RESEARCH PROJECT NOTES

Feminist Pedagogy : Theory and Practice

Barbara FUJIWARA
Department of Social System Studies
Faculty of Contemporary Social Studies

Introduction

Feminist pedagogy refers to the educational approach used by feminist teachers in their endeavors to apply feminist theory to the classroom. In the United States, feminist pedagogy has been influenced by educational thinkers like Dewey and Freire and by movements like critical pedagogy (Weiler, 1991); however, it distinguishes itself from other approaches by its emphasis on women and gender justice. Feminist pedagogy began in the late 1960s as part of the women's liberation movement. Many of the originators were activists, first, in the civil rights movement and later, in the women's movement. They became concerned about the many ways in which women were disregarded in the educational sphere, both in the curriculum where women were rarely considered worthy of study, and in the classroom, where women students encountered a "chilly climate" (Maher & Tetreault, 1994, p. 3). Curricular innovations included courses examining the place and products of women in many disciplines as well as interdisciplinary women's studies courses. Changes in classroom practices were intended to create spaces for women to examine their experiences and ideas (Boxer, 1998).

Feminist teachers began with the analytical tools and group techniques developed in the consciousness-raising groups of the women's liberation movement. Feminist pedagogy was further developed as feminist teachers in a variety of disciplines struggled to apply feminist theory to the teaching of their discipline and shared their efforts in journals and conventions (Maher, 2000). The pioneering study, *Women's Ways of Knowing* (Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger, & Tarule, 1986), furthered understanding of the cognitive processes of a large sample of women; offered new categories of ways of knowing; and stimulated research in several disciplines (Goldberger, Tarule, Clinchy, & Belenky, 1996). Maher and Tetreault's (1994) comprehensive research offered close observation and detailed analysis of feminist classrooms across the United States.

In this paper, I focus on the theory and classroom practices of feminist pedagogy. Although I will use the term "feminist pedagogy," it would be more accurate to refer to feminist pedagogies since there are differences as well as similarities among teachers who have worked on implementing a femi-

nist approach in the classroom. Some of the important commonalties of feminist pedagogy are that feminist teachers seek to empower their students, to create communities of learners, and to inspire students to become agents of social change (Schniedewind & Maher, 1993). This paper examines these theoretical constructs and the teaching practices used to make them a reality in the classroom.

Empowerment

The first theoretical construct, empowerment, refers to the development of the power of each student within the context of the learning community and ultimately, the larger community. The objectives of the feminist teacher are to develop the capacities and authentic voices of all of her/his students, and to teach lifelong learning skills (Schniedewind & Maher, 1993). Students should be encouraged to theorize, to value intellectual work, and to challenge the dominant views (Weiler, 1991). One principle of the women's movement was that the "personal was political" and in the consciousness-raising groups popular in the 60s and 70s, women examined their own experiences as a way of understanding society as a whole. Similarly, feminist teachers try to help students find links between their own experiences and the disciplines they are learning so that they can engage with the subject matter and construct new knowledge rather than study a discipline as received knowledge (Maher, 2000).

Feminist pedagogy needed to go beyond the tools and techniques of the consciousness-raising groups, however, in order to equip students to use the theoretical tools of their discipline or when necessary, to create new theory and tools. One pedagogical tool used to achieve this objective is to have students write journals as a way of reflecting on their experiences and the connections between the personal and the subject matter. Many teachers use variations of the Integrative Learning Journal (Berry & Black, 1993) as a way to promote all the complex elements of the feminist learning process. Students make five different kinds of entries: describing personal experiences and reactions; reflecting on the subject matter as presented in the readings and discussed in the classroom; integrating experiences and subject matter; evaluating their learning; and rethinking of previous ideas (pp. 88–93). This kind of journal aids in the formation of "constructed knowing," an active integration of knowledge from within and without, using both analysis and dialogue (Belenky et al., 1986; Goldberger et al., 1996).

In some cases, students find that the discipline they are studying has ignored or misrepresented their group. One of the most vivid examples of empowerment in action in the classrooms Maher and Tetreault (1994) observed was the discussion of a group of students in a sociology course at Spelman College, the oldest Black women's college in the US. In analyzing their sociology textbook, the students found that the experiences of African American women had been neglected or distorted and that they needed to create their own theory and knowledge (pp. 62–65).

Community of Learners

In contrast with traditional classrooms, where the teacher is the source of all knowledge and students compete to demonstrate

their knowledge or intellectual ability, the ideal of the feminist classroom is a community of learners. In this community, students share the responsibility for the learning of everyone in the class by showing respect for and interest in others' contributions. Although there is quite a difference among feminist teachers in terms of their own use of authority in the classroom, whether as member, facilitator, or lecturer, it is common for the authority of students to be developed through active participation by and dialogue among all students.

