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Feminist Pedagogy and the Construction of Knowledge: One Teacher’s Experience

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Introduction

In this essay we want to illuminate, through the efforts of one English professor, how women’s studies scholarship and women’s experience can generate new pedagogies and processes of teaching in the college classroom. We will describe an aspect of a larger work in progress, an ethnographic study of classroom practices of eighteen feminist college teachers. The study itself analyzes what happens to teaching and learning when women’s perspectives become central to the construction of knowledge.

The transformative impact of the last two decades of feminist scholarship on the academic disciplines and the college curriculum has been well documented (Boxer, 1982; DuBois, et al., 1985; Schmitz, 1985; Schuster and Van Dyne, 1985; Tetreault, 1985). Postmodern scholars, including many feminist theorists, argue that all knowledge is a social construction. From this perspective many traditional disciplines can be seen to reflect concerns and experiences of dominant groups in society, particularly privileged white males. At best they give us limited constructions, and at worst a discourse that silences or marginalizes other ways of knowing. Feminist scholars, on the other hand, call attention to legitimate constructions based on female experience, forms of knowledge obscured heretofore by false universals based on male experience (Alcoff, 1987; Haraway, 1988; Harding, 1987; Mascia-Lees, et al., 1989). These writers, along with other postmodern

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scholars such as Clifford and Marcus (1986), all argue that objectivity is guaranteed only by consciously partial perspectives such as those deriving from peoples' various and specific positions within society. It is an objectivity which is based not on universals but on an acknowledgement of particular contexts, experiences, and histories as bases for knowledge.

Just as feminist theory has challenged the legitimacy of universals in many spheres of knowledge, feminist teaching practices have emerged to challenge universally accepted practices in the traditional classroom. At the heart of the most traditional pedagogy is the goal of mastery, the search for the truth of the work or material, the knowledge of what it "really is" or what it "really means." The predominant vehicle of this pedagogy is lecturing, but discussions also tend toward Socratic reasoning and "critical thinking," with the goal being to eliminate error and reconcile different points of view. Dorothy Berkson, the teacher in our case study below, gives the following example:

I used to come into the classroom with a list of questions, and I knew where they were leading ... You get the students to come up with the answer you want them to come up with.

I would get frustrated if students didn't take the thing in the direction I thought they were supposed to take it; and so I missed all these wonderful insights that they had to offer. They may not be able to develop insights in as sophisticated a way as you and I could, but they sometimes come up with the absolute critical starting point for a really interesting piece of interpretation, and the more they do it, the farther they can take it, and the more sophisticated and the better they get at it.¹

Many teachers who have integrated the study of women into their courses have begun to develop alternative teaching techniques to build on the responses and experiences of women students. There is now a growing literature on such alternatives to traditional pedagogical paradigms. Indeed, feminist pedagogy in its early formulations had characteristics associated with women in general; it was cooperative rather than competitive, attentive to student experiences, and concerned with the personal and relational sources of knowledge.² It remains a pedagogy committed to the view, expressed by Dorothy Berkson, that knowledge may be constructed in the classroom by and with the students, with the responsibility for learning and interpretation a collaborative one.

An Ethnographic Study

We have been interested in four themes in our study of the classroom practices of eighteen feminist college teachers. "Mastery," the first, has traditionally meant the goal of rational comprehension of the material on the teachers' and experts' terms. In the feminist classroom, students seek mastery on their own terms and in concert with others. They make increasingly more sophisticated connections with the materials based on their own positions and their own questions.

Our second theme, "voice," has become a descriptor for the emergence of women's consciousness and experiences into the public sphere, denoting both women's personal awakenings and new visions of the world (Gilligan, 1982; Belenky et al., 1986). In our classrooms, "voice" includes the ways in which students (and their teachers) articulate their own experiences and learning. The concept of "voice" involves students' speaking for themselves, and bringing their own questions and perspectives to the material. "Voice" is the connector between education and personal experience, personal experience that women (and other oppressed groups) must often give up when they seek "mastery" on the terms of the dominant discourse.

Our third theme is "authority." In the traditional classroom teachers and students stand in a hierarchical relationship to knowledge and to scholarly expertise. Teachers interpret the ideas of the experts to the students. Experts are believed to be the closest to the "truth" of an event or idea.
With new paradigms of knowledge construction that identify truth as coming from multiple perspectives, feminist teachers must reevaluate the sources and implications of expert authority, and also the sources of their own authority. As teachers they see themselves as facilitators and resources, and view their expertise as positional and even autobiographically determined, derived from their particular training and experience rather than from mastery of the "truth." In short, they use themselves as models of evolving learners.

