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Teaching Note

Against from Within: Finding Feminist Pedagogical Spaces between Academic Institutional Margins

GEORGANN COPE WATSON

As a teaching assistant in higher education, I acknowledge that I am subject to the particular ideological stance and pedagogical practice of the course professor. As I search to construct my own practice, I endeavor to locate a space within the traditional institutional tenets of pedagogy that characterizes the academy. Historically, these tenets are embedded in a curriculum that honors the knowledge of the hegemonic group, demanding mastery of content and reinforcement by the authority of the professoriate. Overtly, I submit to the authority of the professor and the legally binding course syllabus. I do not have any input into the curriculum, the learning outcomes, or the assessment components of the course. On occasion, the pedagogical stance of the professor is incompatible with my own pedagogical stance. Covertly, I have to find a way to work against from within. I have to create a space that helps me remain true to my own values and beliefs about myself as a teacher while at the same time working within the margins constructed by the professor.

I have worked as a teaching assistant in the introductory course in women's stud-

ies for four years, a place where I have been mentored in a feminist perspective that is supported by the literature on feminist pedagogy. In their 1994 work, "The Feminist Classroom," Frances A. Maher and Mary Kay Thompson Tetreault reveal four critical themes in feminist pedagogical spaces: voice, authority, mastery, and positionality. Other researchers reinforce the perception that the feminist classroom is a place where all voices are heard, power differentials are minimized, knowledge is collectively constructed and differences are honored (Gore; Welch; Mogadime; Lee and Johnson-Bailey). It is my experience, however, that in some contexts this classroom is an ideal that is not always attainable, a discovery that in part helps to explain the difficulty of operationalizing theory into practice. bell hooks, Dolana Mogadime, and Ming-yeh Lee and Juanita Johnson-Bailey reveal similar experiences in their research of feminist teachers in confronting these ideal frameworks in the classroom.

In this teaching note I share an experience during which I was not able to successfully construct a feminist space within my practice. I encountered a particular

group of undergraduate students who did not like my feminist classroom, a classroom where all voices can be heard, where knowledge is co-constructed through respectful sharing of knowledge and lived experiences, where the dominant/subordinate relationship is minimized, and where we acknowledge our individual values and beliefs (examining where they come from). For the first time, I encountered resistance to these feminist classroom practices. I encountered passive aggressive behaviors that made it difficult to confront the resistance. There was bullying towards me and bullying towards other students. I spent many hours reflecting on this experience. I kept a double entry journal (recording experiences and reactions concurrently, and then returning to reflect on reactions and experiences and make connections to the research). I shared this experience and my journal with the professor of the course. Then, through a deconstruction of the experience and an examination of the research I developed some strategies to prevent the reproduction of this experience. I have successfully embedded them into my practice. These strategies emerge from Maher and Tetreault's four critical themes of voice, mastery, authority, and positionality;

- **Voice:** Seminars practice a rotating chair model for discussions; the individual who is speaking has the floor and also chooses the next speaker. Participation grades are based on participation in collaborative learning groups, not on whole group discussions. Participation grades are recorded each seminar and are shared with students. Critical comments, connections to theory and course materials, and evidence of contextual understanding are granted higher grades

than unsupported, opinion-based comments. Students who block comments, dominate the discussion, and/or disallow comments are granted lower grades than students who offer inclusive and respectful comments.

- **Mastery:** In a first-year course students are not expected to master the theoretical constructs that are presented to them. This requires a (re)framing of the term “mastery” by moving it away from the term “expertise” and toward a conceptualization of the term “situated knowledge.” Through an understanding of how different ways of knowing deconstruct the concept of mastering knowledge, new spaces are opened for new voices in the classroom. Students will co-construct their own knowledge and conceptualize constructs through a reciprocal exchange of dialogue and sharing of personal experiences. Students need to know that they are not expected to conquer and claim the course material, and I need to know that I cannot “teach” students to master complicated theory and applications in an introductory course. The emphasis is on individual contextual construction of social knowledge.
- **Authority:** Assignments can be pre-submitted for review. Feedback is provided in time for assignments to be revised and submitted on the due date. Also, during the week before each student's seminar facilitation, a collaborative meeting is held with the teaching assistant to examine the facilitation outline and ensure that the format is congruent with the grading rubric.
- **Positionality:** Individuals' lived experiences, values, beliefs, and particular worldviews are respected in the class. This is supported through the organization of the seminar (the rotat-

ing chair model) and reinforced by the assessment of these behaviors (weekly recordings of participation and dialogues). When tensions arise, the mutually agreed-upon group guidelines are revisited and students are supported in making the choice to withdraw from the discussion.

- All of the above are open for dialogue.

I find that these strategies support a feminist classroom and support my efforts to construct and maintain a feminist pedagogical practice. Maher and Tetreault's four critical themes (voice, authority, mastery, and positionality) provide a comprehensive framework for building authentic, reflexive, and reciprocal spaces for students in seminars. In the spirit of critical reflexivity, I continue to work on the double entry journal, perpetuating data to add to the current research on finding feminist pedagogical spaces between the margins of traditional academic institutions.

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