

Feminist Pedagogy: A Means for Bringing Critical Thinking and Creativity to the Economics Classroom

By JEAN SHACKELFORD*

The past decade has produced a plethora of reports critical of higher education, and many of these reports suggest that classroom activities focus on more than the transmission or transfer of knowledge from teacher to student (Derek Bok, 1986; Ernest L. Boyer, 1987; Association of American Colleges, 1985). Economic education has not escaped these critiques (John Siegfried et al., 1991). Within the same time span, pedagogical approaches that focus on critical thinking and inquiry have emerged. Exposure to innovative curricular-reform programs introduced many instructors to Socratic or dialogic approaches to teaching and to collaborative learning. Programs focusing on transforming courses and curricula to include race, class, and gender acquainted some instructors with methods involved in feminist pedagogy and inquiry.

The term "feminist pedagogy" was coined during the 1980's to incorporate a wide variety of teaching methods and approaches in the classroom that were first adopted by feminists in women's studies programs and later adopted by men and women teaching in various disciplines. This paper introduces economists to feminist pedagogy and its underlying foundations and focuses on how feminist pedagogy fosters elements of critical thinking. Economists will recognize a distinct contrast to the prevailing discourse in the discipline.

I. Feminist Pedagogy—An Overview

Central to the agenda of feminist pedagogy is empowering students to become crit-

ical and creative learners. In fostering critical and creative thinking, it is important that students are encouraged to engage freely in the discourse of the discipline and come to rely less on the authority of the instructor. Feminist pedagogy is often described as student-centered (as opposed to subject- or teacher-centered). It is less hierarchical and emphasizes cooperation and community.

One must recognize at the outset that feminist pedagogy relies, like feminist theory, on ideologies, epistemologies, and methodologies that are negotiated and changing. Mary Bricker-Jenkins and Nancy Hooyman (1987 p. 36) point out that any discussion of feminist ideology must be one of "an open system...criticized from within and open to exchange with other ideologies, it advances through dialogue." Knowledge claims are filtered through one's social position or social location (Helen E. Longino, 1990). The philosopher Sandra Harding (1991 p. 6) notes that "Feminist analyses of science, technology, and knowledge are not monolithic.... There is no single set of claims beyond a few generalities that could be called 'feminism' without controversy among feminists. The feminist science discussions are both enriched and constrained by the different political, practical, and conceptual perspectives that they bring to bear on science, its beliefs, practices, and institutions." For these reasons, I cannot argue here that there is some "essential feminist pedagogy." There are, however, characteristics or enduring themes and principles which relate to the ideology and practice of feminism that help describe, rather than define, what employing a feminist pedagogy might entail.

Recurring themes and principles that are consistent throughout feminist analysis and on which feminist pedagogy can be grounded include: an explicit goal of ending patri-

*Professor of Economics at Bucknell University. I thank Myra Strober for her careful reading and helpful suggestions; Peg Cronin and Diana Strassmann for their thoughtful and collaborative conversations; and Charles Sackery for his critique and encouragement. Thanks also to Janet Seiz, Teresa Amott, Dean Baker, Glynis Carr, Julie Nelson, and Robin Bartlett.

archy and oppression and empowering or giving voice and influence to those disempowered by patriarchal structures; validation of forms of knowing other than "objective," "hierarchical," or "authority-laden" models; and a focus on practice, with an emphasis on process over product or content. These three themes provide a different lens through which students may expand their critical repertoire and thereby develop a more multifaceted understanding of economics. Knowledge that students construct rather than memorize becomes more meaningful, because it is about them and therefore important to their lives.

The first of these themes deals with patriarchal structures, examining white male dominance over other groups, including minorities as well as women. Feminist pedagogy seeks to interrupt this patriarchal dominance and give power to *all* students within the classroom.

Instead of seeking a reversal of the power structure, feminist analysis seeks to empower, to give voice and influence, to those who have been excluded from traditional power structures. In the sciences, including economics, feminists seek analyses applying to all classes, races, and cultures:

Feminists (male and female) want to close the gender gap in scientific and technological literacy, to invent modes of thought and learn the existing techniques and skills that will enable women to get more control over the conditions of their lives. Such sciences can and must benefit men, too—especially those marginalized by racism, imperialism, and class exploitation; the new sciences are not to be *only* for women. [Harding, 1991 p. 5]

In traditional classrooms, continued male dominance is reinforced by underlying assumptions supporting theories and beliefs about society, "others," and existing institutions. Among those institutions are the natural and social sciences and traditional forms of education. Harding argues that knowledge in the sciences, like all other knowledge, has been "created through po-

litical struggles.... They are no less scientific for being driven by particular historical and political projects" (1991 p. 10). It is important to see these as "truths" that speak to some but are not necessarily universal.

