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**Feminist pedagogy: identifying basic principles. (The scholarship of teaching and learning).** *Lynne M. Webb; Myria W. Allen; Kandi L. Walker.*

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#### Abstract

A comprehensive review of multidisciplinary literature revealed six principles of feminist pedagogy: reformation of the relationship between professor and student, empowerment, building community, privileging voice, respecting the diversity of personal experience, and challenging traditional pedagogical notions.

#### Feminist Pedagogy: Identifying Basic Principles

While scholars have long been concerned with the role of women in American public education (see Schmuck, 1987, for a review of relevant literature), academic feminists only recently began articulating the principles of a feminist pedagogy or a feminist methodology for teaching (Bright, 1993). Although definitions of feminism vary (Arnold, 2000; Weiler, 1995), most authors would agree with Shrewsbury's definition of feminist pedagogy as "a theory about the teaching/learning process that guides our choice of classroom practices by providing criteria to evaluate specific educational strategies in terms of the desired goals and outcomes" (1993, p. 8). The theory of feminist pedagogy challenges the current emphasis on efficiency and objectivity that perpetuate the domination of masculine rationality (Scering, 1997) by offering alternative views based on feminist principles.

These innovative pedagogical notions have enjoyed broad application. Instructors have employed feminist pedagogy in the elementary school classroom (e.g., Christie, 1997), high school classroom (e.g., Brady, 1994; Roy & Schen, 1993), the college classroom (e.g., Blumenstyk, 1997; Bright, 1993; Chapman, 1997; Cummings, 1998; Middlecamp & Subramaniam, 1999; Motoyama, 1996; Novek, 1999; Robertson, 1994; Scering, 1997; Schniedewind, 1993; Shrewsbury, 1993; Wood & Lenze, 1991), the computer lab (Parry, 1996), and the professional conference (e.g., Bell, 1993).

As feminist pedagogy enjoys increased adoption, notions about feminism itself are changing and thus "opening up a wide range of ways to be a feminist and to do feminist scholarship" (Thompson & Walker, 1995, p. 848). Given this diversity, it is challenging yet necessary to explicate the principles of feminist pedagogy emerging from recent literature.

The purpose of the present essay is to review the extant literature on feminist pedagogy to distill its basic principles. While a previous author offered a list of feminist principles suggested for application in educational settings (e.g., Briskin, 1990), the present authors could locate no previously published work that reviewed the literature on feminist pedagogy to ascertain the common principles acknowledged across various disciplines and applications represented in this growing body of literature. Instructors might use the identified principles when designing a new course or alternative teaching

methodology for an established class.

While earlier writings proposed a more radical feminist pedagogy (see Kenway & Modra, 1992, for a review of relevant literature), recent articles articulated a methodology that could enjoy more widespread acceptability. Our reading and synthesis of this recent work yielded six central principles of feminist pedagogy: reformation of the relationship between professor and student, empowerment, building community, privileging the individual voice, respect personal experience in its diversity, and challenging traditional views of theory and instruction. Each principle contributes to the creation of a collaborative learning experience that is the goal of contemporary feminist pedagogy.

1. Reformation of the relationship between professor and student. Feminist pedagogy offers both the professor and students new relational roles. Power becomes shared as students assume more responsibility for teaching and teachers for learning. However, deeply embedded attitudes and norms of language can hamper this reformation.

In a feminist classroom, teachers model feminist perspectives (Bowker & Dunkin, 1992) and democratic relationships. The feminist teacher becomes a role model of a leader (Shrewsbury, 1993). For example, Bowker and Dunkin (1992) recommended that the professor allow students to see him/her think by asking aloud the questions being asked intrapersonally. This approach encourages teachers to increase interactions through dialogue (Scering, 1997), establish a norm of inquiring curiosity, and act as intermediary between student and topic rather than as fountainhead of truth (Bowker & Dunkin, 1992). "A classroom based on feminist pedagogy is a community of learners where power is shared and where participatory democratic processes help learners develop independence. It is an active, collaborative classroom where risk-taking is encouraged; where intellectual excitement abounds; and where power is viewed as energy, capacity, and potential, rather than domination" (Christie, 1997, p. 148).

The feminist professor should not "underestimate the pervasive effect patriarchal education has had on the most feminist of your class members. The training to be passive, malleable, modest, inactive, and deferring is extremely potent" (Bright, 1993, p. 131). Thus, both "teacher" and "students" may desire a new rhetorical style or strategy to combat, overcome, and replace the traditional power relationships.

