Teaching What You're Not

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People often ask about my students' reactions to me, both as a teacher and as a feminist. I have discovered that this is usually a polite, if thinly veiled, way to ask me the question that is really on their minds, which is, "What the hell are you, a white, middle-class, straight male, doing teaching Introduction to Women's Studies?" The conversation usually goes off in various directions regarding feminism or pedagogy or the politics of exclusion. In truth, the classes I have taught, regardless of how they were listed in the catalog, have always centered around issues central to feminism, and my teaching style, were you to observe me, is feminist pedagogy at its most stereotypic. It was not, however, until I had my first opportunity to teach Introduction to Women's Studies (while completing my dissertation on feminist pedagogy) that I began to examine my own pedagogy in light of my sex.

Research on feminist pedagogy usually sees gender as a unit of analysis both for students and for the construction of knowledge, but rarely has the gender of the instructor been addressed as an issue. Typically, the literature either assumes that feminist teachers are women (which, although smacking of essentialism, makes for a moot point) or, worse, supposes that feminist teachers, whether female or
male, need only follow certain pedagogical principles in order to fit the label. One of the purposes of this essay is to point out that the gender of the instructor is an important element of one's feminist pedagogy and that "one size does not fit all." In other words, a feminist teacher who is a man and a feminist teacher who is a woman face different issues, and both need to understand the different roles and expectations they fill, both willingly and unwillingly, for their students.

I explore three matters in this essay: first, how my subject positions of "male" and "teacher" have been previously constructed by students long before they enter the college classroom; second, the role of silence in a women's studies classroom when that silence originates from a male teacher; and third, the inherent paradox in a man teaching women's studies—a situation where I use the power afforded me by my white male status to encourage students to challenge traditional patriarchal assumptions and expectations. This strategy, in itself, is merely subversive, but given that my venue is a women's studies classroom and that I am a teacher in a women's studies program, utilizing this strategy evokes a troubling question: How contradictory is it that I may be convincing students of the viability of a feminist message by, at least in some part, fulfilling the patriarchal expectations that many students have of male teachers?

Gender plays a role in all our daily interactions; this is a basic tenet of feminism. Our society's assumptions about gender carry over into the classroom in student/teacher relationships as much as in any other interaction. By the time they reach college, students have had at least twelve years of indoctrination and "practice" at catering differently to male and female authority figures. Research has shown us that students have different expectations for male teachers, believing them to be more competent, more experienced, and "tougher" than female teachers. A recent study found that students see young women teachers as less capable than young men teachers, but that
older women are believed to be the best teachers even though they are seen to be on a par with older men teachers as far as the depth of their knowledge is concerned.3

Regardless of their gender-dependent perceptions, students are highly experienced at ceding authority to teachers while they themselves adopt a passive stance. In this relationship, students passively consume facts provided by a recognized authority figure, assuming that the information is "truth." This typically results in the type of "banking education" that Paulo Freire has long criticized.4 Freire describes this situation, which is the norm in Western schooling, as teachers making deposits of facts in students who act as little more than bank accounts for the storing of information rather than the analysis or critique of information. By the time most young men and women reach college age, they subconsciously expect little change in these long-established patterns. A women's studies class is often their first exposure to the idea of and means for challenging these patterns.

Susan Heald has argued that we all hold "a taken-for-granted set of assumptions about the identity of individuals in various categories," which are rigidly defined by the dominant discourses of our society.5 These categories, or "subject positions," include everything from piano player to lesbian, woman to doctor, teacher to student. Heald cites her own example of having her teenage sense of identity defined and limited through others' expectations of the subject positions of "pianist" and "talented" that were applied to her. We also hold similar assumptions about ourselves, contributing to the creation of a sense of subjectivity, as we occupy various categories. This creation of dominant identities or "subjects" contributes to the stereotypes that reinforce the systems perpetuating sexism, racism, and other social ills. Just as it was long held that Africans were not intelligent enough to care for themselves and thus "needed" the institution of slavery to protect them, there are many beliefs and definitions, based on similar, if less overtly reprehensible, interpretations of subjectivity that bind our own sense of identity as teachers.
Heald goes on to argue, and I would agree, that a part of feminist pedagogy should be to question these established assumptions so that we can upset some of these long-held perceptions about teachers' as well as students' roles.

