

GENDERED SUBJECTS

The Dynamics of Feminist Teaching

Edited by
Margo Culley and Catherine Portuges

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FEMINIST THEORY



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**MARGO CULLEY AND
CATHERINE PORTUGES**

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Introduction

The phrase 'feminist pedagogy' couples the contemporary and the traditional, joining current political movements with a concern for the transmission of knowledge more ancient than the Greek word for teaching. Now, two decades after the first Women's Studies courses appeared on campuses, their place in American higher education happily needs little demonstration. As the number of programs in the US approaches 500, few campuses remain untouched by the intellectual ferment. Some programs offer graduate degrees, and the number of research centers with membership in the National Council for Research on Women continues to grow. Concurrently, efforts to bring material on women into the 'mainstream' curriculum gain momentum. These developments are not limited to the US: feminist research and teaching are thriving around the world. It is a challenging moment to be engaged in feminist research and teaching for, as Florence Howe has noted, 'It is now difficult to keep up with more than a segment of women's studies scholarship — even within a single discipline' (*Women's Studies Quarterly*, vol. 2, no. 2, summer 1983, p. 2).

The early and mid-1970s produced a richness of material *descriptive* of the challenge and exhilaration of teaching and learning about women. At recent professional meetings, increasing numbers of sessions on aspects of feminist pedagogy indicate growing interest in developing and elaborating *theory* about the dynamics of the feminist classroom. But few theoretical studies have so far reached print. With the accumulation of the experience and evidence of the last two decades, we now have the opportunity to think even more deeply and systematically

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about our teaching. We know that to bring women fully into the curriculum means nothing less than to reorganize all knowledge, and that changing *what* we teach, means changing *how* we teach. Educators involved in this late-twentieth-century revolution in teaching and learning must continue to explore and to articulate — through reflection and dialogue — the content of this new conjunction 'feminist pedagogy.'

Perhaps the better phrase is 'feminist pedagogies,' for the essays in this volume are neither homogeneous nor doctrinaire. They reflect a range of classroom experience; from a small elite New England liberal arts college with a long tradition of male education, to a large state university in California; from a Seven Sisters women's college to an urban community college. Despite the differences in their experience, however, educators whose teaching practices have been transformed by the feminist revolution in learning do share some common perspectives which allow an approach to definitions.

Feminist pedagogy postulates the existence of two separate but interlocking sets of concerns, each with its own dynamic. First, its practitioners define themselves as feminists and implement that self-definition through work that challenges the economic, socio-political, cultural and psychological imperatives based on gender. Those engaged in feminist pedagogy work to correct the academy's traditional myopia — a myopia that verges on blindness — by applying feminist principles to the classroom situation. Such application, far from reductive or doctrinaire, contains the potential for reconstructing and revitalizing the ways in which knowledge is acquired, sanctioned and perpetuated.

Aware of the ways in which the pedagogical situation may reproduce discriminatory, even destructive, attitudes and expectations about women, feminist teachers in their praxis enact a conscious (and also unconscious) array of behaviors and attitudes that bear in important ways on the issue of gender. Focus on both the apparent and hidden structures of the classroom yields, among other things, continuing discussion of the question of authority in the feminist classroom. Feminist teachers also explicitly confront the popularly understood schisms between the public and the private, between reason and the emotions. Feminist pedagogy legitimates personal experience as an appropriate arena of intellectual inquiry, and insists on a wedding of affect and intellect. Most feminist educators understand that knowledge is not neutral, that teacher and student alike bring 'texts' of their own to the classroom which shape the transactions within it.

How, then, one might ask, does feminist pedagogy differ from plain good teaching? To be sure, the practice of feminist educators has not developed in isolation from the more widespread developments in teaching theory and practice of the 1960s and 1970s. During these years, student interrogations of traditional classroom formats, as well as the desire of some faculty members to be more responsive to political and cultural upheavals, produced changes within ivied walls. Classrooms long considered the domain of primarily white students between the ages of eighteen and twenty-one were changed in important ways by policies of 'open enrollment' and the arrival of 'reentry' or 'non-traditional students' from diverse racial, ethnic, and class backgrounds, including numbers of older women students. Along with shifts in student concerns and student populations came the need to rethink the organization and delivery of 'knowledge,' as traditionally vested in the composition of the academic canon across the disciplines.

