Teaching What You're Not

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Published by NYU Press

Mayberry, Katherine.
Teaching What You're Not: Identity Politics in Higher Education.
NYU Press, 1996.
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In the 1970s and 1980s, many female women's studies teachers assumed that they had more in common than not with the women students who made up the majority in their classrooms. Their assumption was in part a result both of a politics that claimed a universalistic female identity based on the oppression of women and an optimistic confusion between women's standpoint and feminist conclusions. Scholars of feminist pedagogy, grappling with the authority conveyed by their institutional positions, attempted to relocate their leadership on more legitimate, because feminist, grounds. They did this by emphasizing their shared experience of oppression with women students or by establishing their vanguard position as feminist faculty. Caroline Shrewsbury, for example, speaks of feminist leadership as "a special form of empowerment which empowers others."¹

In contrast, poststructuralist or postmodernist feminist educators of the late 1980s and 1990s are less sanguine about assuming a common identity with their students, or maintaining that radical faculty are automatically at the center of the empowerment process and able to provide students with oppositional or liberatory knowledge they would not otherwise have.

The feminist classroom has therefore emerged in the pedagogical literature as more potentially fragmented, less "safe," and less free of
power relations than previously described. The insight that feminist and liberatory education is not “innocent” could lead feminist and other progressive educators to despair. However, our recognition of how education, including “emancipatory” teaching and learning, is enmeshed in power relations need not dishearten us as faculty and students or lead us to abandon our insights into the relationship between knowledge and power. Instead, our classrooms can be places in which we embrace our own and our students’ partial knowledge, in which we learn from and struggle to trust one another.

In the spring of 1994, I offered for the first time a special topics course, Sex and Sexuality in American Culture, as part of the women’s studies program at West Virginia University. I taught the class again in the spring of 1995 and will be petitioning to make the course a permanent part of the curriculum, both in women’s studies and as part of a projected new minor in lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender studies. The class helped me find a metaphor and strategy for teaching that does not shy away from the recognition of difference and power in the feminist classroom: “teaching as an ally.” As a straight teacher I explored what it meant to teach as an ally in a course that had a strong lesbian, gay, and bisexual (lesbigay) component, both in content and through support by an organized lesbigay student constituency.

While preparing to teach the course for the first time, I found the concepts of coalition and alliance building, taken from feminist political organizing, suggestive guides for dealing with difference. Teaching as an ally became a metaphor for my approach to authority and to the creation of classroom community as a condition for the production of knowledge and transformation of consciousness. Abandoning a priori assumptions of sisterhood and certainties about the teacher as the “origin of what can be known and . . . what can be done,” I found myself in the less comfortable but equally committed and enthusiastic stance of teacher as ally.

I am, therefore, proposing the concept of “teaching as an ally” to
describe what faculty from dominant groups can do to share power, build trust, and create an atmosphere of mutual respect in which to create knowledge with students from nondominant groups. Groups are not monolithic in their experience of privilege and oppression, and differently oppressed groups can form alliances. However, I will be focusing in this essay on faculty acting as allies to students who, on some dimension, have less privilege and power than the faculty—in society as well as in the academy.

Alliance and coalition emerged as strategies of feminist organizing in response to the recognition that women do not automatically share a common set of experiences and a common agenda based on gender. Feminists of color especially challenged any unified definition of “woman” founded on the construction of white womanhood. They emphasized the ways we experience multiple, intersecting social structures that shape experience and identity. Bonnie Thornton Dill, for example, in an article in Feminist Studies published in 1983, argued for “the abandonment of the concept of sisterhood as a global construct based on unexamined assumptions about our similarities.” She called instead for a “more pluralistic approach that recognizes and accepts the objective differences between women,” and for a politics of “building coalitions around issues of shared interest.” Similarly, Bernice Johnson Reagon, in a speech given at the West Coast Women’s Music Festival in 1981, argued the necessity of doing the uncomfortable work of coalition, maintaining that our desire to “be only with people who are like [us]” is illusory and dangerous.