Foss and Griffin (1995) described an alternative form of rhetoric, invitational rhetoric that appears particularly appropriate for practitioners of feminist pedagogy. Based on feminist principles of equality, immanent value, and self-determination, invitational rhetoric does not attempt to change or control others; instead, it appreciates and validates others' perspectives especially when they differ dramatically from the rhetor's own. The rhetor seeks to communicate a relationship of equality, respect, and appreciation. Invitational rhetoric "creates three external conditions in the interaction between [the interactants]—safety, value, and freedom" (p. 10).

2. Empowerment. Empowerment, the primary goal of feminist pedagogy, involves the principles of democracy and shared power. Feminist pedagogy challenges the view that education is a neutral cognitive process (Chapman, 1997). Education either functions as an instrument facilitating students' integration and conformity into the logic of the present system, or it becomes "the practice of freedom" teaching men and women to deal critically and creatively with reality and to learn to participate in transforming their world (Middlecamp & Subramaniam, 1999). The practice of freedom emerges through empowerment yet the patriarchal model generally neglected issues such as empowerment, feelings, and experiences (Chapman, 1997).

We empower students by facilitating "a participatory, democratic process in which at least some power

is shared" (Shrewsbury, 1993, p. 9). "By focusing on empowerment, feminist pedagogy embodies a concept of power as energy, capacity, and potential rather than domination.... Under conceptions of power as capacity, the goal is to increase the power of all actors, not to limit the power of some" (Shrewsbury, 1993, p. 10). This view of the learning process is consonant with the "decentering, antihierarchical perspective of feminism" (Woodbridge, 1994, p. 133).

"Our classrooms need not always reflect an equality of power, but they must reflect movement in that direction" (Shrewsbury, 1993, p. 10). Indeed, Bright argued, "regardless of the extent to which a teacher tries to minimize her [or his] power, it cannot be given away. When the institutional power of the instructor is not acknowledged, the situation is mystified; abuse of power may be obscured, rendering students incapable of naming their experience accurately" (1993, p. 130). While acknowledging his/her power as evaluator and grader, the professor can redefine the teaching role from knowledge leader to "activation of multiple perspectives" (Scering, 1997, p. 66).

3. Building community. Feminist pedagogy is concerned with building community and cooperation within the classroom as well as between the classroom and its broader environment. Developing a community of growth and caring is key in critical/feminist education (Scering, 1997). "Because feminists value community and equality, building a trusting environment in which all members are respected and have an equal opportunity to participate is central" (Schniedewind, 1993, p. 18).

"Collaborative learning assumes that learning occurs through relationships and dialogue; and collaborative learning assumes the learner to be active in her or his own meaning-making and to be a knower in her or his own right" (Gawelek, Mulqueen, & Tarule, 1994, p. 182). "A collaborative floor gives an individual speaker some power over the meaning of words, not usually available to those in a hierarchy who are least powerful and typically muted" (Treichler & Kramarae, 1983, p. 126). Through collaboration "in the feminist classroom, students integrate the skills of critical thinking with respect for and ability to work with others" (Shrewsbury, 1993, p. 9), Bright's (1993) "philosophy of education is that people learn by doing" (p. 128). Indeed, collaborating on tasks and projects helps create a learning community (Parry, 1996).

"Scholars of the late 20th century lament the erosion of community participation in civic, professional, and volunteer associations" (Novek, 1999, p. 232). An ethos of individualism pervades schooling and perpetuates the view of self-enclosed individuals apart from their historical, social, and cultural dimensions (Scering, 1997). Service-learning projects can challenge the ethos of individualism, the power relations of traditional pedagogy, and the power relations existing within the broader community (Novek, 1999).

Feminist scholars often express interest in the transformational potential of community and connectedness. They envision a world where people link together in a fundamental attitude of protectiveness, and act toward the good of a more equitable society (Novek, 1999). Working on service-learning projects encourages students to take part in problem-solving dialogues within their own communities; such activities harmonize well with the feminist goals of liberatory research and praxis.

4. Privileging the individual voice as a way of knowing. Feminist pedagogy encourages authority in others and views knowledge as constructed and culture-bound. "Fostering multiple authorities allows different classroom dynamics and voices to emerge. Authority shifts to students when they can interact and ask questions, where their feedback is actively sought and incorporated, and when faculty work to make themselves less intimidating and more approachable" (Middlecamp & Subramaniam, 1999, p. 521).

"Thinking about voice in teaching leads one to be concerned with how students feel about speaking up in class, about sharing their thinking out loud. Voice is the 'currency' of the academy -- in lectures, writing, discussions, doctoral committees, and in faculty meetings. If the only voice heard is the instructor's, the students are deprived of a primary and critical way of knowing" (Gawelek, Mulqueen, & Tarule, 1994, p. 181). Voice need not be reserved for oral performance courses; rather, the unique voice of each student in any classroom affords a path to knowledge and a methodology for instruction. Students can be encouraged to emerge into the public space, speak for themselves, and bring their own questions and issues to the material they are studying.

