programs intended for a broader feminist public. Through these inclusionary practices, women’s studies courses became organizing spaces for the feminist movement. In addition to offering novel content, women’s studies sought to democratize the classroom and decenter authority in order to increase the sense of power that women students felt over their education and, by extension, their lives. Teachers often rearranged their classrooms to resemble consciousness raising groups or feminist meetings with chairs arrayed in circles and preferred nonhierarchical discussions to lectures. The similarities to consciousness raising extended into course goals and content, too. Women’s studies operated with an explicit feminist agenda to use new research to challenge male bias and to instigate activism. This disruption was premised on feminists’ understanding of how knowledge is constructed, especially repudiation of the goal, and the possibility, of neutrality and objectivity. Instead, women’s studies aimed to present women as they saw themselves, not filtered through the gaze of men. As the poet and essayist Adrienne Rich put it, “We are not ‘the woman question’ asked by somebody else; we are the women who ask the questions.”

Consciousness raising and oral history were ideally suited for courses that rejected the impossible ideal of academic objectivity. In particular, oral history offered a way to learn about women’s experiences while honoring women’s subjectivity as a source of knowledge and expertise. Many women’s studies courses, using a variety of disciplinary approaches, incorporated oral history assignments to awaken students to the realities of women’s lives, past and present. Used along with other autobiographical sources -- journal writing, first-person essays, etc. -- oral history gave students insight into women’s experiences in the past and revealed how sexism shaped their choices.

