

What Is Feminist Pedagogy?

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Feminist pedagogy is a theory about the teaching/learning process that guides our choice of classroom practices by providing criteria to evaluate specific educational strategies and techniques in terms of the desired course goals or outcomes. These evaluative criteria include the extent to which a community of learners is empowered to act responsibly toward one another and the subject matter and to apply that learning to social action.

Feminist pedagogy begins with a vision of what education might be like but frequently is not. This is a vision of the classroom as a liberatory environment in which we, teacher-student and student-teacher, act as subjects, not objects. Feminist pedagogy is engaged teaching/learning—engaged with self in a continuing reflective process; engaged actively with the material being studied; engaged with others in a struggle to get beyond our sexism and racism and classism and homophobia and other destructive hatreds and to work together to enhance our knowledge; engaged with the community, with traditional organizations, and with movements for social change.

The concept of a liberatory environment suggests a new way to be with one another in the classroom. A classroom characterized as persons connected in a net of relationships with people who care about each other's learning as well as their own is very different from a classroom that is seen as comprised of teacher and students. One goal of the liberatory classroom is that members learn to respect each other's differences rather than fear them. Such a perspective is ecological and holistic. The classroom becomes an important place to connect to our roots, our past, and to envision the future. It is a place to utilize and develop all of our talents and abilities, to develop excellence that is not limited to the few. The classroom becomes a place in which integrity is not only possible but normal. The web of interrelationships in the classroom is seen to stretch to the local, regional, and global communities and, potentially, even beyond the boundaries of our earth.

Such a classroom builds on the experiences of the participants. We move on to seeing our experiences in different lights, to relat-

ing our experiences to other or new evidence, to thinking about our experiences in different ways. Under those circumstances we can integrate our new learning and modify our past understandings. But we remain grounded in our experiences, maintaining the sense of ourselves as subjects.

The vision includes a participatory, democratic process in which at least some power is shared. Learners develop independence. The classroom becomes a model of ways for people to work together to accomplish mutual or shared goals, and to help each other reach individual goals. Students are able to take risks in such a classroom. This is an active classroom, where the joy and excitement as well as the hard work of learning provide the kind of positive feedback that magnifies the effort put into learning. At its simplest level, feminist pedagogy is concerned with gender justice and overcoming oppressions. It recognizes the genderedness of all social relations and consequently of all societal institutions and structures. Thus, fundamental to a feminist perspective is a commitment to growth, to renewal, to life. The vision itself must continue to evolve.

In a feminist classroom, students integrate the skills of critical thinking with respect for and ability to work with others. Feminist pedagogy strives to help student and teacher learn to think in new ways, especially ways that enhance the integrity and wholeness of the person and the person's connections with others (Minnich, Rutenberg). Critical thinking, then, is not an abstracted analysis but a reflective process firmly grounded in the experiences of the everyday. It requires continuous questioning and making assumptions explicit, but it does so in a dialogue aimed not at disproving another person's perspective, nor destroying the validity of another's perspective, but at a mutual exploration of explications of diverse experiences.

The vision of a feminist classroom includes an erotic dimension,

an assertion of an empowered creative energy, the sharing of intellectual discovery, which as [Audre] Lorde says, "forms a bridge between the sharers which can be the basis of understanding much of what is not shared between them," a lessening of difference (Allen),

or difference used in a creative way, to spark increased understanding of the many dimensions of life, of incongruities or paradoxes, the complexities inherent in seemingly simple things.

Feminist pedagogy ultimately seeks a transformation of the acad-

emy and points toward steps, however small, that we can all take in each of our classrooms to facilitate that transformation. Three concepts, community, empowerment, and leadership, are central to these steps and provide a way of organizing our exploration into the meaning of feminist pedagogy.

The Theory: Empowerment

Of the three central concepts, empowerment has been the most frequently discussed, in part because of the early ties between feminist pedagogy and Paulo Friere's work in dialogical education. Feminist pedagogy includes a recognition of the power implications of traditional schooling and of the limitations of traditional meanings of the concept of power that embody relations of domination.

