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Feminist Teaching, Feminist Research, Feminist Supervision: Feminist Praxis In Adult Education

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Abstract. Feminist teaching and research have both been the subject of analytical discussions within adult education. Feminist research supervision has received rather less attention. We focus on two main issues, the role of experience and the feminist analysis of power/knowledge dynamics, in order to highlight the similarities and differences between the three areas.

Introduction

Teaching, research and research supervision are obviously different activities. But feminists have argued that practitioners in the first two contexts should adopt certain principles which include, among others, the valuing of experience and subjectivity, and a recognition of the situated and political construction of knowledge. Little has been written about feminist research supervision, particularly in respect of these two issues. We want to consider whether or not there are feminist supervision practices and, if so, how these principles affect them.

We believe that these issues are sharply focused for adult educators engaged in feminist practices for several reasons: one, because students/supervisees/research participants are likely to be peers in all other respects; two, because adult education has, historically, been engaged in critical social praxes (like feminism); three, because adult education has a strong tradition of action research (a feature that links all three activities).

We are both experienced feminist adult educators. Christine is currently working on her PhD and Miriam is her co-supervisor. We began working together twelve years ago on feminist curriculum development and, in our many discussions, have come to recognise the parallels and discontinuities between feminist teaching, research and supervision in adult education.

We believe that the comparison of these three learning processes illuminates more effectively the operation of feminism than separate analyses. The feminist research example (the work Christine carried out for her PhD) is empirical, but the comparative model is drawn from our own experiences: Miriam and Christine as feminist adult educators, Christine as feminist researcher, and Miriam as feminist supervisor (of Christine and others). We were prompted to write the paper when we read Chapman and Sork's dialogue about the supervision relationship. We also talked to a number of feminists (both students and supervisors) about research supervision.

Feminism and Experience

Experience has a central place in feminist educational theory. Its validation is promoted as a counterbalance to the silencing impact of grand theory which suppresses the individual or idiosyncratic. Its role in pedagogy has been celebratory and emancipatory: a statement that women's lives matter and a basis for a critical exploration of those lives in a political context. Experience is troublesome, partial and even contradictory. Nevertheless, its acknowledgement is essential to feminist praxis.

Teaching and Experience. Many women students find it difficult to validate their life experiences in an educational setting. For example, Christine's students were embarrassed to admit that they enjoyed popular romantic fiction. Their experiences of reading were, in effect, invalidated by their experience and expectations of academic life. Consequently, she began to use these texts as part of the curriculum and noticed how they resonated for many women, generating connections between text and experience.

Christine wanted to understand why her groups worked so reflexively with the popular romance. Why did it engage women so effectively in reflecting critically on their own experiences? How could such apparently conservative texts offer scope for feminist teaching without falling into the trap of simply criticising their portrayal of women and, by implication, criticising their readers? Although feminist teaching has always valued women's experiences, the limitations of so doing and the need to move beyond this have also been discussed. The group shared experiences when it discussed these texts in the classroom, but participants also contextualised and politicised those experiences and discussed their relationship to cultural products like the romance. Researching the use of experience in teaching revealed to us that students were in fact exploring 'generative themes' through their reflexive engagement with romantic fiction. They used discussion and dialogue to establish contradictions between texts and lives and commonalities and differences in their understandings of romantic discourses. This process uncovered both the importance of romantic discourses in shaping many of our lives and the many different strategies we used to resist or reconstruct these. In this respect we moved from sharing individual experiences to making connections between those experiences and broader issues of gender construction.

Research and Experience. There has been extensive interest in the use of autobiography and story-telling in adult education research and practice, particularly from feminist and post-colonialist educators seeking to find ways to acknowledge the voices of groups silenced by dominant discourses. Similarly, we were eager to ensure that this research respected the participants' experiences so opted for a grounded qualitative research design influenced by the arguments of feminist researchers committed to phenomenological and interactive methodologies. Data collection methods were designed to maximise the opportunity for students to speak and write freely about their experiences of reading, romance and education.

However, during the process of coding and interpretation, we increasingly understood that the students' responses and journal writings were themselves textual constructs shaped, as the research itself shows, by the discourses available to them. Research is a textual process not a

transparent account of experience. In fact, one aspect of this research that we both found particularly exciting was that we began to discover how women's experiences were often couched in terms of romance narratives.

