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## Full-Contact Pedagogy: Lecturing with Questions and Student-Centered Assignments as Methods for Inciting Self-Reflexivity for Faculty and Students

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CHELSEA TANNER, AND CYRANA WYKER

Full-contact pedagogy? How strange to use a sports analogy for a feminist essay, but I am going to attempt it! I believe as effective teachers our goal is to attempt full contact with students—to capture their attention and engage them even when they themselves are reluctant to be engaged. So, much like a contact sport, we strive for full contact. I am not afraid of the critique that aggressiveness is inconsistent with feminist pedagogies. I think it is disingenuous to argue that we hope for anything less than full intellectual contact with our students. Certainly feminism and feminist theory have made a movement out of aggressively debating important ideas of equal access and equal participation of all people in social processes, such as education. I strive for full contact.

For this essay, I take as an organizing premise Jodi O'Brien and Judith A. Howard's notion of responsible authority—that "teaching is a value-based activity" (327) in which we as educators should be striving to engage students in academic pursuits in order to create a moral citizenry. That is, we need to acknowledge that we wield the power of the academy and that we each engage our scholarship

with passion and commitment. To do so responsibly and effectively, we must be reflexive about our pedagogical goals and techniques. I agree with their perceptive argument for a reflexive and responsible pedagogy and argue that our goal should be full contact with students. I also agree with Adrienne Rich's classic argument that a critical piece in the educational equation is that students must claim their own educations. As such, our goal as teachers is to incite students to claim their own educations—to engage them so fully in the given discipline we are teaching that they can claim it as a scholar would. This is clearly a lofty goal. The question is: how?

How does a teacher incite learning? How do I draw favor for my subject matter, particularly in this historical moment of iPods, cell phones, wireless laptops, on-demand entertainment, and endless video gaming? I want to conceptualize how we might organize pedagogy to aggressively compel students' attention. My goal is always to *draw students in* to the material that I find so fascinating. I have found that to do so one must employ a variety of techniques that involve both the content of the material and the process of classroom participation.

In this essay, I will outline two student-centered techniques: first, a presentation technique I call “lecturing with questions,” and second, a style of student-centered final assignment that asks students to replicate authentic tools of the field of study while putting their own lives in the assignment.

Perhaps it seems clear how I, as a sociologist and women’s studies scholar, might employ the assignments I will outline momentarily. Both sociology and women’s studies are already about the students’ lives (i.e., both study people and interactional experience). But why should instructors outside sociology or women’s studies be interested in these techniques? It seems to me there is a common academic belief that humanities and social sciences are inherently more engaging than, say, math or science and hence are easier to teach. Thus, sharing pedagogies across disciplines is perceived as difficult if not nearly impossible. While I agree the *content* of humanities and social sciences can be more immediately accessible to some students because we all have social experiences from which to draw in these classrooms, I do not agree that all humanities or social science faculty regularly use feminist pedagogies, making classroom *process* potentially alienating for some students. I believe it is common in humanities and social science classrooms for faculty to use (teacher-centered) lecturing—to simply tell students what scholars have found rather than asking students to walk through that discovery themselves. Ironically, “hard” science classrooms commonly use actual science methods (e.g., dissecting frogs or conducting chemistry experiments) to teach, at least by way of verification of existing knowledge, core content of these disciplines. Hence, humanities and social

science classrooms may offer feminist content without employing feminist pedagogies, while science classes may offer active pedagogies (i.e., process) without considering how feminist epistemologies might engage us to think differently about what is science (i.e., content). Currently trendy among science educators is a pedagogy called *guided inquiry*, which asks students to actually walk through the methods of a discipline to allow them to replicate the discovery process (Farrell, Moog and Spencer; Spencer). In short, guided inquiry moves away from teacher-centered methods of engagement with core content toward student-centered pedagogies that reflect on the learning cycle. While not referred to as “guided inquiry,” many scholars in the humanities and social sciences are likely already using a similar pedagogy. Indeed, Donna A. Champeau and Susan M. Shaw speak about “student-centered approaches” in the same way that I engage them here. Referring to teaching about HIV, they write:

Student-centered approaches are key to helping students think beyond biases and stereotypes they may hold concerning who is at risk or who has HIV. These approaches invite students to examine issues through their personal involvement—cognitive, emotional, and behavioral—with the content. As forms of inductive learning, these approaches enable students to discover general principles and ideas from themselves as they examine the specifics of particular experiences. Such discovery learning often proves less intimidating to students and meets less resistance than knowledge that seems to be imposed by the teacher. Instead, students are themselves creating knowledge from their experiences. (213)

In this article, I argue that scholars in all disciplines should employ similar techniques, modified to fit various disciplinary content. My goal here is not to offer a specific assignment or technique but rather to engage faculty in any discipline in what it might mean to be self-reflexive about how to teach a subject area. How would I, as a sociologist, get students to *do sociology* in the classroom, not just talk about the work other scholars have done? How do I incite each student to *be a feminist scholar* as their final assignment? Inspired by the feminist methodology of Mary Margaret Fonow and Judith A. Cook used to organize this special issue, the paradigm I want to introduce is attentiveness to self-reflexivity—to create ways of interacting with students that do not stop at studying what others have studied, but rather put the students in the shoes of scholars using students' own lives as "data" worthy of explanation. My feeling is that personally relevant material will remain with students longer than abstract theories or concepts. Hence, in using the technique of lecturing with questions (a kind of guided inquiry technique) and in using student-centered assignments, students model the actual disciplinary styles and questions of the work we do academically in ways that allow them to use these ways of thinking in their everyday lives. I have to believe doing is more engaging than learning what others have done. I also believe that modeling the work of scholars in the field allows students a greater degree of self-reflexivity about the material, promoting this feminist goal along the way.