By focusing on empowerment, feminist pedagogy embodies a concept of power as energy, capacity, and potential rather than as domination. This is an image of power as the glue holding a community together, giving the people the opportunity "to act, to move, to change conditions, for the benefit of the whole population" (Lane). Under traditional conceptions of power as domination, justice requires that limits be placed on power and that a balance of power be achieved in order to mitigate the results of domination. Under conceptions of power as capability, the goal is to increase the power of all actors, not to limit the power of some.

Thus, a view of power as creative community energy would suggest that strategies be developed to counteract unequal power arrangements. Such strategies recognize the potentiality for changing traditional unequal relationships. Our classrooms need not always reflect an equality of power, but they must reflect movements in that direction.

This conception of power recognizes that people need power, both as a way to maintain a sense of self and as a way to accomplish ends (Janeway). Power can be used to enhance both autonomy and mutuality. To be empowered is to be able to "claim an education" as Adrienne Rich urges us. To be empowered is to recognize our abilities to act to create a more humane social order. To be empowered is to be able to engage in significant learning. To be empowered is to be able to connect with others in mutually productive ways.

To accomplish the empowerment of all, feminist pedagogy employs classroom strategies that: 1) enhance the students' opportunities and abilities to develop their thinking about the goals and

objectives they wish and need to accomplish individually and collectively, 2) develop the students' independence (from formal instructors) as learners, 3) enhance the stake that everyone has in the success of a course and thereby make clear the responsibility of all members of the class for the learning of all, 4) develop skills of planning, negotiating, evaluating, and decision making, 5) reinforce or enhance the self-esteem of class members by the implicit recognition that they are sufficiently competent to play a role in course development and are able to be change agents, 6) expand the students' understanding of the subject matter of the course and of the joy and difficulty of intense intellectual activity as they actively consider learning goals and sequences.

Empowering strategies allow students to find their own voices, to discover the power of authenticity. At the same time, they enable individuals to find communion with others and to discover ways to act on their understanding. Empowering classrooms are places to practice visions of a feminist world, confronting differences to enrich all of us rather than to belittle some of us. Empowering pedagogy does not dissolve the authority or the power of the instructor. It does move from power as domination to power as creative energy. In such a system the teacher's knowledge and experience is recognized and is used with the students to increase the legitimate power of all. Empowering pedagogy takes seriously the goal of lifelong learning by consciously developing teaching/learning skills as well as by providing an informational subject base. It accepts the antihegemonic potential of liberatory education and provides a model of interrelationships that can be incorporated into a developing vision of a world in which hierarchical oppressive relationships are exchanged for autonomy within a community that celebrates difference.

The Theory: Community

"Theories of power," Nancy Hartsock tells us, "are implicitly theories of community." And likewise, our decisions about what we image as community influence the ways in which we construct systems of power.

But, to talk about community, one needs to reexamine the gendered nature of traditional classrooms. The work of Carol Gilligan on moral development provides insights for reconceptualizing community. Gilligan identifies differences in the moral development of boys and girls and the moral conceptions of men and women. One consequence is

the contrast between a self defined through separation and a self delineated through connection, between a self measured against an abstract ideal of perfection and a self assessed through the particular activities of care.

Women seek to build connections. They seek to maintain connections that have been built. Relationships are more than a set of interactions among people. They are the web of existence. For men, the importance of separation results in the creation of rules as the web of existence. Relationships with individual people are less important than the fabric of rules.

These disparate visions in their tension reflect the paradoxical truths of human experience—that we know ourselves as separate only insofar as we live in connection with others, and that we experience relationships only insofar as we differentiate other from self (Gilligan).

The tragedy is that men in power have built a society that in its public aspects reflects only the morality of rights side of the tension.

Within the classroom, too, the morality of rights is dominant. By and large, students participate in our classes as individuals, taking little responsibility for the class as a whole. The classroom has a set of rules about fairness and equity but little consideration of differences in need. The rights of others in the classroom are respected, but little compassion and care is structured into the classroom.