A second theme that underscores feminist pedagogy is based on a feminist analysis of gender, which offers women and minorities a safe place to express their ideas and explore their experiences as legitimate subjects of inquiry. A feminist understanding recognizes that women's historical position has been established under patriarchy. This has determined the experiences, influenced values, shaped perspectives, and hence established women's social location in constructing knowledge. Within feminist analyses, "lived" experiences are given a voice that is often denied in a society that values "objectivity, empiricism, and value-free" analysis. So-called "feminine values" are also given privilege within feminist analysis (Bricker-Jenkins and Hooyman, 1987 p. 36). Feminist pedagogy challenges theories that do not attend to historical underpinnings or to cultural diversity. Feminist pedagogy invites a multiplicity of narratives which avoid overly simplistic reductionist explanations and creates a more inclusive study of economics.

An operative feminist pedagogy allows students, through open dialogue and conversation, to compare, contrast, and connect their views and ideas with those of others toward a goal of achieving a greater understanding of the subject. The result of this process is that students are actively engaged in the production of knowledge, as opposed to being the passive recipients of teacher-imparted "truth."

A third theme found in feminist pedagogy is that knowledge goes hand in hand with process. There is an emphasis on the importance of process relative to solutions or content. Feminists note that many different voices, definitions of problems, positions, and solutions might be operative in a variety of situations. This suggests that how one teaches is as important as what one teaches. Teachers of economics could benefit from such a multiplicity of approaches in the teaching of economics.

Economists may be somewhat uneasy with the "underlying themes" of feminist analysis, as they may appear antithetical to those that underlie mainstream economics. Issues that surround economic method and epistemology influence the rhetoric and the discourse, as well as the content of economic analysis, and thus the conditions and location that enable instructors to teach students to "think like an economist."

II. Feminist Pedagogy in the Economics Classroom

A. Course Content and Materials

The content and context of economics derive from the questions asked and the conclusions made by economists concerning teaching traditions. What is and is not important revolves around the goal of teaching students to "think like an economist." "Problem-solving skills that emphasize analytical reasoning using the techniques and principles of economics... and creative skills that help determine how to frame questions, what tools and principles apply to particular problems, what data and information are pertinent to those problems, and how to understand or explain surprising or unexpected results," are skills to be addressed by the instructor teaching students how to "think like an economist" (Siegfried et al., 1991 p. 21).

However, thinking like an economist may exclude analyses of race, class, and gender. In 1974, Carolyn Shaw Bell observed, "One must first inquire how human beings, people themselves and women among them, enter into the economic calculus. It turns out that they don't, for the most part" (pp. 615-6). Nearly two decades later, one would be hard pressed to assert that gender issues have attained even threshold entry into the "economic calculus." Susan Feiner and Barbara Morgan's (1987) work confirms that there is little inclusion of race or gender in introductory economics textbooks, and that when there is coverage it is often stereotypical or biased. Such texts may well prepare instructors for teaching students how to "think like an economist" and provide the "content" as defined by the disci-

pline in any particular course. Often, however, these texts generate few opportunities for students to discuss or explore economic ideas.

To employ feminist pedagogy effectively in economics classes one must include material that allows students to analyze as well as synthesize and, just as importantly, to explore ways of discovering. Providing some context for understanding the economic content is important in this process. This includes a history of ideas as well as a history motivating the development of important tools and concepts. Economics texts are notorious for providing little history or context for the discussion of issues or the development of theory, while ideology is assumed away and objectivity is assumed to be ever present, simply as a part of good science. Clearly, readings or materials that are more inclusive and that allow students to question and to ask about models, about the political implications of assumptions and policy, and about who wins and who loses within a given solution are important to establishing dialogue. Depending on the course, newspaper articles, films, data use and data gathering, short stories, and even novels may provide both the content and context to allow students to discuss, describe, analyze, assess, and discover the nature of economic theory and policy. Teachers are, after all, imparting more than a body of knowledge to unsuspecting students; and this needs to be indicated.

B. Classroom Environment and Attitudes

While the hierarchical organization and structure of traditional institutions of higher education and especially the position of the professor within this scheme are contradictory to feminist notions of power and authority, recall that feminist analysis focuses on process as well as content and product.

Instructors are vested with power over a class from the moment class rosters are received until final grades are handed in. There is no escaping the authority that comes with the roster. However, it is possible to develop an alternative to a pedagogy of domination. While instructors cannot

deny or give away power and authority, no matter how egalitarian and democratic they may wish to seem, it is still possible to create a classroom environment that relies on democracy rather than dominance. Teachers of economics can establish a forum for student input into the course, where students can enter into conversations and explore ideas as equals. This forum can include student input into the process, goals, content, course design, and even evaluation.

By centering student experiences as a primary source from which learning proceeds, the resulting dialogue establishes that "even students" understand, are affected by, and have differing opinions about economics. Student-centered, rather than teacher-centered, discussion allows students to understand that the way they explore and construct their views may have to do with their experiences as workers, as students, as members of families, as union members, as women, or as men and women of color, among many other things. Qualitative as well as quantitative information influences our knowledge about economics. Dialogue can begin to inform students about how knowledge is formed, revealing the importance of questioning, supporting, or documenting ideas. Conducting a class in this environment not only enables students to learn the structure and arguments of the discipline, but also encourages critical insights and questions, which foster critical thinking and inquiry. Classroom practices, including assignments, examinations, and discussion, need to provide students with a context sensitive to the content and discourse of the discipline.