We were not able fully to resolve the tensions we experienced between our desire to respect and validate experience and our conviction that research data are constructs which cannot have privileged status as truths beyond fiction. We can provide women with opportunities to speak and have their words recorded, but we have to recognise that those words are cultural and linguistic constructs. As researchers we have a responsibility to seek to theorise their implications for feminist purposes.

Supervision and experience. In working together on Christine's thesis, we shared a set of assumptions about the extent to which our experience of the subject of feminism could be taken for granted. Indeed, we assumed that we would not have to explain about feminism but could, instead, rely on shared goals and beliefs about feminism, and some commitment to a feminist project. Of course, any adult education supervisor should recognise the significance of experience in all its guises (historical, shared, within and outside the research context), both for supervisors and supervisees, and respect that experience. However, there are dilemmas for a feminist supervisor looking to take account of experience, and to make it part of the supervision relationship.

First of all, our statement about the significance of experience, and the ways in which we attend to experience may not reflect the expectations of those being supervised. Although individuals may be well established in their own professional fields, may understand intellectually as adult educators that their experience is the legitimate starting point for research, they also participate in the cultural meanings and expectations of a supervisor as expert, voyeur, gatekeeper and guard. An expert, a gatekeeper, is not usually someone who takes into account and pays attention to experience. So the relationship is contradictory - on the one hand, holistic and legitimating, on the other, scrutinising and evaluative.

Secondly, the attempt to take experience into account may be counter-productive in the pursuit of a research degree. As supervisors, we have a responsibility both to the supervisee and to the institution - and sometimes that involves prioritising institutional demands over personal experiences (for example, if a deadline is looming). For feminists - and other supervisors - the recognition of experience may be limited by an understanding of the 'game'. In this situation, it might be more appropriate for feminist supervisors to make explicit the power relations and the negotiations within them, rather than ignoring them.

A third contradiction between taking account of experience and feminist supervision lies in the boundaries around experience. What does it mean to share experience in the supervision context? To what extent could and should discussions about experience be reciprocal? Ultimately, whose experience is being taken into account? Through discussion with other feminists, we believe that there are moral and academic limits to the supervisor's inclusion of (her) own experience. There are limits to the reciprocity of experience. Moreover, a clear understanding of the onus and direction of responsibility (and hierarchy) form an essential part of any research supervision.

Feminism and Knowledge/Power

We believe it is dishonest to pretend that we are all equals with respect to knowledge in every context. The issue is how to use the power that extensive, publicly validated knowledge may give us, with respect to other women who do not have that kind of knowledge.

Teaching and knowledge/power. There are, of course, hierarchies in teaching. Feminists have argued that teaching should be grounded in equality, non-hierarchy and democracy, but we find this problematic. Whilst a critical pedagogue will not establish her/himself as the definitive source of knowledge about the world, even feminist teachers have knowledge, power and responsibility in the classroom.

In particular, they have 'expert' power/knowledge. A feminist teacher has a responsibility to share their expert knowledge in ways which enable students to construct their own knowledges through dialogue which engages their experiences. For example, in the sessions on romantic fiction, students were offered a range of approaches to reading and interpretation to 'bank'. This had its place in a critical feminist project, because it was offered, not as truth, but as a set of tools to enhance dialogue and because each individual constructed their own interpretation of the texts using these tools.

A degree of inequality is almost inevitable in a formal educational context. Inequalities can be ameliorated by ensuring that knowledge in one field does not confer general superiority on the knower. The reflexive approach adopted meant that theory and technique were always interacting with experience - of life, reading and romantic discourses. It was critical to ensure that we all understood that, although the teacher's knowledge of the discipline might be wider, this did not make her experience more valid than theirs or give her the right to put specific constructions on their experiences, be they of life or of reading. However, teachers also have institutional as well as expert power, and cannot give it away. In the end, they assess students.