One way of encouraging this kind of participation is the use of the technique of the consciousness-raising groups in which all participants would sit in a circle and each would make some comment. A major reason for this technique is to counter the silencing of women's voices. Integral to feminist pedagogy is the concept of voice ; the questions "Who speaks?" and "When and why are members muted or silenced?" are closely examined (Belenky et al., 1986 ; Goldberger et al., 1996).

Implicit in Maher and Tetreault's (1994) discussion of the theme of voice in their research results is their conception of the feminist pedagogical ideal, that every class member can speak from her total self, her "multiplicity of identities" (pp. 237-243). Students' comments on classes taught by feminist teachers indicated that many students felt that they were able to speak freely for their first time in their education. This expansion of the concept of what can be said in the classroom has included narratives of personal experiences, emotions, questions, opinions, dreams, and postmodern positionings. In some of the feminist classrooms studied by Maher and Tetreault, topics usually considered taboo not only in the classroom but also in ordinary conversation were raised : sexual orientation, menopause, incest, rape. The researchers describe a number of cases where students for the first time spoke aloud about these matters. In some cases, this speaking enabled the students to raise the topic with family, partners, and friends (pp. 120-122).

In order to build a trusting environment where students can find their voices, some feminist teachers train students in techniques of group dynamics. Students learn to give constructive feedback, to play different roles within a group, to resolve conflicts, and to cooperate in a democratic manner (Schniedewind & Maher, 1993). Others, like bell hooks (1994), feel that conflict and open expression of differences can be used to foster passionate engagement with the material and other members of the community.

It is interesting to note, that Maher and Tetreault (1994) found in their interviews with students that the silencing in traditional classrooms is often attributed to the teacher or discipline, whereas in the feminist classroom, the silencing is due more to the group dynamics, particularly ethnic or class differences. On the other hand, there were also self-mutings in which students who were different from the others, silenced one or another aspect of themselves. For example, a student who was the only African American in her class "kept silent about race" (p. 70) on purpose until the last class ; and at Spelman, a wealthy African American who had grown up among Whites received a sharp retort from a classmate when she suggested that it was important for Blacks and Whites to talk together, and after that, she rarely spoke (p. 97).

Through sharing their experiences, knowledge, and opinions, learners struggle together with the content of the course and discipline. Belenky et al. (1986) discussed the concepts of procedural and connected knowing in which procedural knowing is the mastery of the traditional knowledge of the discipline whereas connected knowing is a rich combination of subjective and objective knowledge. Depending on their discipline and course objectives, feminist teachers may aim for different kinds of knowing. In some cases, such as in the course, Wild Women in Music and Literature taught by Angela Davis and Chinosole at the University of San Francisco, they may aim for the social construction of new knowledge by the group. In this course, for example, a Native American student added to the knowledge of the other students and the teachers by telling them that the women of her tribe had a similar means of resistance to the dominant group through song as African American women did (Maher and Tetreault, 1994, pp. 83–86).

Social Action

Especially in the early days of women's studies, many feminist educators were also social activists and considered their work in the classroom as part of their activism. Whether or not present feminist teachers are active in community or national movements, many continue to educate their students in social advocacy. They hope that as students develop the ability to understand and analyze the social forces, which have shaped their experience, and learn to work with others in meaningful ways, they will acquire the skills and ability to work for social justice. Attention to social justice for members of all groups within the classroom has been matched by social action projects outside the classroom. Projects have included setting up women's resource centers on campus, writing oral histories of women activists in the off-campus community, and working for rape hotlines and women's shelters (Hyman & Lichtenstein, 1999). Rinehart (1999) describes the many challenges of setting up an internship program. She advises that the educator make clear to the agencies involved the kind of duties that would engage students; encourage students to take initiative at the internship sites; and make sure that students understand the reasons and benefits of working as an intern within the context of feminist studies (pp. 84–86).

Conclusion

Since its beginnings in the 1960s, feminist pedagogy has evolved reciprocally with the many social changes in the United States. There are many different methods and controversies in this pedagogical approach, reflecting controversies in feminism itself. The increasing diversity of American classrooms in terms of age, ethnicity, class, and sexual orientation has meant that feminist educators face increasingly complicated classroom dynamics in which to achieve their objectives of empowering all students, creating communities of learners, and inspiring students to work for social justice.

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