Although the concept of teaching as an ally has not been fully developed in the educational literature, other writers on feminist pedagogy have referred to concepts of alliance and coalition building taken from feminist activism. For example, John Schilb, in an article published in an anthology on feminist teaching in 1985, invoked Sara Evans’s call for a flexible organizing mentality in doing coalition work as a guide to avoiding rigidity or purity in applying feminist pedagogical principles. Schilb, a man teaching women’s studies to an
Barbara Scott Winkler

Economically advantaged student population, often felt less distanced from the women and men students in his introductory courses by his maleness than by his feminist politics. The concept of flexibility, of trusting “the complexities of the organizing process itself,” helped him develop a strategy to fit the particulars of his classroom and school environment.8

Mimi Orner also turned to the concept of teacher as ally in an article published in 1992 on the problematic treatment of student resistance and the difficulties with calls for “student voice” in feminist and critical pedagogy.9 Orner, raising questions about the emancipatory role of the teacher, asks, “How do we understand our own embodiment of privilege and oppression, both historical and current? How do we teach as allies to oppressed groups of which we are not a part? What does it mean to teach as an ally?”10

Elizabeth Ellsworth, in an article that criticizes the foundational assumptions of critical pedagogy, also discusses coalition and alliance building in relation to her class on Media and Antiracist Pedagogies. Ellsworth shifts her attention from the self-understanding and responsibility of the faculty member to the class as a whole. Remarking on the creation of student-generated affinity groups outside the classroom, she maintains that the class came to see itself as “building a coalition among the multiple, shifting, intersecting, and sometimes contradictory groups carrying unequal weights of legitimacy within the culture and the classroom.”11 (Halfway through the semester, the students renamed the course “Coalition 607.”

Such a definition of coalitions as constantly responsive and shifting avoids a simplistic polarization of students and faculty into discrete groups of “oppressed” and “oppressors.” Ellsworth found that assumptions about who would develop alliances were often wrong, because class members shared commitments in nonstereotypical ways. Ellsworth also described what her new understanding of the classroom gave her as a member of the faculty. She gained a greater appreciation of classroom practices that would avoid premature closure
or fixity of identity (which she calls a kind of “unknowability”). Teaching as an ally, therefore, does not mean reducing an individual’s life to a single factor or polarizing groups within the classroom into “oppressor” and “oppressed.” It does, however, result in a redefinition of authority and an examination of how faculty as well as students embody both privilege and oppression, as Orner suggests.

Writers on feminist organizing describe precisely what coalitions and alliances entail. In their anthology *Bridges of Power: Women’s Multicultural Alliances*, Lisa Albrecht and Rose M. Brewer distinguish between coalitions, as temporary commitments, and alliances, which are more long-term political relationships. In coalitions, “groups operate autonomously and are usually not connected to each other,” while alliances require a “level of commitment that is longer-standing, deeper, and built upon more trusting political relationships.”

While some students may have established political connections with one another before taking a course, most will have only a limited relationship to other class members and to the material. Therefore, the concept of “alliance” cannot be transplanted too exactly from organizing to the classroom. However, as a member of the faculty, I found the concept of “ally,” which stresses a deeper dedication, instructive and descriptive of my experience.

While we can make commitments to teach as allies in every class, analysis of a course such as the “sexuality class,” which emphasizes material on oppressed or marginalized groups and which is taught by a faculty member who is not a member of those groups, can help us focus more directly on what it means to teach as an ally. A description of the creation and teaching of the course *Sex and Sexuality in American Culture* can therefore, I believe, provide an instructive example of ally teaching.

In January 1993 I received a three-year appointment as the first visiting assistant professor in women’s studies at West Virginia University. WVU is the flagship school of the state. Morgantown has a sum-
mer population of twenty-six thousand that is almost doubled when students return in the fall. While the campus culture is conservative, there is a small but relatively organized lesbigay community, which includes university and nonuniversity people. A gay bar, an important hangout for students as well as townspeople, is located in the downtown area near the university. A community-based group, "Equal Rights Not Special Rights," successfully fought for an antidiscrimination clause in the employment policy of the city government. Students and staff of the university participated in this effort.