This gradual – and at times dramatic – reconsideration and reconstruction highlighted the need for new ways of teaching. Learner-centered and learner-active education became the focus of various experiments with humanistic, experiential, and psychological approaches to pedagogy in the USA and Europe. Working in Brazil, Paulo Freire's genius was to combine learner-centered education with explicit goals for social change. Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (New York: Seabury Press, 1970) is the text most often referred to by the writers in this volume whose theory and practice of feminist pedagogy has been influenced by contemporary educational theory. But little of the progressive educational theory of the last several decades – Freire included – addressed questions of gender. Research has been done on sex equity and on sex-role stereotyping, particularly at the elementary school level. Nevertheless, little has been done to bring theories of teaching and learning together with a heightened consciousness of gender.

Because our teaching is so important, and so personal, talking openly about it is challenging, frightening and stimulating – an activity at once embraced and avoided. Few topics generate such intensity of discussion and debate at feminist conferences and on campuses around the country among those involved in teaching about women. At least such was our experience in presenting a paper with colleagues in 1979 at the New York University Institute for the Humanities Conference, commemorating the thirty-year anniversary of the publication of

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Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex*. The large attendance at that seminar, and the intensity and urgency of discourse surrounding it, convinced us that the time had come (after ten years of 'hands on' experience) for a serious assessment and overview of feminist pedagogy. Debate continued at a Women's Studies Forum on feminist pedagogy at the Modern Language Association Convention in Houston, in 1980, where we conceived the idea for this volume. As practitioners in a field newly institutionalized in higher education, we felt the need to move beyond oral presentations, small group discussions and private reflection in our attempts to theorize about the nature of our experience as feminist teachers. This collection of essays is the result.

Contributors to this volume raise provocative, even compelling, questions. Approaching feminist pedagogy from different perspectives of political orientation, gender and race, and across a variety of educational settings, they reflect upon the particularly charged space that the feminist classroom often becomes. Both the students' and teachers' 'agendas' are subject to scrutiny here, for teaching is not viewed as a strictly cognitive delivery of information, but rather as a complex intellectual and emotional engagement.

In this collection we have combined a number of 'classic' statements on feminist pedagogy from the early and mid-1970s with recent original essays, making what we believe to be significant and exciting contributions to the field. We have not arranged the essays chronologically, but in groups emphasizing the thematics of feminist pedagogy. Part one, 'Frameworks and Definitions,' offers broad theoretical perspectives on the realities of the classroom. 'The Politics of Nurture' (Margo Culley, Arlyn Diamond, Lee Edwards, Sara Lennox and Catherine Portuges) explores the psychodynamics of feminist teaching. One consequence of Adrienne Rich's radical challenge to 'take women students seriously' is developed in Janice Raymond's description of an epistemology of 'passionate knowledge.' Another essay in this group, by Frances Maher, makes the connections between new feminist scholarship and interactive learning. The section concludes with an analysis by Gloria Bonder of Women's Studies in Argentina, where pedagogic strategies take account of 'the subject and intersubjective, the cognitive and emotional processes of an oppressed group facing established knowledge about women and the social reality.'

As the new scholarship on women has changed the content and structure of knowledge in every field, pedagogy has begun to mirror

those changes in exciting ways. Part two, 'Transforming the Disciplines,' explores the implication of feminist pedagogy for particular disciplines. The teaching of history, as Robert Bezucha argues, traditionally based on an assumed split between the public and the private spheres, is transformed when both course content and classroom discourse about it challenge the terms of that division. The teaching of law, an enshrined pedagogy of rote and intimidation, becomes entirely new when Janet Rifkin encourages critical consciousness in the exploration of new modes of conflict-resolution. Helene Keyssar's 'Staging the Feminist Classroom' describes one experiment in theater in which the feminist process is as much the subject of study as the play under production. These essays, while obviously not able to represent all fields where feminist scholarship has transformed pedagogy, suggest ways the new learning may be embodied in the teaching process of other disciplines.