Our final theme is that of "positionality." Recently, feminist thinkers have seen knowledge as valid when it comes from an acknowledgement of the knower's specific position in any context, a position defined by many attributes including gender, race, and class. All of us, teachers and students, women and men, are positioned in society and in the classroom, and our evolving positions give us our own particular frameworks for viewing the world. In some of the classrooms we have studied, knowledge is constructed from the interaction and development of these different positions around the subject matter, and the resulting interplay of perspectives results in a deeper, richer tapestry of meaning.

Using our interest in the four themes of mastery, voice, authority, and positionality, we have studied the shifts made by some teachers away from traditional pedagogy and towards new ways of teaching.

A Case Study — Dorothy Berkson’s Class

Dorothy Berkson teaches English at Lewis and Clark College, one of the three liberal arts colleges in our study. She has been actively involved in gender integration in the classroom, a concern which grew out of a curriculum project funded by the college. A committed feminist, Dorothy Berkson sees the issues raised by feminism as relevant to all her students, both women and men. She describes her teaching goals as:

Empowering students to think for themselves, to ask questions, to challenge virtually everything. Of course, I have the agenda of exposing them to feminist ideas. I think “exposing” them is probably the way I feel, not “imposing” on them. It is a way of empowering them, and I think it is a way for the male students to ask questions about power too.

She says,

I think that the ways we have traditionally been taught to think about ourselves and our world are at a dead end, and if we persist in the old ways of thinking we may not have a future.

One of the hallmarks of her teaching is that she begins class by having students read from their journals. Her purposes are to spark engagement, to get students to interact with the text and with one another, and to explore the positions they have taken.

I try to get them to set the agenda for the class discussion by reading from their journals or asking questions. I try to let that go on as long as I can, as long as they seem to be able to generate discussion. I see my role as stepping in to help clarify things, to focus what has been said and to help them find theoretical ways of dealing with the issues that they have raised. I’m not just neutral. I think I often give them theoretical material at a moment where they need it. “OK, you’ve raised this and you’re curious about this and you’re having problems with this, etc. Will this theory help you think about these issues?”

Sometimes the discussion dies and I have to step in and help fuel it, but my sense is that it builds as we go, that there is a way in which the dynamics, the internal dynamics of the class are like a furnace — you’ve got to get the furnace going at the beginning and once it’s going it really goes.

We have taken as an example of Berkson’s methods, a class from her course, “Women Writers.” It illustrates the way in which allowing the students to set the agenda for class dis-
cussions leads to a particularly powerful encouragement of student voice. "Women Writers" was taught in 1987, and included 17 women and 5 men ranging from freshmen to seniors. At a previous class meeting, students had struggled to interpret Emily Dickinson's poems. Berkson had ended the class by telling the students to go back and reread the poems and do another journal entry based on what they had learned from the day's discussion. This particular class began with Berkson asking if anyone had taken her advice to try to write about Emily Dickinson again after the last class. Nancy, a very quiet Japanese-American girl who often sat at the edge of the room, nodded. Berkson asked her to read. Nancy had grown up in a small Finnish community in Southern Washington, where hers was the only Japanese family enrolled in school. She commented in her interview with us, "Everybody was blond and tall ... and then there was us. We grew up in this community where we were obviously very different physically, but since we grew up there we didn't really perceive ourselves as very different."

Nancy based her journal entry on the following Emily Dickinson poem (228, Johnson Edition):

I'm Nobody! Who are you? Are you - Nobody - too? Then there's a pair of us? Don't tell! they'd advertise - you know! How dreary - to be - Somebody! How Public - like a frog - To tell one's name - the livelong June to an admiring Bog!

She began:

I couldn't help thinking of the idea of a mute culture within a dominant culture. A "nobody" knowing she's different from the dominant culture, keeps silent and is surprised to find out there are others who share this feeling. But they speak only to each other and hide otherwise. This is what it must have been like being a woman thinking against the grain. But don't tell! At least if you are silent and no one knows, you can continue to live your inner life as you wish, your thoughts at least still belong to you. If "they," the somebodies, find out, they'll advertise and you'll have to become one of them.

But to be somebody! How dreary! How public! She says "To tell one's name the livelong day to an admiring bog!" What is a name? I think she means an easily classifiable public identity. Names don't really tell you anything about what a person is like. So when you become somebody and buy into the dominant culture, you have to live in their roles. You could call yourself a spinster even and the bog would still admire you because you fit. But what if you don't want to be any of these things? Well then you stay nobody. Nobodies, though silent and secretive at least have their peace, their solitude and are free from the judgment of the bog.