C. Assignments

Developing assignments, discussions, and other activities that focus on discovery and encourage students to use their personal experience is the challenge to employing feminist pedagogy. Joanne Gainen Kurfiss (1988) notes that in courses emphasizing critical thinking, "Courses are assignment centered rather than text and lecture centered. Goals, methods, and evaluation emphasize using content rather than simply acquiring it" (p. 88). Personal knowledge as

well as digression can be a source of creativity and insight, fostering student awareness and interest in the subject. Dialogue allows students to explore the language, argument, and discourse of economics, and at the same time to create knowledge as part of an emerging community of learners. While class dialogue should focus on content within this framework, if courses continue to require memorization of facts, they may well become Alfred North Whitehead's "inert ideas" by the end of the term.

I have found that writing assignments play an essential role in encouraging both student learning and the exploration of ideas. Writing assignments may include essays, abstracts, responses to inquiries, and data collection and analysis, along with journals in which students write to learn rather than to perform or demonstrate knowledge. Collaboration and peer review of this writing encourage students to become responsible not only for themselves but to each other. This fosters a sense of community within the classroom and promotes the pursuit of knowledge.

The lecture, in which it is difficult to inspire dialogue or encourage creative or critical thinking, can also introduce assignments which may serve to motivate critical thinking. In very large lecture sections the instructor may periodically "check in" with the students, pausing to allow short writing tasks: making lists of what they see to be the main points of the lecture, summarizing the lecture in their own words, or "free writing" about issues raised in the lecture.

Projects and assignments which require the use of concepts, tools, goals, and dialogue allow students the opportunity to internalize the process of "thinking like an economist." Games can be used to foster and reinforce the use of tools and concepts as well as the skills required to employ them. Through these kinds of projects and activities, students begin to rely upon themselves and the group for answers. This empowers students to seek answers beyond texts or lectures and to reconstruct questions, thereby fostering life-long learning attitudes and skills. This active learning process is central to critical thinking and creativity.

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While I believe that Solow is largely correct in his assessment of why economists do teach what they do, I would contest his view that economists do not know how to (or do not) teach communication or creative and critical judgement. Instructors show their knowledge of these skills daily and so must begin to teach them actively. Teachers of economics are constantly demonstrating or "modeling" a critical thinking agenda in lectures and in the questions raised in class. Perhaps economists need to recognize, examine, and question their teaching agendas, particularly as they unconsciously relate to critical thinking skills. Feminist pedagogical methods can assist instructors in recognizing what they are doing in their courses, and it offers direction in helping students understand the discourse, conventions, and community of economists.

In addition to providing insights on how one should teach, feminist pedagogy also offers advice about what should be taught, encouraging the incorporation of a more inclusive and contextual set of materials that avoid gender and racial biases. Currently, instructors are likely to employ, as models or assumptions, metaphors that perhaps unconsciously reflect social values. One gendered metaphor that pervades economic models is that of the "economic man." Julie Nelson has written of this arrogant economic actor: "Economic man, 'the agent' of the prototypical economic model, springs up fully formed, with preferences fully developed, and is fully active and self-contained. He has no childhood or old age; no dependence on anyone; no responsibility for anyone but himself. The environment has no effect on him, but rather is merely the passive material, presented as 'constraints,' over which his rationality has play. He interacts in society without being influenced by society: his mode of interaction is through an ideal market in which prices form the only,

and only necessary form of communication. *Homo economicus* is the central character in a romance of individuality without connection to nature or society" (Nelson, 1991 p. 16). Nancy Folbre and Heidi Hartmann (1988 p. 193) add: "Feminist economic approaches, however diverse, are all suspicious of any rhetoric that describes women as less self-interested than men or automatically places gender interests on a lower level of analysis than family interests or class interests." A feminist pedagogy employed in the economics classroom would attend to these perspectives, metaphors, and contexts.

Of course, there are costs to this pedagogical strategy. Clearly, dialogue is impossible in very large classes. Developing materials, assignments, and projects that address critical thinking skills, responding frequently to student projects, papers, and journals is extremely time-consuming. Classroom dynamics are never the same, and one must always respond to that. Even with all this investment of time, there is no recipe guaranteeing success, particularly when methods which evaluate these strategies are still emerging (John E. McPeck, 1981; Kurfiss, 1988). Furthermore, despite growing lip service to the importance of teaching, the reward structure in the economics discipline and in higher education is on research. So long as the payoff is skewed toward the research model of higher education, few will choose to devote the time necessary to dialogic methods of teaching.

While these costs may seem high, what are the costs of the alternative? The studies critical of higher education only address the national and international costs of producing students who have not acquired skills in critical thinking and learning in general terms. Economists might want to assess more explicitly the cost of not changing teaching methods; of not addressing critical learning and thinking skills within the context of disciplinary organization, content, and discourse. In doing so economists might begin developing a curriculum and a pedagogy that is meaningful not only to the students today, but to those increasingly diverse student bodies expected in the next

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decades. If students are challenged to think critically in the classroom about economics, perhaps they will be engaged as creative theorists and policymakers. To this end I believe that economists can employ feminist pedagogy to encourage students to explore economics actively and critically.

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