Traditionally, learning passed from master to novice, and unquestioned authority was vested in those older and therefore wiser. Part three, 'Teacher as Other,' looks at this role division. What are the consequences — ask Erlene Stetson and Judith McDaniels — when the teacher inhabits a marginal position in the culture? What authority does the black woman or the 'out' lesbian bring to the classroom when her position in the institution is likely to be precarious? Diedrick Snook explores contradictions of a different nature for the male feminist at a traditional college: he may wish to divest himself of the automatic authority granted by his gender, but what if his students prove resistant to, and suspicious of, his intellectual and political perspectives?

In the feminist classroom, life-experience and theory interact as legitimately complementary, but sometimes competing, authorities. Two 'classic' essays — 'Breaking Silences: Life in the Feminist Classroom' (Nancy Hoffman) and 'Black-Eyed Blues Connections' (Michele Russell) — explore in detail a theme recurrent in this volume: the transforming power of the personal as the subject and method of feminist education. Other contributors insist on the importance of theory, confronting the myth that theory is alien to women, while admitting its seductive power. Joan Cocks writes about teaching feminist theory, Catherine Portuges about combining film and psychoanalytic theory, and Nancy K. Miller urges her graduate students in French to put 'the codes (and modes) of metacritical discourse' to the service of a feminist analysis.

Once experience becomes an appropriate subject of intellectual

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inquiry, the classroom is forever changed. And one consequence of that change is that traditional structures of authority in the classroom come under scrutiny. Susan Freidman takes issue with the popular idea of the non-hierarchical feminist classroom in an effort to reclaim and redefine the possibility of authority for women. Personal experience brings with it all forms of affect to the classroom, and one challenge to the feminist teacher (unlikely to be trained in such strategies) is to use affective energy in creative and productive ways. Margo Culley explores the particularly problematic uses of anger in the feminist classroom.

To achieve what Johnnella Butler calls 'Everywoman's Studies,' feminist teaching strategies as well as intellectual visions must be based in a multicultural reality. Contributors to part seven 'Communication Across Differences,' explore how race (Mary Helen Washington, Johnnella Butler and Elizabeth Spelman), gender and class (John Schilb) and political orientation (Barbara Hillyer Davis) inform feminist inquiry.

While these essays raise important issues in the hope of producing further dialogue, many other topics remain unexplored. More attention must be paid to the intersection between cognitive development and feminist teaching and might extend to the teachers' as well as the students' development. At different stages in our work, we experience different needs for control, and we fluctuate in our availability to students — indeed, in our engagement in teaching itself. How far can our changing sense of our work-selves be accounted for by changes in age, professional accomplishment and the climate in which we operate? More work must be done on feminist teaching in multicultural and multilingual contexts, including international feminist education. We look for more work on feminist pedagogy and the sciences, an arena where the connections promise to be particularly exciting. Moreover, settings outside formal schooling must be central to our thinking about feminist pedagogy, and our theorizing must also take us back to the elementary and secondary classroom. Finally, those involved in the effort to 'mainstream' material about women in the curriculum must explore the pedagogical implications of their work for the traditional classroom.

Every anthology is, in some sense, a collective enterprise. Even so, the editors of this collection are especially fortunate in their contributors, who have demonstrated the kind of cooperative spirit that has come to characterize the feminist academic endeavor. This book

could not have happened without our companions in learning and teaching: the students, faculty and staff of the Women's Studies Program at the University of Massachusetts, Amherst. It is through more than a decade of almost daily interaction with these valued friends and colleagues that we have learned what we know about feminist pedagogy.

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1984