

Feminist Pedagogy: Promises and Challenges

I want to thank Linda Shadiow for inviting me to be on this panel. I particularly welcome this opportunity since it forced me to sit down and think carefully about what I do in my classes, how I teach, what I strive to achieve and how many of the modalities and tools associated with feminist pedagogy do I consciously deploy in my class rooms. For most part over the last 6 years of teaching, I must confess I have dreaded the term pedagogy. Every time I have been called upon to explain my teaching philosophy, mostly for my Annual Review file, I have done it with much resistance—why do I always have explain what I do and how I do it? I know what I do and I enjoy being in a class-room, I cover topics and readings in my syllabus, I assign new cutting edge scholarship in my courses, revise my courses to keep them up to date, Offer new courses, engage passionately with the assigned materials, and urge my students to: read, question, debate, challenge, imbibe selectively, embrace competing perspectives and enjoy the process of critical thinking, acquire essential verbal and writing skills! So, last week, when I agreed to be on this panel, I thought to myself, well maybe this will be an opportunity to get a better handle on the ever- evasive issue: I do think of myself as a “feminist” instructor, so what it is that makes me one, and how does taking on this label, this conscious position, make me different from my colleagues who do not assume this subjective position? How does this shape my classroom interaction? How do students experience a classroom with a feminist instructor? Are my classrooms feminist spaces?

So, it was with all these questions in mind I got thinking about what I wanted to share today with all of you. As a caveat, let me add, at the outset, I do not presume to have a conclusive definition about what exactly is entailed in embracing feminist pedagogy, because, for one, there is no foundational all conclusive universal definition of “feminist.” What I consider feminist, might not necessarily be shared even by my other panelists, leave alone the audience in this room. So starting from an anti-foundational position, let me lay down a few thoughts on what I think are important while trying to adopt

and embrace a “feminist pedagogy.”

Let me begin with outlining in very broad strokes some learning / teaching objectives that I think feminist pedagogy seeks to achieve:

1. QUESTION UNIVERSALS

2. DECONSTRUCT ELITE ARTICULATIONS

3. READ AGAINST THE GRAIN, TO ACCESS THE UNDERLYING ASSUMPTIONS SHAPING DOMINANT DISCOURSES AND POSITIONS

4. RECOGNIZE THE MULTIPLE MODALITIES BY WHICH POWER IS ALWAYS ALREADY GENDERED, AS WELL AS ORGANIZED ALONG INTERSECTING AXIS OF RACE, CLASS, ETHNICITY, SEXUAL PREFERENCE, AND NATIONAL STATUS.

5. FEMINIST PEDAGOGY THEN IS NOT ONLY ABOUT UNCOVERING HOW WE PERFORM GENDER, BUT ALSO HOW OUR GENDER IDENTITIES ARE NECESSARILY PREDETERMINED BY OUR SPECIFIC CLASS, RACE, ETHNIC, SEXUAL, AND NATIONAL LOCATIONS.

6. INTRODUCE AND EMBRACE THE IDEA OF COMPETING PERSPECTIVES ON ALL MOST ALL SUBJECTS OF INQUIRY.

Going by the very basic principles laid down above, it would be fair to say that feminist pedagogy is not grounded in trying to make the class room into a “feel good,” political, intellectual, or cultural space.

It involves instead the idea of pushing the envelop, testing the waters, decentering the dominant understanding, and privileging marginality as a valid subject position—engaging it, understanding it, rather than judging it as wanting and less than. Here I agree with bell hooks, who has argued that:

“courses that work to shift paradigms, to change consciousness, cannot necessarily be experienced immediately as fun or positive or safe and this is not a worthwhile criteria to use in evaluation.”

Moreover, feminist pedagogy does not regard knowledge as objective, context free, and as such existing outside of any power structures. Instead it seeks to undo the nexus between knowledge and structures of power. It recognizes the subjective location of the observer and the observed. It recognizes knowledge and education as a challenging project rather than as a benign enterprise.

To some the project as outlined above would appear exciting and worth pursuing—to many others, and especially to some students and colleagues here at NAU it might appear to be overtly political!! The exercise aimed at uncovering dominant bias, would appear to those opposed to this form of learning as itself being grounded in highly subjective and blinkered reading of the dominant position!! In trying to reveal the underlying patriarchal, racist, sexist, heterosexual, Anglo-Saxon, Christian, bias of the dominant world-view, we may in turn be accused of being racist, sexist, anti-male, or possibly – to use the now-omnipresent and all-inclusive trope – even possibly an intellectual “terrorist” who threatens “our” way of life, hates “our” freedoms and is ultimately inimical/hostile to the functioning of “our” democracy.

So, while we need to recognize feminist pedagogy as embracing some of the best practices and values associated with the process of learning and teaching, it is equally important to remind ourselves of the challenges we face in trying to convert these ideals into class room practice.

Thus, while feminist pedagogy is personally for me the way to go, I think it is equally important to recognize the challenges of trying to adopt this philosophical position in our current political environment. This is especially so when the challenges to the mainstream from a feminist position are articulated by those of us who are visibly different-- based not only on our gender, but also race, class, ethnic, and national backgrounds, our accents, our sartorial styles, or a host of other factors.

Let me just end by reminding us of the most recent legislative initiative seeking to alter the very nature of what we teach, how we teach and what can we hope our students to learn. The initiative is aimed at furthering the corporate academy's representation of students as "consumers," and instructors as purveyors of intellectual goods. By policing all that might be "personally offensive" to individual students, what the proposed legislation clearly seeks to do is to make our class rooms a feel-good space, reinforcing dominant biases, in most cases meaning we will need to validate Eurocentric perspectives, and leave marginal voices, especially those that trouble and question the mainstream, outside our class room lectures, reading assignments, and film screenings. In the process, of course, this will also wipe out all traces of dissent, resistance, questioning, and critical inquiry from class discussions and debates. Ironically, it seems to me that the current legislative initiative is grounded in promoting "learner centric," education, but this time with the intent to evacuate active and engaged learning from our class-rooms. If the learner is offended by an point of view that challenges his or her perspective, then she or he has the freedom to not engage with the alternative perspective.

These are some of the challenges that feminist pedagogy faces today. I look forward to the discussion!