The school has a very progressive antidiscrimination policy that covers sexual orientation as well as race and gender. There is a supportive social justice office, created by the outgoing university president. The Bisexual, Gay and Lesbian Mountaineers (BIGLM), a student group founded in 1987, has a significant presence on campus. Through university-wide activities and programming, including Gay Pride Week, BIGLM raises awareness around lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender issues. The group played an important role in my hiring and in the creation of the sexuality course.

The WVU Center for Women's Studies has been in existence in one form or another since 1980. Like many women's studies programs, the center originally relied on the founding coordinator (an English department professor) and other departmental faculty for course offerings. Obtaining a full-time women's studies faculty position, even a temporary one, required much organizing by students as well as by center staff and affiliated faculty.

Staffing the introductory course was the primary justification for establishing the position. However, the center was also concerned with internal curricular development. BIGLM was especially interested in ensuring that whoever was hired would offer a course in lesbian and gay studies. I was asked during my hiring interview whether I would be willing to do so both by students and by the social justice officer.

I had just received my doctorate in American studies from the Uni-
versity of Michigan six months before, where new courses in the history of sexuality and culture of gays and lesbians were being offered through the history department and the American culture program. Coursework in this field had not been available to me before I started my dissertation. However, I had read in the area on my own and believed that as a social and cultural historian I could offer a course that focused on the issues and on key theoretical concepts in the history of sexuality in the United States. Equally important, as a feminist and women's studies scholar, I was committed to antiheterosexist teaching and supported a women's studies program making a contribution to the scholarship and curricula in lesbigay studies. These commitments were personal as well as intellectual, and stemmed in part from relationships with lesbigay friends and colleagues. As I told the BIGLM representative, the opportunity to teach such a course was therefore very exciting to me.

At the hiring interview I offered to teach lesbigay studies as part of a course on the history of sexuality in the United States that also explored changes in heterosexuality. The course would look at how race and class helped shape those experiences as well. There was no such course on campus, and as a student of American studies with a history background I felt this approach would best tap my skills and knowledge as a scholar, as well as my own subjectivity. This was, therefore, not to be an exclusively lesbigay studies course. However, the extensiveness of lesbigay content as well as questions and themes that would structure the course, such as the emergence of a "homo-sexual" identity and the creation of a "heterosexual norm," would make it a class substantially informed by scholarship in this area.

After I was hired and before I put together the syllabus, I met with BIGLM. I wanted to hear what their expectations were for such a course. I also invited discussion of the impact that my sexual identity as a straight woman might have on the class, including recognition of the possible limitations this could impose.

I could not meet all the BIGLM students’ expectations for the
course. For example, I was not an expert on representations of same-
sex intimacy in ancient Greece, and I wanted to limit the focus to the
United States. Also, while I felt that a statement of my subjective
position was a responsible strategy, it did not always produce the
effect I intended. Later, one of the older lesbians in the group told
me that my declaration had confused her. She wondered if my self-
labeling as straight indicated that I would "back off" from commit-
ting to exploration of lesbian, gay, and bisexual material. Fortunately,
she took the course. She later assured me that she concluded there
had been nothing to worry about. If I were to replay the BIGLM
meeting, I would make a similar statement, since I believe it chal-
 lenges notions of objectivity and disinterested authority. However,
instead of speaking solely of my identity as a straight woman, I
would also refer to my political and intellectual commitments as a
feminist and antihomophobic teacher.

Meeting with BIGLM helped me think about who would take the
course the first time I offered it. I was told that there was a great deal
of "pent-up demand" for the class, and I was aware of the particular
constituencies that were most likely to take the class: in particular,
lesbian, gay, and bisexual students and feminist-identified straight
students. I hoped for a student group that was diverse and gay-posi-
tive.

Thirty students enrolled, a large number for a seminar. They in-
cluded a number of activists in BIGLM and in the lesbigay commu-
nity at large. Lesbian, gay, and bisexual students who enrolled in this
first session may or may not have had acquaintance with scholarship
on the history of sexuality, including lesbian, gay, and bisexual stud-
ies, but they had considerable life experience in dealing with many
of the issues we dealt with in the course. Several were older. Their
participation was invaluable in creating a gay-positive classroom
community.