At the core of feminist pedagogy is a re-imagining of the classroom as a community of learners where there is both autonomy of self and mutuality with others that is congruent with the developmental needs of both women and men. There are many advantages to creating such a classroom. Learning is enhanced in such environments (see Nelsen, Schmuck in Bar-Tal and Saxe, Torney-Purta, Johnson and Johnson, Schniedewind). Further, as Hannah Arendt noted, power arises from the collective self-confidence in a people's capacity to act and effect their fate. Empowerment is only possible when there is a sense of mutuality.

Decision making when there is a community of mutuality rather than a community of isolated individuals can take place by consensus as well as by formalized decision rules. Creativity is enhanced by the consensus process for "something emerges as a desirable outcome, even though no member of the group thought

about it in advance" (Thayer). Differences and diversity in a community of mutuality can be recognized and seen as a source of creative energy (Lorde, Nelsen).

The personal can be recognized as political in a classroom with some sense of mutual community. Students may find connections with themselves, their individual and collective pasts, with others, and with the future. In such a classroom there is a need and desire to move learning beyond the walls of the classroom. Theory can be extended to action, and action can come back to inform theory and that can lead again to action.

For too long community has been seen as either the polar opposite of autonomy or as the rather weak conception of an aggregate of individuals together because of some shared formality like geographic boundaries. Feminist pedagogy includes teaching strategies that are based on a reconceptualization of community with a richness that includes the autonomy and individuality of members who share a sense of relationship and connectedness with each other.

The Theory: Leadership

Leadership in its liberatory aspect as an active element of praxis is the third crucial concept in feminist pedagogy. Leadership is the embodiment of our ability and our willingness to act on our beliefs. Florence Howe illustrated this in noting that

a leader is someone who knows how to control her life, and who has a vision of possibilities for other lives apart from her own, for her community, for other women, for example, and who works to make that *vision* visible to others, to share it, without trampling on other persons, but engaging them, enabling them to work for that vision as well.

Feminist pedagogy focuses on the development of leadership. For example, students who take part in developing goals and objectives for a course learn planning and negotiating skills. They also learn how to develop an understanding of, and an ability to articulate, their needs. They learn how to find connections between their needs and the needs of others. They learn about groups and about the different leadership tasks in groups and take different leadership roles throughout the course period. As students struggle with evaluation methods, they learn how to evaluate actions and the connection between objectives and achievement. When things aren't working in the classroom, they learn how to analyze the

problem and how to find alternatives. And the skill of the students as leaders helps all of this work more smoothly and effectively. Leadership is a special form of empowerment that empowers others.

The feminist teacher is above all a role model of a leader. S/he has helped members of the class develop a community, a sense of shared purpose, a set of skills for accomplishing that purpose, and the leadership skills so that teacher and students may jointly proceed on those tasks. There is a dynamic between leadership and followership, and effective leaders under the more modern sense of leadership are also effective followers. Between the two is a morality based upon responsibility. Individuals are responsible for their acts within the context in which they have freedom to act. They have responsibility arising out of the relationships they have with those with whom they share a community. The students' and teacher's joint responsibility for the successful conclusion of a class emphasizes the moral nature of leadership and followership activities. This is a very different perception of the classroom than that where teachers have responsibility for teaching and students for learning with the implication that each is at least partially independent. It emphasizes the moral nature of choices within a community and the necessity for agency by community members.

Leadership then is logically and intuitively connected to community and empowerment by providing the active mechanism for achieving the empowered community and for that community to continue to be effective within the broader world. It suggests that change does not take place magically but by the active exercise of agency, whether directed at ourselves or at structures.

Feminist pedagogy does not assume that all classrooms are alike. Indeed, it suggests how classrooms might differ depending, for example, on the initial competence of students (see Schniedewind, this issue). It does not automatically preclude any technique or approach. It does indicate the relationship that specific techniques have to educational goals. It is not limited to any specific subject matter but it does include a reflexive element that increases the feminist scholarship component involved in the teaching/learning of any subject matter. It has close ties with other liberatory pedagogies, but it cannot be subsumed under other pedagogical approaches. It is transformative, helping us revision the educational enterprise. But it can also be phased into a traditional teaching approach or another alternative pedagogical approach. It is not all or nothing, although practitioners find that taking one step makes

the next step logically compelling. It is a crucial component of a feminist revolution.

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