network should it do so.

In the 1971 conference proceedings a plenary discussion identified the research priorities of SCUTREA’s then 12 member institutions. Although all the categories outlined could be argued to have gender dimension, this was not explicitly identified. Twenty years later, the Scottish Continuing Education Network’s five research themes were presented to SCUTREA as part of a discussion to develop a research agenda for continuing education. Although gender was the first theme on the Scottish list, there was no record of it having been explicitly discussed in the session that agreed the research agenda nor was it highlighted on the final list. It is frequently claimed that adult education played a significant and critical role in the development of gender studies and feminist pedagogy in the UK. My research enables us to understand the specific contribution made by SCUTREA to what I suggest is a more nuanced contribution to gender studies and feminist pedagogy than that indicated by the official histories of adult education. It also challenges the contemporary tendency to see gender issues, and more especially women’s experience of lifelong learning, as a matter of largely historical interest.

I am not the first feminist to scrutinise SCUTREA in this way. Miriam Zukas (1997) reviewed the corpus of SCUTREA conference papers to highlight the extent to which, in the UK, feminism and women’s studies contributed to the formation of adult education as a disciplinary field. The focus of her paper was the often paradoxical role of feminism in the epistemology of the education of adults rather than a concern with gender and feminism in SCUTREA as such but the paper, written from an explicit, pro-active feminist position, provides a theorised insider’s account of how SCUTREA came to gender awareness and feminist action. She tracks the absence of references to gender and feminism in papers and proceedings from SCUTREA’s first decade, honours the work of SCUTREA’s feminist pioneers – Nell Keddie, Jane Thompson and Sallie Westwood - and contextualises the watershed created by the 1982 formation of the Women and Adult Education interest group. She argues that ‘feminist concerns were taken up, not in the guise of a focus on women or even gender, but in the newly fashionable focus on subjectivity and reflective practice.’ (Zukas 1997:483).

My purpose here is different, in that I track the ways in which gender themes and issues emerge in the corpus of work accepted for presentation at SCUTREA Conferences, paying particular attention to authorship. I also outline SCUTREA’s engagement with gender in relation to organizational structure and ethos. The research findings are based on a content analysis of SCUTREA Conference proceedings and administrative papers. A fuller engagement with the cultural history
of SCUTREA as a gendered organization would require textual data to be supplemented by narrative and observational data.

**Organizational structure and ethos**

SCUTREA offers institutional and individual membership, with the majority of its membership via institutions. There is therefore no significant distinction to be made between male and female members, although it would be interesting to explore if representation of the institution shifts between men and women and whether pro-activity within SCUTREA, including its representation on other key networks, shows any significant inflection towards men or women. Certainly, the reports from the earliest conferences – which took the form of reports on conference activities and debates – show that bar a few notable exceptions, men convene, contribute to, participate in and report on sessions. This reflects a further historical sexual division of labour within UK adult education, whereby the majority of staff employed full-time in university extra-mural departments, as in the Workers’ Educational Association and Local Education Authority provision, were men. Certainly, senior positions were held by men. Women worked across the sector, but generally on a part-time basis. This began to change from and throughout the 1980s, which saw a greater number of women taking up full-time posts across the sector, including university adult and continuing education, often with a specific brief to work with women. Miriam Zukas notes these women were often active in gender politics and brought different disciplinary backgrounds to those of the men – and occasional woman – from the previous generation of adult educators. Literature, History and PPE gave way to psychology and the social sciences (Zukas 1997:484). This increased the critical mass of feminists in SCUTREA without which the cultural changes that produced its characteristic egalitarian ethos may not have happened.

By the mid-1990s, when I first began attending SCUTREA conferences, the ethos impressed me as gender equitable – certainly in comparison with higher education itself and also the Universities Association for Continuing Education, a policy forum, which I encountered at the same time. But my background of radical community education practice created sensitivity to the silences and absences of race and sexuality and the sometimes uneasy tension between class and gender. Just as there had been an isolated presence of feminist and women’s issues in the first formation of SCUTREA, so too had there been outliers putting race on the adult education research agenda (Brah & Kaye 1993) and sometimes they were the same person (Westwood 1989). Frequently, though, it was international scholars (Luttrell 1988) who worked with the complex intersections of difference more confidently and often much earlier than UK scholars for whom sustained engagement with ‘excluded discourses’ (Preece 1996; Avari et al 1997) came later.