## Lecturing with Questions

The classroom is an ideal forum for introducing radical ideas to individuals who

may not otherwise be exposed to such critical discussions. As a women's studies scholar and feminist sociologist, I intentionally present arguments that disrupt students' often comfortable, dominant notions about gender, race, class, and sexualities. I actively try to push students to think beyond their comfort levels and allow them a safe space to discuss difficult issues. My intent is not so much to have the class come to one right answer but rather to encourage them to rigorously test their theorizing skills using quality, scholarly materials and to allow students to build their own well-honed opinions while learning about theory-building as a process. I believe an interactive classroom yields much more active results than a lecture style-presentation and that students tend to learn more as a result of speaking the material themselves and through testing each other's opinions than they would if I were to speak at them. My style includes providing them data, theoretical perspectives, or personal narratives, followed by interactive questioning (i.e., "How can we explain that set of data?" or "Do you agree with that theory? Does it seem to explain the issue?" or "Can an overarching theory address the variety of personal narratives that we have read?"). I walk through the ideas *with* them as I facilitate, allowing them the opportunity to discover the arguments for themselves. This is a style much like guided inquiry used in the sciences. Here I outline my presentation style, lecturing with questions, and show how it is similar to guided inquiry common in other disciplines.

Using the presentation style I call lecturing with questions, each "lecture" that I plan is actually a series of questions designed to draw students into the disciplinary issues that comprise a course of

study. On the first day, I always ask them: “What is sociology?” or “What is women’s studies?” (depending on the course being taught). I then follow with, “why are you here? What do you think you are going to learn in this class?” This line of reflexive questioning lasts throughout the semester. From the first moment, I want them to consider—self-reflexively—what we are doing throughout the course. Rather than lecturing at them, I plan each lecture as a series of questions that organize the disciplinary area I am teaching. For each class session, my lecture notes are organized as a series of these kinds of questions for which I already have in mind the “answers”—that is, I have thoroughly organized the day’s topic—but with which I can engage students much more actively than a standard lecture format.

This presentation style could be used for any discipline. For example, a current debate in chemistry is whether matter is comprised of atoms or strings. One might pose the question to students in an introductory chemistry class: “What is the basic composition of matter?” and yet we would likely not expect students to even know how to begin to answer that question. These students are not likely to be nearly well enough versed in basic chemistry to attempt such an answer, but this pedagogical technique leads students down a productive path by introducing the debate about whether matter is composed of atoms or strings following with an important question of methods: “How would you know whether matter is made of atoms or strings?” “How can we investigate this question?” A student may respond with an answer like: “Just look through a microscope,” which, although simplistic, allows the teacher to talk about measurement, data, testing, and so on. It

leads us to discuss: How do we as scholars know? Can we as faculty state our work in plain terms such that an educated, lay public (like students) understands conceptually what we do?

Planning the types of questions and teacher response is key. John J. Farrell, Richard S. Moog, and James N. Spencer, as well as David Hanson and Troy Wolfskill, address the types of questions and interactive faculty responses that optimize guided inquiry. They address specific styles of “critical thinking questions” and outline how styles of questions incite more effective and less effective responses. Hanson and Wolfskill particularly outline types of questions that inhibit or limit useful interaction and those that promote useful response. They suggest that “promoting” styles of questions “call for reflection, originate or examine ideas, and process data” (128). This paradigm demonstrates my intent in lecturing with questions. When I ask my Human Sexual Behavior class, “What is sex?”, the initial question is almost rhetorical in that I immediately follow with something more leading and less amorphous, such as: “When does it start and when does it end?” This second question allows students to answer more concretely while recognizing that to answer such a question seriously delimits the definition of an activity. These kinds of questions promote critical thinking, under Hanson and Wolfskill’s rubric. They lead toward a guided kind of discovery. While I leave it to others to fully define a kind of encompassing rubric for all forms of questions, I want to outline three purposes for questions that I commonly use in my classroom facilitation.

First, I often begin a semester with questions designed to *solve a theoretical problem* or lead students through the

development of schools of thought. For example, in a sociology class I might begin with the overarching question of sociology: “How does social order happen?” For a women’s studies course, I might ask: “What is a feminist?” or “What defines the group ‘women?’” or “How do you know gender inequality exists?” These are the grand questions of a discipline that students will likely not know how to answer but that put their early experiences with a new topic in the largest scope—that is, they begin with “the big picture.” Rather than allow students to wallow in unknown territory, I immediately lead them through the thought process of the discipline. If I start with “How does social order happen?” I follow up with a much more practical example of everyday life (i.e., by operationalizing the problem, if you will) with something like, “How do roads get built? Why do we build roads? Why do you agree to park a half-mile from this classroom? Why not just park right outside the door?” As they answer with simplistic answers (i.e., “Because I’ll get a parking ticket if I park at the classroom door”), I can push them to recognize the sociological axiom that we participate in an orderly fashion because it is efficient. This leads me to introducing functionalist theory—one of the major strains of sociological theory. In so doing, we move from grand questions to practical, everyday examples to the most simple, first step into major sociological schools of thought. This kind of question is designed to walk them through the history of the development of social thought in very simplistic steps, exposing them to the way sociologists think in the process.

