Chapter One
Home Economics as an area of study and a school subject

We are a different subject, serving different needs of students. We are not mainstream, we are marginal....We have been and are a basic challenge to traditional pedagogical practices and forms of knowledge in schools and higher education (Peterat, 1989, p. 73).

Home economics began in the late 1800s as a response to world-wide change and development. In Europe the agrarian way of life that had sustained untold generations with food, clothing and shelter was gradually giving way to industrialization, resulting in migration to cities and large-scale emigration abroad. The social issues of family life, health, hygiene and the rights of women and children became critically important. Home economics developed as one of the earliest forms of modern feminism, sharing many concerns with the women’s movement of the 1900s. It was also part of Progressive education, “a many-sided effort to use the schools to improve the lives of individuals” (Cremin, 1961) that dominated educational philosophy in the early 1900s. John Dewey, one of the best known proponents of Progressive education, advocated home economics as a means of educating the whole child through “head, heart and hand”. Early home economics professionals took healthy living as their theme and asked that issues of daily life be a recognized area of academic study.

The 1893 World’s Fair in Chicago was a pivotal event for home economics. While women such as Catharine Beecher had been writing about the importance of women’s roles in society for at least fifty years, the World’s Fair went a step further and included a Women’s Pavilion, a facility which was completely designed and managed by women. Ellen Richards, the acknowledged founder of home economics in the United States, designed a small kitchen at the Fair that not only served 10,000 nutritious meals over a two-month period but also functioned as a laboratory to show consumers about the content of the food they were eating and how it was prepared. An important Canadian connection occurred at the Fair with the election of Lady Isphel Aberdeen, wife of Lord Aberdeen, Canada’s governor-general, to president of the International Council of Women. In October of 1893 Lady Aberdeen founded the National Council of Women of Canada.

At the same time, a new leader emerged for the home economics movement in Canada. Adelaide Hunter Hoodless had undergone a personal tragedy that made her determined to improve health standards across the nation. She was instrumental in creating a home economics teacher education program in her hometown of Hamilton, Ontario, and then collaborated with the principal of the Hamilton school, Mary Urive Watson, in 1898 to write a textbook that covered the topics of nutrition, methods of cooking, marketing, food safety, table service, care of the household, laundry work and emergencies. Tables of measurement, food composition and digestion established the scientific basis of the new subject area, soon to be renamed home economics from its previous title of “domestic science”.

In 1900 James W. Robertson, Dairy Commissioner of Canada, decided to do something about rural apathy, and he started a seed-growing competition with the sponsorship of Sir William Macdonald that expanded into the Macdonald-Robertson movement and the introduction of manual training for boys into Canadian schools. At the same time satellite branches of the National Council of Women had sprung up across Canada, including Victoria, BC. When the Macdonald School funding ran out in 1903, the Victoria School Board officials decided to ask the provincial government to continue the program. Although women did not have the vote
provincially or federally, they could vote in municipal and school board elections, and by happy coincidence, Margaret Jenkins, the one woman on the Victoria board was also a member of the Victoria Local Council of Women [LCW]. In 1903 a deputation from the LCW asked the Victoria school board for funding for girls to be taught domestic science and promised to equip a room if the board would pay half a year’s salary for a teacher. The four hundred dollars required to equip the room was raised largely through personal donations.

In 1899, at the same time that home economics was becoming established in teacher-training institutions, important meetings that would affect the future of the subject area began in Lake Placid, a small town in upstate New York. Ellen Richards and Annie and Melvil Dewey instigated the talks; and a number of Canadians such as Alice Chown (see her autobiography, *The Stairway*), Fannie Twiss (later Supervisor of Home Economics in Saskatchewan), Mary Urie Watson and Adelaide Hoodless attended over the next nine years. The *Proceedings of the Lake Placid Conferences* became the basis for the founding of the American Home Economics Association in 1909.

In a content analysis of the *Proceedings*, Eleanore Vaines (1981) determined that while the mission of home economics was discussed at Lake Placid, the field was not precisely conceptualized. Several themes were apparent; skill-oriented topics such as cooking, sewing, fabrics, crafts, childcare, efficiency, sanitation (includes water), home arrangement, etiquette, domestic science and home skills, and domestic science trades occupied about 40% of the discussion. Research, theory, and philosophically oriented topics were discussed just under 60% of the time. Other topics such as food, nutrition, textiles, family, management, sanitation theory, sociology, methods, food/clothing/shelter, character-building, thinking, and housing were also discussed, but to a more limited degree. Thus, the contradictory nature of home economics can be seen to exist from its theoretical beginnings; was it practical or theoretical? The answer would seem to be both, and home economics has existed in the space in-between ever since.

The historical role that home economics has played in allowing women entry into higher education is also an important facet of the subject area. Beginning with Socrates in ancient Greece, education has been a masculine venture (Peterat, 1983). Men gained training for the public world through seminars, universities and the military, while women stayed within the family confines, focusing on domestic craft and culture. With the Industrial Revolution, production moved outside the home; and women’s roles diminished. They gained access through higher education beginning with the home economics programs that in Peterat’s words, “formed as a synthesis or blend of science (male) and the home (female)” (p. 67).

When women first started to attend universities, they were frequently ostracized, as in the case of Canada’s two first female physicians, forced to sit behind screens so that their presence would not distract the men. Home economics was in a different position from medicine or nursing because it represented the domestic world and was therefore accorded much less status. Educated women such as Evlyn Farris, often spoke out against home economics because they believed that education for women’s social roles would undermine any inroads that women made when they were permitted to study in the same courses as men (Stewart, 1990).