The distinctive international dimension of SCUTREA owes much to the 1986 Kellogg Exchanges and the subsequent TransAtlantic Dialogue Conferences (1988 and 2006). The original scheme was aimed at early-career scholars, and this investment catalysed working relationships and openness to international and global perspectives which continue to shape SCUTREA. From our 21st century standpoint, especially in relation to travel and advances in information communications technology, it may be hard to remember – or imagine! - just how insular British academic life was and how rare opportunities for transnational exchange and continued collaboration. The Kellogg exchanges fostered connections between
Britain, Canada and the USA which underpinned collaborations with adult education scholars in Australia, Europe (West and East), New Zealand and Southern Africa. The conjunction of the Kellogg Foundation funding with feminist campaigns within the organisation ensured that women were centrally involved. Over the years, there have been several papers and editorials evaluating or reflecting on the exchange. These were more often written by women than men (Armstrong 1997; McIntosh 1986; Miller and Zukas 1995; Zukas 1994) and learning about diversity is often cited as a significant benefit. This learning was usually from the practices and research of North American counterparts but there are also folk tales from the UK participants concerning gentle and not-so-gentle learning and teaching about sexism …

SCUTREA has never been complacent about gender equity – it is, like all issues of power and social change, a process of becoming rather being. It is, however, instructive to compare SCUTREA with other adult education organizations; as Chris Duke did in 1995, when he took the opportunity of SCUTREA’s 25th anniversary to review his 25 year editorship of the *International Congress of University Adult Education Journal*. Founded in 1970, a formal editorial board is not constituted until 1993 and of its 14 members, 4 are women. An authorship audit takes 3 moments – 71 – 74; 81 – 84; and 91 – 4. Women contribute 0.5%, 10% and 33% of the papers respectively and papers which address gender are, numerically and respectively, 0; 1; and 4. (Duke 1995).

In respect of elected officers, the profile moves from men in power (Chair and Treasurer) and women in service (Secretary) through the 1970s and 80s to a succession of feminist women chairs, beginning with Sallie Westwood in 1987 – 90, and men taking on the service role of Secretary. Between 1987 and 1999 SCUTREA was always chaired by a feminist. At the end of this phase (1996 – 99) the first female Chair and Secretary (Roseanne Benn and Cheryl Hunt) were elected. This is a positive outcome from women’s campaigning and the successful naturalising of women holding positions of power and responsibility can be seen in the next phase, where the roles shift backwards and forwards between men and women until the current period in which a feminist Chair and Secretary has been joined by the first feminist Treasurer, Ann-Marie Houghton.

**Authorship**

Counting and comparing papers presented by women and men may seem a reductive way to begin untangling SCUTREA’s gender threads but it performs an important first step in making gender, and the patterns of its presence, visible. Although I offer a comparison of male and female presenters, sampled from 4 Conferences (2006, 1996, 1986 and 1976) my primary interest is to establish who wrote about or referenced gender, feminism, masculinity and sexuality. I searched for these terms (plus women, men, gay, lesbian and queer) across the whole corpus of conference papers using the SCUTREA CD–Rom and manual searches. I refined the distinction between male or female authorship by recording UK and non-UK location and patterns of collaborative authorship. These findings will be presented in full during the session.

In 1976, the SCUTREA conference took the form of 5 seminar groups, an address from the Minister for Education and Science and 3 interest groups. The proceedings were compiled post-conference and combined papers written for the seminars with
reports. One group was led by a woman (Naomi McIntosh) who presented research into drop-out rates amongst Open University students; and recorded by another, Elizabeth Monkhouse. A third, Muriel Crane, recorded an interest group. These are the only references to women’s participation at this conference.

There was no explicit reference to women’s experience, gender or feminism in any presentation. The research into dropouts uses the category of ‘housewife’ alongside teachers, manual, shop and clerical workers, and cites ‘having a new baby’ as a personal reason for withdrawing from a course. (McIntosh 1976). Although the research provided evidence for a gendered interpretation, this appears not to have been developed.