5. Respect for diversity of personal experience. "A community of students and teachers who work closely with one another and respect one another's sociohistorical development challenges hierarchical relations of schooling and involves social bonding within more democratic relations fundamental to schooling as a forum for critical democracy" (Scering, 1997, p. 66). Feminist theory privileges personal lived experiences as the basis for analysis, theory generation, activism, and research (Foss & Foss, 1994). Thus, a feminist pedagogy involves an emphasis on personal experience and validation (Chapman, 1997). Such a perspective results in several positive outcomes, including increased respect, enhanced empathy, better critical thinking skills, and broader understanding of truths.

"Feminist pedagogy makes explicit that how we experience and understand things is rooted in our social position, based on a variety of factors, including gender, race, ethnicity, class, and sexual preference" (Parry, 1996, p. 46). "One goal of the liberatory classroom is that members learn to respect each other's differences rather than fear them" (Shrewsbury, 1993, p. 8). Respect can replace fear when students articulate unique personal experiences based on diverse backgrounds.

Because "feminist pedagogy affirms the value of personal experience as a central component of learning" (Parry, 1996, p. 47), Bowker and Dunkin described the feminist professor's task as "introducing the personal as knowledge without sacrificing credibility" (1992, p. 262). Weiler argued, "feminist research is characterized by an emphasis on lived experience and the significance of everyday life" (1988, p. 58). Feminist scholarship provides for "a multiplicity of truths and a valuing of diversity not possible with many other kinds of evidence" (Foss & Foss, 1994); it produces not only knowledge but also understanding (the capacity for insight, empathy, and attentive caring).

6. Challenging traditional views. Embedded within the previously discussed five principles is a sixth principle: challenging traditional views and practices. Feminist pedagogy challenges the notion that knowledge and teaching methods can be value free. "Schools reproduce and reinforce the social construction of gender through the dichotomization of nurturance and autonomy, public and private, and masculine and feminine" (Scering, 1997). Further, feminist teachers challenge the origins of ideas and theories, the positions of their promoters, and the factors influencing how knowledge comes to exist in its present form (Middlecamp & Subramaniam, 1999).

The scholarship of Wood and Lenze (1991) provides an example of a significant feminist challenge to the content traditionally taught in a given class. The researchers examined how instructors of interpersonal communication articulate a commitment to expanding students' understanding of themselves. Yet, few mainstream interpersonal communication textbooks include material on the differential developmental processes and outcomes characteristic of women and men's development of the sense of self. Teaching only one developmental model "is inadvisable since there is no convincing evidence that one developmental path or one interpersonal orientation is universally descriptive or superior" (p. 11). Pointing out problems with theories that imply or state value orientations sharpens

students' awareness that values are socially constructed and therefore open to question and change.

### Conclusions

The present essay identified six principles of feminist pedagogy: reformation of the relationship between teacher and student, empowerment, building community, privileging voice, respecting the diversity of personal experience, and challenging traditional pedagogical views. While enacting a feminist pedagogy may be challenging, it offers sufficient benefits to justify the effort. The present authors invite readers to participate in four strategies to facilitate more widespread adoption of feminist pedagogy. (a) Essays such as this offer a blueprint and encouragement to instructors desiring more egalitarian classrooms. Forward this essay to a friend. (b) As more instructors practice feminist pedagogy, the methodology becomes more widely practiced and accepted. Innovate--employ feminist pedagogy in your classroom. (c) If supervisors continue to evaluate, promote, and reward instructors based on student evaluations, then feminist pedagogy will continue to spread. Take a colleague to lunch; discuss your classroom technique and your high student ratings. Offer to help him/her convert to a more feminist pedagogy. (d) Realize that both men and women enjoy egalitarianism; share your ideas about feminist pedagogy with male and female colleagues alike. Indeed, in an educational environment in which change is constant and the student body is increasingly diverse, feminist pedagogy offers an inclusive teaching methodology for the twenty-first century.

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Lynne M. Webb, University of Arkansas Myria W. Allen, University of Arkansas Kandi L. Walker  
University of Louisville, KY

Lynne (PhD, 1980, University of Oregon) is a Professor and Myria (PhD, 1988, University of Kentucky) is an Associate Professor in the Department of Communication. Kandi (PhD, 1999, University of Denver) is an Assistant Professor in the Department of Communication. An earlier version of this paper was presented at the annual meeting of the National Communication Association, Seattle, November 10, 2000.

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