A second style of question that I use intends to *interrogate inflexible public notions*. For most disciplines, there tends

to be a kind of simplified public interpretation of academic theories that spread through nonacademic spaces (newspapers, public myth, etc.) and often impede students’ learning. In other words, they must unlearn their urban myths before they can understand rigorous academic study. For example, loosely-recognizable versions of Freudian psychology sometimes turn up in movies or in everyday talk overheard among friends, only with applications that would likely make Freud curse. These kinds of everyday knowledges sometimes need to be interrogated to allow students to think more widely about a subject matter. To do so, I plan provocative questions that engage them in their own lives; for example, in a Human Sexual Behavior course, I ask: “What is sex? What counts as sex? When does it start and when does it end?” Because most of my students (even lesbian/gay/bisexual/transgendered identified students!) assume the unmodified word “sex” implies one male person and one female person engaging in one act and one act only with limited implied positions (because that is the semantic definition of “sex” in the everyday world of language), I often need to unsettle this notion in order to be able to discuss a range of sexual practices, identities, relationships, experiences, and so on in order to avoid having them view the study of sexuality in very narrow terms. We cannot begin to learn the literature until we unsettle their inflexible, pre-existing notions. As an added benefit, provocative questions are especially helpful at getting their attention. Provocative questions can be utilized in other disciplines as well. For example, with all the current political debate about climate change, a physicist or geologist might ask: “Is global warming for real?” After piecing through the opinions students may parrot

from their parents, a political party or interest group, or the most recent editorial in the local paper, an instructor can now push past public debate, which is often partial, political, and not always based in academically rigorous sources, to begin to address the issue as scholars in the field would.

A third kind of question is related to the previous and involves *complicating issues that seem simple*. Public knowledges are often set up as simple binaries (“right” versus “wrong”) or imply little complexity such as intervening variables, diverse perspectives, international contexts, and so on. Similar to interrogating inflexible notions, some questions work to complicate, rather than simplify, issues. A classic example from women’s studies classes is enticing students to think more complexly about abortion. Few issues are more polarized or polarizing than abortion, so I often begin by asking questions that complicate an oversimplified orientation to only two understandings of this multifaceted issue. I might ask, “Are ‘pro-life’ and ‘pro-choice’ advocates addressing the same issue?” This allows me to begin an analysis of rhetoric and critique the notion of a clear and uncomplicated “truth.” Rather than providing simple, finite answers, these kinds of questions make the issue more complex, and they allow instructors to talk about various disciplinary approaches to or complex analyses of an issue or question.

I offer these question types by way of giving helpful examples, rather than by way of attempting to create a new taxonomy of questions. There are so many kinds of productive questions that any instructor simply has to imagine ways to creatively introduce the material. However, there certainly are some kinds of questions that lead to unproductive results and frustration by students. Although asking broad

questions to theoretical problems can begin a productive discussion, allowing students to wallow too long in a guessing game can lead to frustration. Questions need to be designed to lead a student through a set of answers, not simply get bogged down in the frustrating game of “guess what’s on the teacher’s mind.” If you plan to walk them through the derivation of a theorem, it is helpful to give hints and directions such that a logical person could piece together an answer. Further, certain responses by the teacher that reduce discovery or critique a particular student should be avoided. An answer of “no” or “that’s not right” always shuts down future interest by the questioner and can have a chilling effect on other classmates. Answering the question too fast for the students or asking them to compete over who already knows the material (“Who read the textbook?”) creates a hierarchy that limits student interest. The goal is to promote questions that lead with just enough opportunity for response based on critical thinking, not a wealth of prior knowledge, so that students can think through the issue themselves. (Think in terms of solving a riddle, rather than winning the spelling bee.)

Importantly, the questions and debates that organize a particular content area do not change between lower division, upper division, graduate work, and indeed my own scholarship. The questions do not change, only the level of depth with which we engage them. These are the organizing questions of our disciplines. Why not walk the students through them in the way scholars do?

What I am suggesting here is not that students can reinvent the discipline or that we should abandon core concepts of a field. Rather, I am suggesting we con-



vey those concepts and recognize open debates in the same manner that holds our attention as experts in those fields—through discovery and debate. This does not imply that we are no longer teaching core concepts on which the students will be tested, but it does recognize the manner in which academic research is actually completed—through styles of discovery and contextualizing, ongoing, unresolved, and sometimes destabilizing debates. In essence, instead of telling students the answers, we ask them how we might come to the answers and work through the critical issues together. Further, this style of presentation demonstrates for students that, for each discipline, the curriculum is always based on a tension between core concepts and ongoing debates that destabilize those very concepts. At a very basic level, it models our work and exposes the fluidity and participatory nature of knowledge construction by way of inviting them into the process rather than assuming they should be excluded from it.