Teachers and students are "gendered" subjects, as they are "raced" and "classed" and identified according to sexual orientation, age, and physical ability. In addition, we/they are also what I call educational subjects: We have claimed an identity within the range of those laid out by educational institutions. We need to keep trying to uncover just how it is that our subjectivities are formed within these institutions. . . . Feminist pedagogy needs to be grounded in the understanding that education is an apparatus of social regulation and as such participates in the formation of the dominant subject positions of "teacher" and "student."6

What are the beliefs, assumptions, and definitions students hold about the identity of the subject position "male teacher"? How do they limit, or perhaps, as John Schilb has suggested, enhance, my ability to teach in women's studies?7

For both students and professors, these beliefs, assumptions, and definitions center around the use of power. All students have been taught in the classroom that the teacher holds power and they do not. We are all taught by our society and our culture that men hold power, and women, with few exceptions, do not.

Power and authority have always been recognized as problematic components of feminist pedagogy. The stereotypical image of the feminist teacher as "female nurturer" rather than "male disciplinarian" is all well and good, but we cannot dismiss, as bell hooks points out, that teachers have power over students, and as long as we evaluate students' performance we cannot pretend to give up all our authority as teachers.8 Some, such as hooks, Nancy Buffington,9 or Magda Gere Lewis, suggest that this power can be used to good advantage. Lewis asserts that

the use of institutional power, I believe, should not always be viewed as counterproductive to our politics. Feminism is a politics that is both
historical and contingent on existing social relations. I [have] no problem justifying the use of my institutional power to create the possibility for privilege to face itself and own its violation publicly. Using power to subjugate is quite different from using power to liberate.\textsuperscript{10}

While I agree that a teacher cannot and should not abrogate all power and authority in the classroom, I question the use of power as a pedagogical tool for myself or for any male feminist teacher. Under certain circumstances, it can be useful and beneficial for a female teacher to use those strategies that have typically been the reserve of male authority figures, especially if their use can challenge oppressive stereotypes. But as a white male teacher, I obviously have no need to appropriate "the master’s tools" of authoritative power. It is my responsibility as a feminist teacher to promote a discursive space that not only promotes new interpretations of women’s subject positions but also allows students to challenge the dominant images of men and men who are teachers.

My students expect me, as a male teacher, to overtly control the discourse and the classroom environment. To them, a teacher is a source of information and an “attitude cop,” with the grade book as the nightstick. While being a source of information is a primary responsibility of any teacher, it should be tempered with an understanding of how students see this second role, especially if one is committed to a feminist pedagogy.

The students in my Introduction to Women’s Studies classes (I have taught this class seven times now) work in small groups of five or six for most of the class periods during the semester. The groups have directed activities, such as role plays and small group projects as well as broadly outlined discussion agendas to work from, and the students are responsible for maintaining a fruitful discussion within their own group. I rarely intervene. Within a very few weeks, the students, partly as a reflection of the subject matter of the course and partly as an aspect of human nature, form a sense of community with their group members and, by extension, with the class as a whole. To a
large extent, this sense of community replaces any need on my part to
exercise control overtly.

By remaining largely silent, I abrogate my traditional subject posi-
tion as authority figure, and the students, by virtue of the communi-
ties they form within the classroom, have no need of one. When they
see that I, the traditional teacher/power figure, am willing not to
exercise my privilege to control their discourse, their thinking, or their
learning, then they are free to learn from the materials, from each
other, and from me in whatever way each of them can best profit
from. The students, because they feel an obligation and responsibility
to their classroom community and to themselves, make the invest-
ments of thought, time, and effort that are necessary for a successful
learning experience.

I am very active in creating a relationship with my students charac-
terized by a horizontal rather than vertical power dynamic. I expect
my students to use my first name and I rarely answer questions
directly as if I held secrets for others to discover. I often leave the
classroom (after establishing some guidelines) to allow them auton-
omy in their learning, and I practice a variety of other behaviors
designed to shift the focus from me at the center to the academic
information and their analysis of it.