Research and knowledge/power . The issues raised in relation to teaching and knowledge/power persist in any feminist understanding of research. At one level, those being researched have rather more power than those being taught. Their 'data' forms the basis for the creation of knowledge and this might be seen as a central point of power; they may view themselves as the 'knower' (rather than the researcher); they may indeed exercise power and mislead deliberately or even refuse to participate.

Many feminists have attempted to recognise and make explicit (and equal) the power relationships that exist in the research process and to argue that, by presenting women's words as they stand, without imposing their own meanings and understandings, they are able to share power with those they research.

But ultimately, although the process of research might be equal, non-hierarchical and collaborative, and it might involve participants in the construction and carrying out of research, the product of research - that is, the creation of emergent knowledge - is well and truly in the

hands of the researcher. As argued above, the researcher constructs a story, produces a text which is never an unmediated account of experience. Indeed, the researcher may use several devices to exclude or reinterpret material that does not 'fit' such as data which is damaging for a feminist perspective.

Supervision and knowledge/power.

'You were very clear from the beginning to point out the reciprocal nature of the supervisory relationship. I must admit I still have problems with this, which I realise is really contradictory to my feminism. The difficulty for me is primarily around revisiting and redefining previously held (undergraduate) notions of academics and researchers and the production of knowledge, and concomitantly integrating ideas I have about feminism into that ongoing redefinition. I still find it hard to think that you could possibly learn anything from me'.

Despite our expectation that knowledge creation will genuinely be a joint activity within research supervision, and that this is reciprocal, this quote shows the extent to which supervisory relationships are negotiated within a cultural context in which institutional status and power cannot be disregarded - even within a feminist perspective. Regardless of the intentions of the supervisor, those being supervised will often make explicit their demands for knowledge from a supervisor - their expectation that a supervisor will be an expert, will 'know' (the best way to research, the latest research, how to do it, etc). And, in order to 'contain' the riskiness of postgraduate study, to make it safe, we believe that supervisors need to take responsibility for this investment, on the part of both supervisee and institution, of authority and power. They need to be able to facilitate a structure for the research, to set up supervision that will be focused and useful.

This does not mean a denial of reciprocity - in many ways, the shared journey towards the creation of new knowledge is understated by the examination of an individual's thesis (acknowledgements do not perhaps reflect the reciprocity of such an intense process). But it does mean an explicit understanding of the ways in which power operates even within an ostensibly equal relationship.

Furthermore, it may be helpful - even for feminist supervisees - to maintain an illusion of surveillance, of expertise, both within the supervision sessions themselves and outside. Christine positions Miriam as 'knower' by holding a dialogue with her as she writes, even though she knows at this stage that she is much more knowledgeable about her thesis than Miriam. But she recognises this as a device - she simultaneously recognises the gradual transfer of power, control and knowledge as she is ever closer to completion. Perhaps the greatest risk for feminist supervisors is a denial of the significance of knowledge/power in research relationships, and an over-emphasis on reciprocity and mutuality.

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Conclusions

We have tried to look at the consequences of feminism for research supervision, by comparison with teaching and research. All three praxes value experience in that they use it as their starting point. However, all three need to move beyond experience: teaching, in order to fulfil other aspects of a feminist agenda -the politicisation of experience and the analysis of gender oppression; research, because it is constructive rather than transparent, acknowledging participants' accounts of their experiences whilst using these as the basis for the creation of new interpretations of experience; supervision, because it needs to recognise that there are two experiences which have to count and which may be differently weighted - the supervisee's and the supervisor's.

The relationship between experience and power/knowledge lies in the fact that the teacher (not the taught), the researcher (not the researched) and the supervisor (not the supervisee) has the most power to determine which experiences will count as knowledge. The feminist teacher, researcher or supervisor has a responsibility to maximise opportunities for the validation of the experiences of those with whom she works. Thus, negotiating the place of experience, indeed acting as an advocate for its validation within the insitutional and interpersonal frameworks which contain and contextualise it, is a critical responsibility for the feminist educator.

Recognition and negotiation of the place of experience and power/knowledge are not the same as acceptance; neither are they complete rejection. Instead, we believe that the feminist educator needs to go well beyond simple dichotomies and act as a catalyst for change within shifting constructions of knowledge and experience. We would also welcome a dialogue with others who are trying to develop feminist research supervision practices.