In terms of classroom process, I always strive toward exercises and questions that are attention getting and that they might answer from their own experiences—so they might participate. Perhaps the ability to use provocative questions is a disciplinary advantage for a sociologist who teaches about sexualities, but I do believe teachers can strive toward meeting students in their own lives as a means to engage them (a subject addressed in this volume as use of “situation-at-hand”). For example, if the local industry happens to be mining, perhaps a science class might organize exercises or topics around mining, a subject about which they may already know something or at least one that seems locally relevant.

As part of planning the “lecture,” tim-

ing and student experience may become key issues. I very clearly stage my lectures for timing in which I plan video clips, short exercises, or transitions from one “question” topic to the next to maintain students’ attentiveness. During long class periods, I will plan to get them together in small groups to get them speaking to each other to answer the questions I pose. Small group discussions provide for the students a context to learn and an interactive experience to which they can later refer. Further, it may be important to introduce an idea or provide them with an “experience” with a video clip. Teaching at the undergraduate level, I am constantly reminded that students’ adult memory is approximately twenty-four months. Hence, many have much less life experience than my own peers. In certain cases, I can utilize exercises to, in a sense, provide them with that social experience. Using video clips as “data” can center a topic or provide this kind of “experience.” (For example in my first semester teaching I referred to Ayatollah Khomeini as an example of a charismatic ruler. My students’ blank faces reminded me they had not yet been born when the Iranian hostage crisis was taking place. Hence, to use this example, I might need to use a film clip about the issue.) But students’ own experience, inside or outside the classroom, is key to this form of learning. When presented with this kind of line of questioning, they can piece through it logically with the concepts the teacher has offered and the “experiences” they brought with them or those that were offered in the class. In this way, they walk through the ideas offered in class like a decision tree, participating as though they had each thought it originally.

It sounds simple, but as a way of actively reflecting on the substance of a



topic, I believe lecturing with questions helps faculty concisely organize content, and it can be a very helpful mechanism for engaging students self-reflexively. By organizing each lecture as a series of questions for students to engage in the classroom, faculty can accomplish the feminist goal of giving students voice in their own learning process, as well as accomplishing the disciplinary goal of walking students through the actual questions that scholars in each field grapple with in academe. In this way, students have the opportunity to become intimate with the knowledge targeted and replicate the knowledge production process of open scholarly debate.

I believe lecturing with questions accomplishes at least six goals. First, this method attends to the major questions and debates that organize each discipline. In a very realistic sense, this method relates the substance and concerns of scholars within that discipline. It provides the major debates and developments within the construction of knowledge for a given system—as the scholars would have approached it. The method of lecturing with questions is not discipline-specific. Each discipline and interdisciplinary area of study is organized around a central focus or kind of academic project. Using a standard lecture technique, we tend to avoid teaching this project, instead only giving a status of the disciplinary knowledge at the current moment. This not only avoids modeling the disciplinary practice but also highlights the faculty member's knowledge more than the student's process of learning. It is perhaps parallel to engaging in a home repair project and asking your daughter or son to sit quietly by handing you tools while you fix the problem, rather than using the opportunity to teach a child how they might fix a future

problem. In this example, the child learns the names of tools but not how to use them. The idea of lecturing with questions is to walk the student through the kinds of questions and debates that organize a discipline so that they might also understand the logics that developed current theory. Rather than learning only the status of a discipline, they also learn its history, at least to some extent, and how to think like a scholar.

Second, lecturing with questions uses an interactive method. Consistent with the classical pedagogical style that Paulo Freire and bell hooks champion, students' participation is paramount. Lecturing with questions does not convey the “banking system of knowledge” (Freire) and moves toward a feminist pedagogy that encourages dialogue and interaction in the classroom rather than uni-directional lecturing (Chow et al.). That is, knowledge is not seen as a finite set of ideas that must be given from an instructor to a recipient student (via unidirectional means—lecturing). Rather, knowledge construction is conveyed as an active engagement of inquiry for both scholars and students. In short, I am not talking at them, but rather talking with them—often simply conveying existing knowledge but potentially in some instances also co-constructing new ideas.

Third, lecturing with questions allows students to imagine themselves as the original authors of these disciplinary ideas and thus perhaps have a greater likelihood of buying into them. Although all of the questions one uses in an undergraduate setting have been asked before (in essence, one is teaching an existing set of ideas), the students interact with the ideas as though they actually thought them up. I find that students are much more receptive to ideas they believe they

initiated, even if those were in fact the very substance of my own lecture notes. Hence, the ideas feel like their own, a process students often find empowering (Middlecamp and Subramaniam). Further, cognitive studies models of education have demonstrated that “the best methodology to enable students to grasp and retain a concept begins with an exploration or data collection” (Spencer). In other words, the notion of guided inquiry recognizes that students learn well by proceeding through steps in a learning cycle, not simply by being told concepts. According to guided inquiry, the learning cycle is most effective when it begins with exploration and only as a second step involves defining terms. Hence, most lecture formats skip the first critical step of engaging exploration—that is, questioning.

Fourth, lecturing with questions teaches students reflexivity. They must examine what they think about an issue, a type of organizing logic, or a theorem. Do they agree? In other words, it teaches them to critique epistemologies, which is not an easy task. Indeed, this may be the purest example of teaching critical thinking skills, which I understand to be one of the clear mandates of all disciplines.