After several weeks of a semester, the majority of my students do
exhibit a good deal of autonomy and community in the classroom. It
takes only two to three weeks for them to stop looking to me for
reassurance or reward and to begin relying on themselves and their
classmates for interaction. This is not to say that I sit among my
students observing a raging chaos. I do have to set boundaries, estab-
lish a classroom environment, assign grades, and act as a knowledge-
able resource. But by redefining my subject positions, I can do all
these things with my students, not for them.

Regardless of how well or much I "redefine" myself in the class-
room, I still, in large part, represent the "norm," and students have
been taught that when the "norm" speaks, they should sit up and take
note. Even after weeks of nearly silent participation, I need only raise my voice or adopt a stern demeanor and my little communities of learners start to wither, their budding sense of empowerment seeming to collapse on itself. Clearly, in one fifteen-week semester, I cannot completely overcome my subject position. Even by the end of the semester, the majority rarely challenge me directly or export their autonomous behavior to other classes. The few instances in which this has occurred I count among my greatest successes.

It has been my perception that students question but do not challenge my unique (in their experience) subject position of male women's studies teacher; they want to know why, as a man, I am interested in feminism and women's studies, but they have never challenged that interest or my professional expertise. My women colleagues, on the other hand, who teach similar courses in the women's studies department, do not, in general, go unchallenged by many of their students, at least the male ones. Their pedagogies tend more toward the overt use of authority in the classroom, which I agree can be an important strategy for women. In the same way that students need to learn that I can be silent, they need to learn that women can represent authority. But regardless of pedagogical style, these colleagues, particularly the younger ones, regularly experience resistance, not necessarily to the material, but to their sex and their role as teacher.

This is the source of what I see as a paradox. If students are not questioning my positions and are responding to me primarily as a man/teacher (rather than a man/feminist or any other subject position), what then are the consequences for my pedagogy? Obviously, I am in a somewhat unique position. Should I use my patriarchal subject position to further my feminist agenda? If I continue to work toward less authority-based relationships with my students, will I reach a point where they stop taking me seriously? This, I feel, is the major issue facing men in women's studies. On the one hand, we represent excellent role models for students as men who respect and support feminist agendas, but, on the other, we represent the patriar-
chy and everything our students expect of it. Where is the balance between male silence and male authority?

Maintaining this balance is a key responsibility of a male women's studies teacher. I wonder, even when I remain verbally silent, what other messages I am sending with my body language, my mannerisms, my very presence—messages that my students are long practiced at recognizing and responding to. As Kampf and Ohmann point out, a man teaching in women's studies "will have to be sensitive about dominating class. He will have to be open to criticism... . He'll have to to learn when to be quiet and when to disappear. These are all lessons worth learning."\(^1\)

Do I succeed if one of my students comes to believe that patriarchy must be challenged because I say it should? Obviously not. Do I succeed if I make myself so innocuous in the classroom that my students have no respect for me at all? Again, obviously not. I can maintain a balance between these extremes only by subverting my position as male authority figure through the use of feminist pedagogy while asserting my position as teacher, again using feminist pedagogical strategies. I cannot (and should not) shed the evaluative and mentoring authority granted me by my role as a teacher. However, by deflecting the flow of power in the classroom away from me and back to my students so that it flows among all of us in a more or less egalitarian manner, I am able to present myself as a teacher who respects my students' abilities, knowledge, and experiences as well as their lack thereof. This more horizontal power dynamic supports the creation of a community of learners in the classroom who view me as a more knowledgeable member who can be looked to for guidance and leadership rather than as the authority figure from whom the setting and interpretation of rules are expected.

To create such a community, a teacher needs to understand that students are active agents in their own learning processes and to promote an environment that supports this perception among all members. This requires that the teacher agree not to exercise all of
her/his power and to allow the students to explore and experiment with their own senses of identity—their own subject positions. There will always be a certain degree of indoctrination that occurs in a classroom, especially a women’s studies classroom, but if we allow students to contribute to the process, then we can involve them in their own learning.

NOTES


6. Heald, 147.


BIBLIOGRAPHY