In 1902 the University of Toronto established the first undergraduate degree program in home economics, and in 1943 the University of British Columbia was the last to do so. While the reasons for the late implementation at UBC are complex, it is safe to say that politics played an important part.
Home economics at the public school level grew steadily in British Columbia. In 1905, the province's second domestic science centre was established at King Edward High School in Vancouver. Like the Victoria centre, it was equipped with money raised by local women's organizations. The Vancouver centre was managed by Elizabeth Berry, a graduate of the Macdonald Institute in Guelph, Ontario. Domestic science teachers were recognized officially in the Public School Act of 1905 and shortly afterwards "home economics" was approved as an optional subject in the provincial curriculum. Its adoption was slow; beleaguered school boards often viewed its introduction as an unnecessary frill. The 1911 arrival of Alice Ravenhill to British Columbia offered much promise for the future of home economics. Ravenhill came with impeccable British qualifications to promote home economics from the perspective of healthy living. Whether her adopted homeland recognized her brilliance is a matter of conjecture.

The 1926 Survey of the British Columbia School System (more popularly known as the Putman-Weir Survey) solidified the place of practical subjects such home economics in the school system. Home economics was intended to teach technical skills with a moral rationale; to provide “systematic and well-directed instruction and practice in those activities which are fundamental to home-making and therefore fundamental for building up and preserving a healthy nation” (Putman and Weir, 1925, p. 91). Based on the educational ideas of John Dewey, the Putman-Weir Survey recommended that a supervisor be hired to coordinate home economics throughout the Province.

Jessie McLenaghan was hired as the first Director of the Home Economics Branch of the B.C. Department of Education; the first woman in Canada to hold such a responsible position in government. Under her direction home economics became recognized as a matriculation subject and in 1936, it was made a compulsory subject for Grade 7 and Grade 8 in the British Columbia's city and municipal school districts. The previously informal curriculum was made very prescriptive. It was said that a home economics teacher in Prince George could phone her friend in Prince Rupert on a given Tuesday in November and ask, "How did your orange tea biscuit lab turn out today?" McLenaghan was responsible for the creation of a textbook, Foods, Nutrition and Home Management that she believed would prove home economics was a “prepared” subject.

Professional home economics advanced with the formation of the Canadian Home Economics Association in 1939. Jessie McLenaghan was elected as the first president; in her inaugural address she asked for greater solidarity in the ranks, and a strong professional spirit among all the workers in the home economics field; dieticians, nutritionists, women in business, professional homemakers and teachers. “The recognition we gain will depend on our unity of purpose” (Bannerman, Rebus & Smith, 1989, p. 6).

By the time McLenaghan retired in 1946, home economics was being taught to nearly 18,000 students in over one hundred B.C. public schools. After the extremes of World War II, the postwar 1950s were a time of relative placidity and strong economic growth. The prominence of home economics in the B.C. school system continued until the Chant Commission of 1961 which removed it from the elementary school curriculum and placed a greater emphasis on science, mathematics and other "core" subjects. This change in focus has been attributed to the Russian-American "race to space" and the ascendancy of science and mathematics over other school subjects.

The 60's burst onto the scene with exuberance and energy, and by the end of the decade Canada had seen the introduction of the birth control pill, changes in the Divorce Act and changes in public mores about public nudity, homosexuality and premarital cohabitation. These social
changes were not mirrored in home economics; the field had become moribund as home economics departments struggled merely to survive. As women took advantage of new educational opportunities in traditional male professions, several universities across Canada changed the names of their home economics faculties and/or schools to Family and Consumer Studies, Family and Nutritional Sciences, and Human Ecology, perhaps in a bid to rid themselves of the “cooking and sewing” stereotypes.

In the 1970s home economists / theorists in the United States such as Marjorie Brown started the process of defining home economics and its role in society. Across Canada, home economics programs were increasingly under duress, affected by the second wave of feminism in the 1960s, changing women's roles and evolution of the social welfare state in Canada. The 1974 closing of the Lillian Massey Treble School of Home Economics at Mount Allison University offers a case in point (Abe, n.d.). Its closure was attributed to the combination of practical subjects such as food and clothing that were incompatible with university subjects and could just as well be learned at home, according to the University, with foods and nutrition programs that required sound knowledge in chemistry and biology. The University labeled the School as “incoherent” and lacking direction. In addition, the school seemed to attract traditional students who wanted to be well-educated homemakers or to seek employment in traditional female occupations such as high school teaching. The real reason according to Abe was the vulnerability of the School of Home Economics to criticism by faculty members of other departments. Something had to give; home economics did not fit into the long term liberal arts plan of the University. Oddly (or perhaps unsurprisingly) this stance harkens back to Evlyn Farris, who in 1914, fought against the inclusion of home economics at the University of British Columbia because she believed that the “tendency in North America to introduce practical training for women imperiled their intellectual development, and endangered the value of philosophical learning” (Stewart, 1990, p. 45).

In the 1980s Eleanore Vaines and Linda Peterat, faculty members at UBC in Family and Nutritional Sciences and Education respectively, took up the challenge of defining home economics from a Canadian perspective. It was perhaps too late. The Bachelor of Home Economics degree was discontinued at UBC in 2002 as the Faculty of Agriculture re-invented itself as Food and Land Systems. Prospective home economics teachers had to cobble together credits from various faculties and schools across the UBC campus and the program was arbitrarily canceled in 2007 by the Dean of Education, only to be restored after a mass protest was initiated through the Teachers of Home Economics Specialist Association list serve. A home economics diploma program directed at qualified teachers was started in 2005 to help fill the gap between job openings and teachers with home economics qualifications. The position of home economics education at UBC continues to be precarious.
References and Further Readings


The Homeroom. http://www.viu.ca/homeroom/content/topics/Programs/homecon.htm