Fifth, but just as important, this method keeps students awake and focused. They are much more likely to stay engaged with an interactive method than a method of direct lecture.

Last, and perhaps a source of personal motivation, it allows instructors to reflect regularly on the purpose and goals of their academic pursuits. Developing questions gives one regular cause to reflect on one’s own understanding of the area of study. As I mentioned above, the core issues of a discipline—the questions—do not change as one ascends through the

hierarchy of the academy. What changes is the depth with which we attend to these questions. So, for example, if the question, “How does social organization happen?” is offered up to the undergraduate classroom, one might offer a ten-minute elementary response that focuses on critical reflection in everyday life or popular culture, one which only scratches the surface of a two hundred-year long study. For example, you might ask students, “Why do you park half a mile from this building?” This question illuminates a surface-level discussion of key sociological concepts like social control or the functionalist theory of interaction. A simple everyday question leads to simple sociological analysis. For a graduate student, the question of how social organization happens may be posed similarly, but the response moves toward epistemological concerns and perhaps organizes an entire semester. For example, the debate might tend toward a debate between schools of thought so that students might answer, “because hierarchies of power exert pressure on our lives” or “because people work together to accomplish order,” where ultimately the class debates epistemologies of beliefs about the nature of power. In each case, the class addresses the same question but with very different levels of depth to the analysis. For a faculty member, it is a life’s work to take a position on the very same question, maybe even changing one’s response to it mid-career. As such, the undergraduate classroom becomes a place for constant reflection for faculty and graduate student instructors alike.

In my own case, I often find undergraduate classroom teaching does little to help me advance my research because the level of competence of students is clearly behind the level of a faculty member (in

fact, by definition, given that the faculty member is giving instruction for this purpose). Graduate teaching may offer more enhanced opportunities to engage my scholarly mind but also becomes somewhat repetitious over time, starting from scratch again with each new class in each new semester. Indeed, I have read many articles considered classics in feminist theory multiple times to accommodate each semester. While undergraduates reading the article for the first time may be traveling at what seems like an infant's pace to me, I learn more about that classic piece each time *when I focus on reflexively understanding its place in the discipline*. The point is that lecturing with questions is modeling good scholarly behavior for myself as well. I learn something each time I teach a subject (again!) because constructing the lecture in this way gives me opportunity to see connections that the undergraduates and maybe even the graduates will not yet see but that I am pushed to reexamine and reconnect. Not only is this often helpful for my writing, but it keeps me awake. I feel more engaged, as though teaching is not something to be gotten past to get to my own writing or research, but as a useful process for organizing my own thoughts. For example, if I have recently read new literature in my field and then read a classic piece, it might occur to me only then that the classic piece uses hints of that literature, which I would previously not have noticed prior to reading this new literature for the first time.

This pedagogical technique hones my debate skills as well. Lecturing with questions is harder than it might seem. Students often come up with fantastic answers to questions that are fully outside the scope of the disciplinary area being

taught. I often find myself on my toes to direct the conversation clearly and effectively. I am forced to not only know the answers but to also know why they are more appropriate for this area of study than other responses. It is much harder to offer up a broad question than to simply provide the answers of a discipline. Further, this method can become a non-hierarchical means of classroom control. Because I often ask students to interact with me on familiar rather than formal terms in order to increase their comfort and entice them to speak, periodically my competence as a faculty member is challenged by a student. While I could invoke the standard hierarchies ("Call me Dr. Crawley" or "Speak only when I call on you"), I find it much more effective to simply invoke the jargon and a strong argument when challenged, demonstrating that while I am a nice person to chat with in the class, I also deserve their respect (and classroom order) because I know what I am talking about. Students tend to respond with greater respect for my knowledge than my title or my institutional power when I am called to cite my sources, make convincing arguments, and succeed in convincing a public that I deserve my "station." As a result, my debate skills within my specialty area stay quite focused and honed.

This is also the source of greatest pitfalls with this method. To use this pedagogical approach, one must be prepared for almost anything. It invites a debate. It calls for a variety of responses. As a result, it is very important to be well prepared and to construct questions and examples that call for specific answers (leading questions, if you will). Students only become frustrated if the questions are so broad as to give no hint of direction.

Also, the goal of the pedagogy is to lead students through a specific line of thinking, so the questions must be intentionally directive, not too broad or vague. It is not intended as a guessing game, but as a logical line of thinking organized by specific questions, designed to invoke that line of thinking. As an example, one course that I regularly teach is Human Sexual Behavior, the large, interdisciplinary, introductory course on sexualities that covers everything from anatomies to cross-cultural analyses of sexual practices to ethical reflections of moral questions. Although we base the course in scientific studies of sexualities, students often forget this due to both the interdisciplinary orientation of the course design and my pedagogical style. Students will ask for sexual performance tips or relationship advice or the “right” moral response to an ethics question. I must always be prepared to reorient such questions to the disciplinary, usually scientific, focus of our topic. (Elsewhere I have written about the challenges of teaching this course, as have others. See Myerson et al. and Davis).