When planning the course content, I chose topics designed to en-
gage and inform the lesbian, gay, bisexual, and straight students who
wanted to learn more about the history of sexuality in the United States. Lesbigay issues were presented as an integral part of this history.\textsuperscript{17} Since the course covered the history of sexuality in the United States from the colonial period to the present, much of the initial material did not directly deal with lesbigay issues, although such topics as cross-gender roles in Native American tribes and Victorian romantic friendships were discussed. Most of the last third of the class did focus more directly on lesbigay concerns, including the emergence of homosexual communities, the political and cultural significance of lesbian and gay bar culture, cross-cultural comparisons and the construction of gayness in communities of color, gay liberation, lesbian feminism, bisexuality, and the moral panic around AIDS. In this section we also dealt with the sexual revolution, abortion and reproductive rights, pornography, and the impact of consumerism on sexuality.

According to evaluations at the end of the course, some straight students overestimated how much time was actually spent on lesbigay material, but most felt that this was a positive experience. As one student wrote, "Bringing homosexual topics into each issue helped me, as a heterosexual, to further understand their world." Another wrote, "I learned so much about a culture I knew almost nothing about—it really opened my eyes."\textsuperscript{18}

In this first semester, a significant percentage of the students were lesbian, gay, or bisexual. A student's anonymous survey of class members revealed that half of the students who reported their sexual identity were lesbian or gay male, and half were bisexual or straight. (She divided the class into two categories: lesbian and gay, bisexual and straight.) My own estimate was that 60 percent of the students were lesbian, gay, or bisexual. Out of thirty students, twenty-five were women. The five men were all gay. While BIGLM played an important role in advocating the course, this was not a "BIGLM class." Students who were not part of BIGLM, including those who were lesbian, gay, or bisexual, enrolled, and not all members of the
organization took the course. Eight students who had taken my Fall course, Contemporary U.S. Women's Movements, followed up with the sexuality class.

That the course attracted such a significant percentage of lesbian, gay, and bisexual students in the first semester helped make the classroom a gay-positive or "queer" space, as the students described it. Lesbian, gay, and bisexual students often spoke out of their sexual subjectivity, openly identifying themselves. While straight women actively participated in classroom discussion, they sometimes gave the impression of "overhearing" conversations of which they were not the center. Their group presentations (which I will describe below), however, provided them with the means to speak more authoritatively.

When I offered the course again the following spring term, the class makeup was reversed: closer to 40 percent of the eighteen students who enrolled were lesbian, gay, or bisexual, while 60 percent were straight. This affected the dynamics of the class. Heterosexual feminists were more outspoken, focusing on issues of reproductive rights, the sex industry, New Right attempts to regulate sexuality, teen pregnancy, and welfare. Several of the students in the class had direct experience with welfare or knew friends who did. Several straight and bisexual women students also had friends or acquaintances who stripped in local clubs, providing an interesting slant on the sex industry. The more conservative views on these issues of a straight white male student helped spark some of these discussions.

While bisexual, lesbian, and gay students were again active and vocal participants in the class, many fewer chose to self-label, and such identifications seemed not to be as much at the center of the discussion. The absence of role models, such as the older lesbian students who helped shape such discussions the previous year, also contributed.

There were exceptions. Bisexual students were more vocal than before about the ways both straight and gay communities were preju-
diced against them or misrepresented them. Heightened bisexual awareness may, in part, have been a result of the impact of a major bisexual speaker, Lani Kaahumanu, who participated in Gay Pride Week that fall.

In the circumstances of the second class, I felt a greater responsibility to bring diverse lesbian, gay, and bisexual voices into discussions through the readings. Our texts, therefore, became an even more central resource.

