As a feminist, former DNA biochemist, and now science educator, I rarely find myself "at home" in the academy. The University of Wisconsin System Women and Science program afforded me one of those opportunities recently as a National Science Foundation Visiting Professor of Women and Science in the Collaborative Community including UW-River Falls (my host campus), UW-Stout, and UW-Eau Claire during spring semester of 1994. Here I found myself at home in the interesting and challenging role of faculty development leader. While in this role, I also came "home" in terms of my scholarship, finally finding my location in academic space -- in the field of Gender and Science, a field situated at the intersection of women's studies and science/technology studies. It was in this moment that Brains on Toast came into my view.

Produced by Joyan Saunders, this video presents a lively and humorous look at some of the issues currently being examined in the area of Gender and Science. Imagine my surprise at finding my scholarly self with that "at-home" feeling at a viewing of new video works at Minneapolis' Walker Art Gallery! That's where I first encountered Brains on Toast in February of 1994. I found myself laughing hysterically -- alone -- throughout the entire production. To have enough context to wrap my mind around a piece of "innovative and experimental" video art seemed like a grand moment to me. Ever the educator, my impulse was to find a way for this video to be employed in the classroom, so I offer the following thoughts.

The video examines three issues in Gender and Science. The first is a satirical look at brain size differences between the genders -- hence the title of the video. The same treatment of hormonal differences follows. Finally, the scientific construction of gender is explored. Each topic is set in the context of discussions arising in a women's studies course. Characters in the course reappear in the scenes exploring each topic. Some classic music sequences are employed ("I Enjoy Being a Girl," for example) as well as a clip from a Saturday Night Live takeoff on a commercial for that important pharmaceutical, "Balz Off." Each segment is interspersed with scenes at a zoo, where men are being interviewed about their views on the biological differences between men and women. ("Would you want to have a baby?" they are asked.) The overall effect of the video is that of a humorous yet quite serious critique of deeply rooted ideas about the biological basis of gender differences.

I can envision using the video in a women's studies course, a Gender and Science course, or a Biology of Women course. A real challenge, I think, would be to employ the video in a General Biology course! It is time for science students to be learning about how the science they study interacts with the culture they live in!

Thanks to the excellent scholarship in the field of Gender and Science, there are several readings that could be used with students in preparation for viewing the video. The first is a review of the field of Gender and Science offered by Londa Schiebinger in her article "The History and Philosophy of Women in Science: A Review Essay." First published in
There are a number of tangents the experience of the video could follow. What about the impact on cultural representations of science such as those that Saturday Night Live presents (remember the "Mr. Know-it-all" segment with Dana Carvey, Demi Moore, and Phil Hartman)? What about the representation of women's studies in this video? How do different disciplines view the video? Do any students find themselves "at home" with the video? These are just a few of the issues the video raises for me. I encourage you to let the humor of Brains on Toast entice you into creative classroom endeavors!

Cheryl Ney is currently Associate Professor of Chemistry and Director, Summer Institute in Science and Math for Preprofessional Students, Capital University, Columbus, Ohio.