In short, opening up a topic with questions tests one’s skills as a facilitator to keep the issues on topic as well as to keep order in the classroom. Inviting participation invites rule breaking from the standard classroom etiquette. While this is part of my goal—to have the students actually speak the lecture—it requires more skill than simply invoking traditional classroom practices. Sometimes even the most honed skill can lead to a bad day in class if students refuse to be corralled on an issue once they are offered a chance to share their ideas. The key to directing the issues and to keeping classroom order is to be prepared. Walk through the questions and ideas methodically. Be prepared for mis-

steps and have answers to your questions in your notes. You must know why your direction is an accurate explanation of your discipline’s focus as well as why other answers may not follow the logic of your discipline. It is a bit of thought preparation, but I think well worth it.

## Student-Centered Assignments

I am not the first person to offer the notion of student-centered approaches as a pedagogical tool (Champeau and Shaw; Farrell, Moog, and Spencer; Spencer). In women’s studies, journals are so common a pedagogical tool that it would be hard to attribute from whom the idea was inspired. My goal here is to demonstrate how inventing your own style of final assignment might authentically engage tools of the discipline and the circumstances of a student’s own life. As such these assignments become a tool for student’s own reflexivity. Similar to the goals of lecturing with questions as a classroom presentation style, student-centered assignments focus on requiring students to think self-reflexively about the relationship of theory to themselves. Having reflected on pedagogy, one of my graduate students, Heather, outlines the importance of self-reflexivity as follows:

When the idea of self-reflexivity is brought into the classroom and put into practice through engaged assignments and projects, I believe there is a crucial “turning in” that occurs, in which students begin to thread the theory into their lived experiences, in which they see how the topics they’re studying arise from and play out in their lives; there is an effective bridging of the distance between lived experience and academic theory. In setting

one's experiences within a theoretical framework, and vice versa, the student engages fully with the topic at hand. As an obvious example, it is well and good to introduce students in a women's studies classroom to the conceptual framework of privilege and power disparity, but if it remains an externality, something that shapes other lives in other locations, the meaning doesn't take root. They remain simply concepts, and often unnavigable ones at that. I use the examples of power and privilege because they are incendiary fodder in the classroom and, often, students react defensively. However, to turn it inward, to write one's life as it is impacted by a variety of factors, brings those concepts, literally, to life. (Heather Curry, MA student, women's studies)

In my classes, I have devised two final assignments to engage just that. Here I will outline autoethnography and "feminifestos" in place of the standard final research paper. I offer these, not as the only way to structure final assignments, but as examples of "doing" a disciplinary style of work as a final assignment.

A few years ago after experiencing great frustration about having an argument to make but no "data" with which to style this argument, I wrote an autoethnography about my own gender experiences. In doing so, I followed the sociological contributions of Carolyn Ellis, who is perhaps the most well known proponent and originator of autoethnography. The experience of writing it was both intellectually enriching and personally challenging, and that article remains a favorite of my own work. What then is autoethnography? My argument is that autoethnography is the opposite of autobiography. Autobiography is usually about famous people and reveals the

intricate details of their individual lives. We read an autobiography of Madonna so we can access the gory details of the not-so-public part of her grand life. Autoethnography is the opposite. It is a theoretical paper with a sociological analysis in which I, not some generalizable sample of an abstract population, am the data. What makes my life useful as data, unlike Madonna's life, is that I am "nobody." This suggests my life could be exemplary of many people's common experiences (Crawley). Autoethnography works best when it evokes a common experience that a researcher could not learn without embodying it. It is the ultimate in what anthropologists call "going native" because you already are. The goal of this approach is to "extract meaning from experience" (Bochner 270). It is deep self-reflection *and* systematic sociological analysis of the social order of one's life—generally organized around a particular topic being theorized. As such, autoethnography is best organized around theoretical issues, not chronology, and theory should be implicit throughout. It is best to avoid simply narrating the events of one's life from the beginning, but instead recall the relevant memories that flood back frequently when thinking about a topic—the memories that resurface often and won't go away. I argue these persistent memories are persistent because they are relevant to our everyday worries and everyday theoretical analyses of our own lives. Most of us are just waiting to theorize our own lives and experiences. Autoethnography is a tool for accomplishing this. For this kind of classroom assignment, my favorite style of autoethnography proceeds with writing "scenes" where the autoethnographic part is set in as "data" followed by analytical responses (i.e., the "theory") to those

scenes.<sup>1</sup> It is my favorite style because it is easy to explain to students and is roughly similar to a style of paper with which they are already familiar (i.e., “data” separated from “theory”). The scenes and responses are woven together like a theoretical analysis, not in the chronology of a life. In this way, each of us can theorize a class-based, racialized, gendered, and so on, theory of social organization. Indeed, this is what makes autoethnography feminist because the “point of creating autoethnographic texts is to change the world” (Holman Jones 765) by giving voice to our particularities and experiences.<sup>2</sup>

In essence, autoethnography is a sociology research paper in which I am the data. All other components of it operate similarly to writing a final research paper, including formulating a theoretical framework and constructing an analysis around the data. You can imagine that students are more compelled by this assignment than by say, theorizing mortality and morbidity patterns of eighteenth-century American immigrants (unless, of course, one is particularly compelled by demography or eighteenth-century immigration is part of one’s own family story). This style of theorizing allows one to put one’s own experience at center and fully reflect on social theory from a very personal place.