Course content also helped counter racial bias. In both semesters the class was primarily white. In the first semester the course was offered, it was exclusively so. The second semester, a feminist-friendly black man whose family was Guyanese enrolled. Students of color make up 5 percent of the total WVU student population, and 6 percent of undergraduate students. Three percent both of total students and of undergraduates are African American.21 There are very few gays of color who are out on campus. I was concerned that the white experience of sexuality not become implicitly hegemonic. Readings on Native American, Mexican, and African American heterosexual experience, and African American, Mexican, and Chicano lesbians and gay men shifted the center to these groups. The perspective of lesbians and gays of color helped make the “naturalness” of Anglo sexual identities problematic.

In the first semester the class met for a three-hour block in the evening. Various class activities helped promote a “lesbigay-friendly” classroom environment. In both the first and second years I emphasized in the first class meeting that a good portion of the course content would be on lesbian, bisexual, and gay issues.22 Questions raised by such material—for example, social constructionist and essentialist explanations of sexual identity or mechanisms of sexual regulation and marginalization—were then integrated throughout the semester. In the first semester, a lively discussion of the benefits and drawbacks of labeling also took place the first evening, and the class later returned to the topic when we discussed community and identity.23
I also asked the students to brainstorm topics for required group projects (or in the second semester, individual paper topics). We filled the board with a variety of possible subject areas, including sex education in the schools, marital rape and the law, femme/butch in the lesbian community, straight and gay experiences of pornography, lesbians and gays in the military, and others. In the first semester the group project "brainstorm" closed the class meeting, producing a high level of collective class energy by tapping student interests and creativity. (Since in the second semester the class met twice a week for shorter time periods, I asked students to bring in topics for a brainstorm during the second meeting.) The brainstorming made it clear that students were expected to be active participants in the class and that this was a course where lesbian, gay, and bisexual themes were welcome—without promoting possibly risky self-disclosure in the first session.

While coalitions and alliances can develop in the classroom, not all students may wish or be ready to make the commitment that is required of faculty who teach as allies. Throughout both semesters, I was acutely aware of my own position as a straight if gay-positive feminist teacher. In class I called attention to my own social privilege in discussing the institutionalization of heterosexuality.24 I worked to understand life experiences I had not had and encouraged students to become more aware of how their identities are relational, a part of group relations. However, while I hoped students would be open to lives different from their own as they participated in the course, I did not assume that every class member had the desire or ability to make a further commitment to understanding or action.25 Still, collective in-class and out of class activities can help build knowledge of others, and even commitment and trust.

We made space for announcements of relevant events. This situated the class in larger social struggles and acknowledged students' commitments outside the classroom. In the first year there were an-
nouncements of a workshop led by a member of the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force on New Right backlash. There was discussion of the formation of a university-wide Council on Sexual Orientation and evaluation of what effect the university's antidiscrimination clause had on faculty and student attitudes. In the second year, class members discussed attacks by a local politician on BiGLM. A Take Back the Night rally and march, which included protest against hate crimes targeting gays as well as rape and domestic violence, was announced by students who were taking a leadership role in organizing the event.

Group projects in the first semester also contributed to breaking down isolation between class members and helped clarify and bridge differences among students in their identities and their political approach to issues. Students chose topics, usually from the list developed in the brainstorm, and collaboratively researched in-class presentations, after providing me with a group proposal. The students were then required to write individual papers incorporating material from their group presentation. Many straight students demonstrated their desire to act as allies through their choice of project topics or participation in gay-straight project groups. Lesbian, gay, and bisexual students also negotiated their differences and affirmed solidarity through class projects.

One of the more successful presentations, on pornography, was done by a group of students who were mixed both in gender and sexual orientation and who collectively explored how their different subjectivities shaped their responses to the topic. While they engaged in collective activity and discussion—for example, going to a pornographic bookstore together—members of the project group did not feel any need to come to agreement. Their multiple perceptions, sometimes overlapping, sometimes differing, were the center of their class presentation.

Another presentation, on gays in the military, became the basis for
a joint evening with BIGLM. Armed forces policy toward gays in the military had become a hot campus topic because of the vocal opposition of ROTC members to any changes. While I and members of BIGLM who were participants in the class arranged the invitation with the BIGLM programming coordinator, we first got the agreement of the class. Since the group of students who presented that evening were the first to share their research project with the class, the evening felt particularly special. In addition to the group presentation, we also showed the film Comrades in Arms, a British recreation of the experience of gays and lesbians in the military during World War II.