Nancy also wrote some comments about poem 327 (Johnson Edition):

Before I got my eye put out I liked as well to see - As other Creatures, that have Eyes And know no other way But were it told to me - Today - That I might have the sky For mine - tell you that my heart Would split, for size of me - The Meadows - mine - The Mountains - mine - All Forests - Stintless Stars - As much of Noon as I could take Between my finite eyes - The Motions of the Dipping Birds The Morning's Amber Road -
for mine – to look at when I
liked –
The News would strike me dead –
So safer – guess – with must my
soul
Upon the Window pane –
Where other Creatures put their eyes –
Incautious – of the Sun –

She commented:

Those termed “mad” by society, while more rewarded on a
higher plane, still suffer here. You are either forced to con­
form and lose that sanity or you live under all sorts of social
chains that keep you “still” and quiet, mute.

But looking at [poem 327] it’s problematic, there is a price to
pay, and it isn’t always voluntary. Infinite vision seems to
come from suffering through enforced pain. “Before my
eyes got put out I liked as well to see - As other Creatures,
that have Eyes and know no other way.” You can run
around in ignorant bliss until something breaks through
this level of illusion, takes out the “eye” that makes it possible
for you to view the world this way, and once you see
through it you can’t go back, trying to face yourself back­
wards would “strike you dead.” I’m not articulating this
well but it’s like growing awareness.

A silly example: It’s like watching a Walt Disney movie as a
child where Hayley Mills and these other girls dance and
primp before a party singing “Femininity,” how being a
woman is all about looking pretty and smiling pretty and
acting stupid to attract men. As a child I ate it up — at least
it seemed benign, at the most I eagerly studied it. But once
your eyes get put out and you realize how this vision has
warped you, it would split your heart to try and believe
that again, it would strike you dead.

This journal entry seemed to us to be a particularly pow­
erful example of a previously silent student coming to voice.
Nancy’s image of “a nobody knowing she’s different from the
dominant culture,” breaking through the illusion of “ignorant

bliss,” reveals this as a moment of awakening for her. She
connected what she was learning with her experience as a
woman, and perhaps as a minority woman. In voicing these
connections, she was constructing knowledge from the stand­
point, the position, of the previously silenced outsider, the
“nobody” in Dickinson’s terms, and thus creating for every­
one a new and insightful reading of the text.

Other female students responded to Nancy’s journal
entry by exploring with her this alternative world view, spec­
culating on the benefits (and costs) of joining the dominant cul­
ture. Susan said, “It’s like a gift to be put into the dominant
culture role and then you kind of owe it something; you can’t
have it both ways.” Marcy, another Asian-American student,
responded, “But how dreary to be part of the majority. When
you are nobody you are really someone.”

In the conclusion of her journal entry, Nancy used power­
ful metaphors to depict her awakening. Her “silly example”
implicated that she was breaking through the illusion of a
Japanese-American girl patterning herself after Hayley Mills,
a prototypic blond American teenager from the sixties. She
may have been thinking of ethnicity as well as gender here,
although there is no explicit mention of race or ethnicity.
When Mary Kay first asked her if her journal entry related to
her personal experience, she said she didn’t “think about it in
terms of an incident. Maybe an overlying personal experience.
I really didn’t think about that.” But later in a follow-up inter­
view, she said:

There’s no way that it could not [relate to personal experi­
ence], because obviously it had to connect to something and
even I think the fact that when I put in about the example
— I don’t think there’s a way you could be able to think
about that sort of a concept of culture if you have not felt
like you’ve lived it...
You know just even thinking in terms of race, even thinking about different kinds of minority perspectives... I've started to look more into experience instead of just thinking about these theories... I think that is something that sort of came out of this class.

Thus we see the theme of position as well as voice. Not only did Nancy speak from the explicit position of someone on the margins, but Berkson, too, repositioned her relationship to the students and the students’ relationship to the material when she allowed them to raise questions and set the agenda instead of herself. The first voice to be taken seriously was a student’s. By acknowledging Nancy’s responses to Dickinson, her powerful connection to her own experience, Berkson let in the disruptive voice, a voice from the “wild zone.”

The repositioning of Berkson was connected with the altered use of her authority, our fourth issue. Authority as an issue also emerged in the responses of male students to the journal work of female students like Nancy. Duke, one of the five males in the class, spoke in his interview of the importance of hearing female voices. He found himself becoming interested in how “women feel about these texts.”