Although it is easy to provide my own arguments for the use of student-centered assignments, I have been told by several former students that they were particularly gripped by these assignment styles. As such, I asked a few students to briefly explain their experiences with the two types of assignments I describe here. Below, Julie offers her experience of writing her autoethnography for a Queer Theory class assignment:

My autoethnography centered on a visual image of how the women in my family hold hands, how we must hold hands, and how we must hold the hands of men. Through the writing of my autoethnography, I wove queer theorists and feminist theorists into the story of my life and the lives of all the women in my family. I was able to better understand why we made the life choices that we made and the consequences of those choices. Although I had read faithfully each week and completed all assignments and I had participated fully in all classes and discussions throughout the sixteen-week course, nothing moved me like the writing of that autoethnography. In that one place the theories that I read and thought about had application to my life and relevance to what I lived. In that one assignment, that I cried and raged through, I understood the women in my family and how our subject position had produced few choices available to us other than the position of wife—dependent, Christian, straight, and married. I understood why the women in our family never leave the men they marry no matter what. From that place too a path of liberation was visible. (Julie Dumois-Sands, MA student, women’s studies and Africana studies)

Similarly, Chelsea offers her experience of writing autoethnography for a different Queer Theory class:

Writing the autoethnography left me with a rich understanding of the relationship between theory and lives and why theory is written—to experience what theorists aim to explain in the very production of theory. These were not easy assignments to complete as they challenged me academically and also emotionally as I was discovering



my autonomy as a student, individual, and scholar. One of the most amazing aspects of this assignment was the entrance of my voice amongst theory and other published scholars. Writing left me with a powerful sense of fluidity and transparency, wondering who I was yesterday and what I am today, while leaving absolute space for the possibility of tomorrow, initiating a relationship with theory not as static, but, much like myself, a multitude of meanings and possibilities. (Chelsea Tanner, MA student, women's studies and communication)

Not all disciplines could use specifically autoethnography to address the goal of having students model both disciplinary work and self-reflexivity, but there are options to attain something similar with disciplinary nuances. As Donald J. Wink describes later in this volume in an article on engaging student involvement in chemistry classrooms, a teacher might ask students to journal about their experiences of completing their more standard disciplinary work. This provides the student an opportunity for self-reflexivity while providing the faculty with a wealth of knowledge about the effectiveness of how the students are meeting the material. Another option is to model a standard core content assignment but to use local examples for investigating that content. This option pursues the notion of utilizing the situation-at-hand as we outline in the introduction and as Catherine Hurt Middlecamp and Kristina R. Knoll address in their articles. The goal is to draw on students' local knowledges or personal interests to engage the subject addressed. For example, a political scientist might connect a local industry to world politics or an ecologist in South Florida might use

the Everglades as the example, connecting local resources to global issues and core disciplinary content. The point is to be creative in engaging students' interests.

The second style of student-centered assignment I have used is having students write a manifesto. In teaching Classics in Feminism, I had been frustrated that students were resistant to writing in a polemical style that was common several decades ago. For the unfamiliar, second wave feminist writings (approximately during the late 1960s and 1970s women's rights movement) were commonly characterized by a strong political voice and theoretical analyses of the condition of women written in everyday language, often by nonacademic people. I liked the style because it was a strong paradigm for developing student voice and because it values and promotes social theorizing related to but often outside the academy. Although the content of such pieces were often radical and perhaps impractical, they did encourage students to be passionate about the issue of their focus. I had been lamenting that students no longer write manifestos, with strength of voice and commitment to issues. "Aha," I thought, "I should have them write their own manifesto," by way of having them develop their theoretical analysis of an issue about which they are passionate while also developing a strong voice.

Students responded with immediate reflexivity. They argued that in a Classics in Feminism class we should not be writing "man"-ifestos; we must call them something less androcentric. We debated what to call them as a class and settled on calling the assignment a "feminifesto." Wonderful! The assignment had already invoked reflexivity about theory and the project to be accomplished.



To choose their topic, I asked them what issue about gender inequality makes them passionate. Drawing from previous readings or journaling during the semester or their own off-campus activism, what issue would they pursue if they had time and energy to pursue only one? Students were free and encouraged to follow their passion. To organize the feminifesto such that the assignment has focus and analytic content, I asked students to follow Charlotte Bunch's theory construction model which outlines four components of a theory: description, analysis, vision, and strategy. This format allows students to describe their issue in detail from research they accomplished outside the classroom (which required research in the library); to analyze the issue using classical feminist theory (wherein they were required to cite a certain number of the course readings); to create their own vision for the future; and to outline a specific practical strategy to accomplish their call for change. In this way, students complete a standard research project, applying previously developed theoretical perspectives, while also engaging their own passions and developing their own voices. It allows them to model a polemical writing style, which helps develop a strong voice, while also learning to write a research paper. In my view, it allowed many students to engage a strong theoretical analysis perhaps for the first time. Instead of describing some author's theory "correctly," they were actually using that theorist's line of argument to make their own claims. Indeed, many have subsequently told me that it clarified their personal politics for them and gave them direction for the kind of activism they now want to pursue.