Group project presentations swallowed up most of class time in the latter portion of the course, making it difficult to explore course material, especially lesbigay material, as thoroughly as I and the class would have liked. I therefore reluctantly abandoned the collaborative projects the second time I taught the course. Instead, to give students the experience of collaborating with other students, I substituted two activities: giving each student a partner who would provide feedback on the drafts of thematic/research papers, and asking students to bring in discussion questions every week. I was dissatisfied with the outcome of the first activity: a few students chose the draft and critique deadline to disappear from the class, and we all agreed that the partnered critiques were not "public" enough discussions of what class members were doing.26

The second experiment, however, was extremely successful. On Tuesdays most students consistently brought in questions on our weekly readings, which I typed up on one or two sheets and disseminated for our Thursday sessions. I would group questions to suggest themes. Sometimes I would start us off with a question I particularly wanted to pursue. Still, Thursdays became known as the days students set the agenda for the class.

The questions offered by students deepened our understanding of
the issues by providing collective readings of the material. Students felt that the questions democratized the class and built trust among students and between faculty and students. As one student wrote on the year-end evaluation, “I really enjoyed the class discussions on Thursdays. I learned a lot from the other people in the class as well as the material we read!” Another wrote that the student-generated discussion questions “gave us a voice—and also let us see where other people were coming from.” This student also maintained that one of the most valuable aspects of the course was “the open environment which nurtured no holds barred discussion.”

Successful ally teaching does not preclude conflict in the classroom. Indeed, the articulation of disagreement can mean that a class has become safe enough that participants are able to take risks with one another, rather than burying differences in premature agreement or the silence of resistance. In the first semester I was especially heartened when students disagreed with my social constructionist approach to sexual identity, or argued with each other about the best strategies to achieve liberation. Such disagreements emphasized how “knowledge is produced, negotiated and transformed” in the classroom. When students challenged my interpretations or disagreed with other students’ political strategies, they demonstrated that pedagogy is interactive and not a matter of knowledge transmitted by the instructor and passively received by individual students unaffected by one another.

Disagreement about the relative value of social construction and essentialism provided an opportunity to encourage students to develop their own interpretations. Some students were especially wary of social constructionist analyses of present-day lesbian and gay identity because such theoretical approaches tended to neglect the relationship between psychology and collective social formation. Others were persuaded by social construction’s attempt to historicize sexuality and its emphasis on the mediation of sexual identity by cultural
Students who embraced social constructionist theories argued that such approaches freed them from what they perceived as the limitations and denials inherent in all fixed sexual categories, while others were concerned that such explanations were vulnerable to misinterpretation in the current political environment. Like many current gay activists, they preferred a biologically determined "born this way" explanation of sexual identity in the face of right-wing attacks.

To explore student responses to various social constructionist and essentialist explanatory strategies, I asked the students to write about what they liked and disliked and what they found useful in each. This produced a collective text that I reproduced for the students. As a result of this activity, student responses to questions on the final examination about nineteenth-century female romantic friendships and Mexican and Chicano same-sex relations became less polarized. Regardless of their preferred theoretical stance, students did not dismiss any of the models as outside consideration.

My experience of teaching Sex and Sexuality in American Culture has led me to become more aware of multiple leadership in the classroom. Certainly as a faculty member I bring important resources: my training as a historian and a feminist scholar; personal experiences with political activism; and the authority of my position, which gives me greater access to shaping the classroom community than students have. I provided leadership or contributed specific expertise when I engaged the students in historical thinking that challenged received categories. However, students also provided expertise growing out of their experience in organizing around issues that we addressed in the course, their life experience, or their prior knowledge of the scholarship. I agree with educators David Lusted and Patti Lather that pedagogy involves "the transformation of consciousness that takes place in the intersection of three agencies—the teacher, the learner and the knowledge they together produce." I especially strove to create a community of diverse and differing knowers through activities such
as the group projects, the evaluation of social construction and essentialism, and the student-generated study questions.