By 1986, conference size had increased – 28 papers/ reports - and the form changed. The proceedings are edited and include an explanatory editorial (from Miriam Zukas, who also edited the 1996 and 2006 conferences). 1986 is a hybrid – retaining some features of the early conferences, such as organised and pre-planned activities; a keynote address; and introducing those which were to become established, such as a conference theme (The Politics of Adult Education Research) and post-conference events. Transitional in respect of organisational culture, the theme appears to have been embodied, as well as debated, in the conference (Brown 1986). Five seminar group leaders prepared and pre-circulated papers addressing an agreed set of issues which, along with reports of the groups, were included in the proceedings. Conference participants were randomly assigned to these seminar groups but could choose one of 3 parallel groups which addressed the conference theme in relation to discipline-based, evaluation and participatory / action research. The post-conference event debated conceptual issues arising from the Kellogg exchange.

The conference is still predominantly UK-based, contributing 26 of 28 papers. 19 are by men, 7 by women and USA man and woman author the remaining papers. Amongst UK contributors, the practice of writing pre-papers and reports means that 1 woman and 3 men appear up to 3 times as authors. While some men write collaboratively, no women do and there is no male/female collaborative writing. Although 2 papers based on research into women’s education had been presented in 1985, explicit reference to women’s experience, gender or feminism was minimal and defensive (Alexander 1986). Feminism is clearly one of the political poles in the overarching conference debate.

By 1996, the conference has increased in size again with 53 papers from 70 individuals representing 30 institutions from 5 countries (USA, Canada, Australia, New Zealand and UK). A quarter of contributions are now international. The conference was themed and papers / workshop proposals accepted on the basis of anonymous peer review of abstracts. There were no keynote speeches. The editorial sought to explicate the tacit practices of the learning community SCUTREA seeks to foster (Zukas 1996). Feminism informs but is not named by this text; and two other factors contribute to the conscious creation of an inclusive ethos. First, the generational shift within SCUTREA foregrounds the danger of creating a modern version of the exclusionary culture they had encountered as newcomers to SCUTREA. Second, sectoral changes were remaking professional identities and practices in ways which put academic practice under scrutiny.
Contributions from men and women are almost equal: 18 UK men and 14 women; 3 non-UK men and 4 women. Collaborative papers, usually 2 authors, have increased: 10 UK and 4 non-UK. Interestingly, these are either women only or woman and men; unlike a decade earlier, where male collaboration was significant in SCUTREA and the field more generally. Gender issues – including the first explicit reference to masculinity (Thompson 1996) and reference to, if not exploration of, sexual orientation – are a distinct thread in the proceedings. 7 papers are contributed from the UK by men and women, writing individually and collaboratively; and 1 internationally authored male/female collaboration.

In 2006, the conference expanded again: 63 papers from 124 individuals representing 55 institutions from 11 countries plus 4 symposiums and 2 roundtables. Contributions were split almost equally between both UK and international contributors (35 non-UK; 28 UK) and men and women (20 men; 18 women). Collaborative writing between women and men and women remained popular, with 15 male/female collaborations; 8 female collaborations and 2 male collaborations. A small number of trans-national collaborations are offered. This pattern was not replicated in the symposiums, especially those based in the UK and linked to large research programmes. Only one symposium was convened by a woman and only one had equal contributions from men and women. In one, 4 men and 1 woman presented; and in another 6 men and 3 women.

10 papers, the majority (7.5) were international, explicitly addressed gender issues; a slightly lower proportion than in 1996. However, these papers demonstrate a wide range of themes, testifying to the pervasiveness of gendered approaches. They included papers on informal learning in textile crafts; feminist research methodologies; graduate students’ learning; immigrant women’s work; adult education participation as women of color; and as mothers; pedagogies of self in women’s professional and manual work; representations of women in popular culture. Of these papers, none deal directly with questions of sexual identity or masculinity; although several explore class, gender and race their focus is heterosexual women.

Engagements with sexual identity and masculinity are transitory within SCUTREA. Sexual identity is referred to as early as 1990 and first forms the basis of several substantive studies, from Canada and the USA, in 1997. In the 2005 conference, themed around Diversity and Difference, Robert Hill makes an argument for queer cultural competency in lifelong learning, which constitutes difference education as actively anti-oppressive, challenging discourses of tolerance (Hill 2005:148). There is little follow through on issues of sexual identity, with or without queer theory. Similarly, masculinities could not be said to constitute a recurrent or generative theme in SCUTREA, although a handful of papers explored the theory and practice of working with men in the UK and Australia (Golding et al 2008). There are two significant differences between these dimensions of gender and those concerning women and feminism. First is the reach of the politics – as social movements and in policy – and, second, the critical mass of advocates within SCUTREA. Whether feminism has fully exploited this situation is something we can discuss together.
References
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