Here Chelsea, who took both Queer Theory and Classics in Feminism with me,

describes her experience of writing a feminifesto:

I felt that the greatest thing about this assignment was the plethora of issues and knowledge production the class communally created through peer editing and sharing of final papers. Because we choose our own topics, cumulatively, our final presentations resembled a table of contents from an *Issues in Feminism* textbook, illustrating how very relevant the material we studied was to our own interests. The feminifesto not only served as a research paper but also allowed for the creativity of each individual to enter the project. This final part of the paper called for the student to propose a *solution* to the issue they researched. I thought this was one of the more interesting sections of the paper, as we were encouraged to take radical stances and think outside of socially accepted means. By the completion of my feminifesto I had, in a sense, created my own mini-feminism with the identification of an issue, the analysis, and the proposed solution. It was great to experience yourself not only as a researcher but also as a theorist and social policy maker. (Chelsea Tanner, MA Student, women's studies and communication)

Cyрана, having taken the same Classics in Feminism course as Chelsea, also writes about her experiences of writing a feminifesto:

Writing the feminifesto forced me to appreciate the class material [classical feminist theory] and place myself within the conversation. The assignment was to define a problem, analyze the problem, discuss what should be, and provide a solution. We were to use sources discussed in class and sources found through our own research. The analysis

required that I have a more thorough understanding of the course material. Authors that I had critiqued in class became the authors I came to admire as I began to understand their position more fully. It completely changed the way I evaluated the material. I was able to understand how the material relates to my personal passions and ideas. The *feminifesto* was a unique assignment, most challenging and most rewarding. Instead of having a mere reaction to the material or regurgitating knowledge that scholars have already put out there, I had to formulate my own ideas and support them with the material that was discussed in class. I was able to engage the material discussed in class in a way that actually helped me develop as a scholar, and it introduced me to material that expanded my academic interests. Most importantly it changed the way I saw myself. The *feminifesto* assignment marks my transition from a student who just soaks up information to a scholar contributing to a discussion. (Cyra Wyker, MA student, women's studies)

For each autoethnography and *feminifesto*, my goal was to have students complete a final research paper that modeled disciplinary methods and engaged course content, but did so with themselves and their passionate concerns at the center of the paper. (See Wink et al., in this issue, for a different version of this process as it relates to the natural sciences.) As such, they examine their own politics while learning and applying the theories offered in the course. These forms of student-centered assignments invoke reflexivity between the course content, standard methods of writing, and students' own strongly held concerns and interests in the world. I believe and

research supports (Umbach and Wawryzynski) that invoking students' interests, even passions, for issues is a necessary means to create full pedagogical contact.

## How Do I Know These Techniques Work?

It is easy to cite the cognitive literature about effective pedagogies as I have above. But a teacher in the classroom often gains a more intimate and personal sense of when a course is meaningful to students. It is much harder to provide information to an outsider that would allow that person to also appreciate this teacher-student connection. Course evaluations are one standard way academics use to talk with each other about student impact, and my course evaluations have been exemplary, not only with high numerical ratings but also with comments that reveal the students feel the way I do about their engagement in the course. (For example, I have received a 5.0 [of 5.0 possible] overall instructor rating from student evaluations—in other words the highest score possible from all students responding—in three separate semesters, each from classes of fewer than twenty-five students, and I received a 4.91 overall instructor rating with seventy-five students responding for a large section). Further, in Fall 2006 I received one of our university's Outstanding Undergraduate Teaching awards. Additionally, my students often tell me (or leave a "thank you" card) or write on my evaluations that their experiences in my classes are superlative (i.e., "best professor I have had," "best class at this school") or that it transformed their lives (i.e., "I will always remember this class," "You've changed the way I look at the world"). Students regularly tell me

they “love” me. One student even called me the “rock star” on campus. (That was kind of fun).

Although I find these comments flattering and recognize that to some extent they may be related to the subject matters that I teach (sexualities, social inequalities, social psychologies), which address students’ everyday lives and experiences, I also think the results suggest students are engaged. I think I have made contact.

## Conclusion

My hope is that the student testimonials articulate a feeling of their own engagement more so than promotion for a particular kind of assignment. Rather than arguing that autoethnography or feminifesto per se are the answer (although I do enjoy using these particular assignments), my goal is to demonstrate that course assignments can be creatively organized to engage students in the classic tools of our disciplines (research, critical analysis, and so forth) if we as faculty practice self-reflexivity about our goals and intentions with our coursework.

Both lecturing with questions, as an everyday classroom process, and student-centered capstone assignments work toward engaging student and faculty self-reflexively throughout the course. They encourage students and faculty to constantly evaluate: Why are we doing this? I believe that is a healthy and engaged evaluation process that attempts full contact, invoking students and faculty as people, rather than promoting static curriculum or education as a disciplining system. In my view, a full-contact pedagogy is the purpose of feminist education and is most likely to create responsible citizens of the world.

## NOTES

1. There are many styles of autoethnography and, in fact, many of its advocates encourage it as a largely free-form method of writing. For example, Carolyn Ellis would likely cringe at my separation of the concepts “data” and “theory” here, as she is more interested in the artistry and evocation of autoethnography (See also Adams and Holman Jones). As I explain, I advocate this style of autoethnography for students primarily to give form to the assignment by way of assuaging some of the fears they are likely to be experiencing already from being given this uncommon kind of assignment.

2. In this way, autoethnography becomes very much like Dorothy Smith’s method called institutional ethnography because it offers a view from the individual moving through an institution.

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