As I have suggested, feminist and other progressive educators have tried to reconceptualize issues of authority and leadership in the classroom. Early feminist educators relied on solidarity between themselves and their often movement-wise students. They expected students to share responsibility for their education. However, as Barbara Hillyer Davis points out, with the successful institutionalization of women’s studies, students who were unfamiliar with consciousness-raising or activism in the women’s movement became the majority in women’s studies classrooms by the 1980s.\(^3\) Many writers on feminist pedagogy responded by de-emphasizing collective responsibility for classroom learning and by paying renewed attention to faculty’s caretaking activities.

A redefinition of authority as something to be shared between faculty and students and among students can be seen in the more recent writing by feminist educators. Postmodern feminists such as Ellsworth and Orner deconstruct the role of teacher as “empowerer.”\(^3\) Other feminist educators emphasize how students can become “authorities to each other.”\(^3\) This renewed emphasis on multiple, diverse, and reciprocal authorities in the classroom has, in part, emerged from recognition of students’ individual expertise.\(^3\) But the most significant contributing factor has been the recognition that students, as well as faculty, are members of social groupings with specific (if partial) knowledge. For example, Ellsworth, as a feminist, had developed “sophisticated strategies for interpreting and interrupting sexism” but recognized that her experience of and understanding of racism were constrained by her “white skin and middle class privilege.”\(^3\) She contrasted this with the knowledge of her students of color who had life-long experience with racism and had engaged in campus activism and other antiracist struggles.\(^3\)

Teaching as an ally relies on our recognition of partial perspec-
tives—our own and that of our students—and our need to engage in collaborative efforts to recover and make central the experience of previously excluded groups in the construction and reconstruction of knowledge. This isn’t always easy. As one feminist teacher, Nancy Grey Osterud, points out, her white students resisted examining their own privilege or developing a systematic analysis of racial inequality. Nevertheless, she wanted to

create classrooms that prefigure the possibilities of emancipation. That means not only sharing authority with students . . . but also . . . critically examining . . . and opposing hierarchies of domination and subordination based on race, class, and culture.

As members of the faculty, we cannot divest ourselves of our positions of authority (and responsibility) in our institutions. However, we can acknowledge and use our position and its opportunities and responsibilities. My own commitment to lesbigay studies grew as a result of teaching the sexuality course; I was asked to chair the Education Committee on Research and Curriculum of the president’s Council on Sexual Orientation. Participation in the council, which was diverse in sexual orientation, gender, and race, gave me both a sense of community and continued education in institutional strategizing around lesbigay issues. Both outside and inside the classroom we can act as allies with our students.

**NOTES**


2. Special topics courses are not yet permanent offerings in the curriculum and do not require institutional approval above the program or departmental level.


5. See Lisa Albrecht and Rose M. Brewer, “Bridges of Power: Women’s Multicultural Alliances for Change,” in Albrecht and Brewer, eds., 3. Albrecht and Brewer are citing the work of Bonnie Thornton Dill.


9. Adherents of critical pedagogy see schools as cultural as well as instructional sites, as “arenas of contestation and struggle among differently empowered cultural and economic groups.” Through classroom critiques of injustice and oppression, critical pedagogy attempts to contribute to the creation of an “open, self-critical community of inquiring citizens.” See Henry Giroux, Theory and Resistance in Education: A Pedagogy for the Opposition (South Hadley, MA: Bergin and Garvey, 1983), 74, 190. Poststructuralist feminists like Orner are critical of what they see as insufficient attention to how power relations structure even progressive forums for dialogue.


13. See Margaret Andersen and Patricia Hill Collins, “Shifting the Center and Reconstructing Knowledge,” in Race, Class, and Gender: An Anthology, ed. Margaret Andersen and Patricia Hill Collins (Belmont, CA: Wadsworth, 1995), 4. Andersen and Collins describe such awareness as “inclusive thinking.”


15. The title “coordinator” was changed to “director” when the center was established as a freestanding unit in 1984. Women’s studies has since moved back into the Eberly College of Arts and Sciences.