I could read Dickinson a thousand times and probably never try to relate to that because it just would never make an impression on me. But having the girls in that class interested in that particular topic, “How does that relate to me as a woman?” then I sit back and I think that’s a really good question and although I’m male I can sit and learn something from this and learn how women react to women’s texts as opposed to maybe the way I react to it or Dorothy reacts to it or something like that.

This learning to listen and willingness to empower female classmates changed the position of males like Duke as well. The male view was no longer at the center of the discourse. Moreover, this class was able to construct new knowledge based on these new perspectives, knowledge concerning gender and culture which would not otherwise have been generated.

**Practical Matters**

Dorothy Berkson has determined that she wants to have her class discussions start with the students’ questions rather than her own. She and others have found many ways to do this, all of them geared toward helping students prepare for a responsibility which they do not normally have in traditional, teacher-centered classrooms. Journal assignments can be very specific (responding to a particular work, issue or theme in the material at hand), or very general. Students can sign up in advance to read from their journals every other week or so, or they can volunteer on the spot. In the class discussion itself, students can read singly, with each entry discussed separately, or they can read one after the other, thus introducing several voices concurrently.

There are other ways of making sure the discussion takes its direction from the students. Students can write their questions on the backboard before the teacher comes in; they can be put in small groups to discuss readings and come up with discussion topics for the whole group; they can do “free writing” or spontaneous writing as a preparation for discussion.

As for the teacher’s role in prompting students’ contributions to the construction of knowledge, Berkson, and teachers like her, share a number of characteristics. Their lectures tend to be responses to student-generated questions, or ways to give information that students need to know in order to carry the topic further. As Dorothy says above, “I’m not just neutral. I think I often give them theoretical material at a moment when they need it.” It is not, as skeptics might have it, that teachers do not transmit needed information to their students. It is that they do it in response to students’ concerns. Also, their lectures are usually not delivered as the last word or “the right answer.” These teachers show their students their own knowledge. The knowledge they convey to students is often presented in historical, even autobiographical terms, making clear the social context of the theories being discussed. Thus students see the sources of ideas and concepts in
terms of their human makers, including the teacher. In this way students are encouraged to make their own interpretations and build their own theories.

Because the topics and the subject matter in these classrooms vary widely, the new relationships between teacher, students and material also vary widely. But central to all of these classes is the deliberate repositioning of the teachers' and students' responsibilities for creating knowledge.

What can we conclude about the kinds of pedagogical decisions teachers must make? In the traditional classroom, to oversimplify things a bit, teachers' pedagogical choices are aimed at the best exposition possible of the techniques, the guiding theories, and the world views of a particular discipline. However, feminist (and postmodernist) theories argue that all world views are necessarily limited, and truth is at best partial. It all depends on your position, i.e. your gender, race, and class. It is also dependent on context, including the context of the classroom, so that for example, a women's text and a feminist teacher may bring new "truths" forward while marginalizing others which used to occupy center stage.

Truth is partial, dependent on position and context, and yet it is, paradoxically, available to us through attention to these very things — different positions and the lenses they offer. Teachers must become conscious of aspects of teaching and learning which are obscured by traditional "absolute" paradigms. We are all particular (and evolving) knowers; the sources of our authority lie in our experience and our history, not centrally in our greater grasp of the abstract truths of our disciplines. Students' questions and concerns, like those of Nancy, can open up material to new interpretations, new readings, new significances.

Our own identities as teachers are evolving these days, as we attempt to listen to our students' questions and to keep up with the shifting ground of gendered knowledge construction as it is allowed into our disciplines. Our student population is in many disciplines already over 50% female, and is becoming increasingly ethnically diverse. There is a constantly expanding set of perspectives to contend with and honor as valid. If the goal of education is to empower all our students, then we have to facilitate this empowerment not only by paying attention to what is in a course (its content), but also to know by what methods this content is taught (pedagogy). As teachers we need to acknowledge our own processes of development, see our own truths as partial, and yet affirm our own commitments and experiences as valid basles for our authority. Then we can respond to the multiple voices and disparate perspectives of our students, and introduce new paradigms of knowledge construction into our classrooms.

Notes
1 From an interview with the author.
3 Positionality is a term used by many postmodernists to denote the importance of the relationship among different positions, standpoints or viewpoints in the construction of knowledge. (See for example, Alcoff, 1988; Bartlett, 1990)
4 Anthropologists Shirley and Edwin Ardener refer, in their conceptualization of culture, to a "wild zone" in which women as a "muted group" are not wholly contained by the dominant (male) group, but generate beliefs and order ideas of social reality at the unconscious level (discussed in Showalter, 1985).

References