16. In the academic year 1993–94, the staff adviser for BIGLM and a profes-
sor in the English department brought together a group of faculty, students, and staff to plan a university-wide committee in recognition that greater institutional and faculty support was needed to address the needs of the lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender university community. This group, the Council on Sexual Orientation, received the university president’s mandate under the guidance of the Office of Social Justice. The Center for Women was also able to hire a second, permanent director, whose appointment is full-time.

17. I believed it was particularly important to problematize heterosexuality by examining the historical and cultural changes in its meaning, expression, and regulation. In this effort, I was guided by our excellent textbook, John D’Emilio and Estelle Freedman, *Intimate Matters: A History of Sexuality in America* (New York: Harper and Row, 1988).

18. See Evaluation Forms—Spring 1994, WMST 191/391/HIST 111, “Sex and Sexuality in American Culture.” All evaluations were anonymous.

19. The term “queer” is controversial, and I use it with caution because it can hide differences and tensions among lesbians, gays, bisexuals, and transgender people. Gay, lesbian, and bisexual students called the class in the first semester a “queer classroom,” expressing their sense of co-ownership and because it explored political sexual cultures beyond heterosexual dominance. For an excellent discussion of the implications of the term “queer,” see Lauren Berlant, Michael Warner, et al., “Forum: On the Political Implications of Using the Term ‘Queer,’ as in ‘Queer Politics,’ ‘Queer Studies,’ and ‘Queer Pedagogy,’” *Radical Teacher*, issue on lesbian/gay/queer studies, 45 (winter 1994): 52–57.

20. White students experienced a similar initial silence in a course, Women, Race, and Class, taught by Dorothy Haecker and Frances Jones-Sneed at the University of Missouri-Columbia in the mid-1980s. One student, Mary McNamara, maintained that such silence was temporary. When she learned what other women had to deal with from other students her reticence dissipated. See Barbara Scott Winkler, *A Comparative History of Four Women’s Studies Programs, 1970–1985*, Ph.D. diss., University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, 1992 (Ann Arbor: University Microfilms International, 1992), p. 349, PR 9303838.


22. In the second year I wanted to include more readings and discussion about transsexuality and transgender. While we did have several articles, the excellent book that I hoped we could order in its less expensive paperback edition before the end of the course became available too late. I intend to
include it next time I teach the course. See Kate Bornstein, *Gender Outlaw: On Men, Women, and the Rest of Us* (New York: Routledge, 1994).

23. Students distinguished between self-identification and labeling by others in the use of terms like “queer,” “dyke,” and so forth. While some students felt uncomfortable with labels as simplifying their histories and self-understanding, others felt they were useful in creating and identifying community.

24. In the first semester this resulted in a certain amount of good-natured teasing by students who had decided I was just a little bit “bent.”

25. I believe that it is important for faculty to keep encouraging involvement and creating support for students with whom we disagree. In all my classes I establish ground rules for mutual respect as the basis for discussion. When sexist, homophobic, racist, or other prejudiced comments are made, I intervene in a way that tries to honor the integrity of each student while helping them step back from their own preconceptions. I ask all of us, including myself, to do this thoughtfully, with compassion, and with humor when appropriate.

26. Interestingly, the critiques had worked well that fall semester in the U.S. Contemporary Women’s Movements course. I think the difference may be due to the subject matter.


28. While students disagreed with one another and with me, I found that this was usually tempered by good humor and respect. A colleague, Dennis Allen, who had helped found the Council on Sexual Orientation, found this also to be the case in his course Cultural Representations of Sexual Diversity, which he taught for the first time in the fall of 1994.


34. See Ellsworth and Orner, especially 77, 83.
35. See Maher and Tetreault, 130.
37. Ellsworth, 100.
38. Ellsworth, 99.
39. See Andersen and Collins, 3.
41. The Education Committee was successful in obtaining a grant from the WVU Provost’s Multicultural Committee to plan a faculty development seminar on the intersection of racial and sexual identities, focusing on lesbigay people of color.

BIBLIOGRAPHY


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