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# Feminist Pedagogies and Graduate Adult and Higher Education for Women Students: Matters of Connection and Possibility

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**Abstract:** *This essay examines the disconnection between the homeplace and the university in graduate education for women students. It explores the ways that positional models of feminist pedagogies can be used to develop more inclusive and transformative forms of graduate education.*

## Introduction

Various researchers who have investigated the status and predicament of women graduate students in higher education assert that, despite some improvements in regard to access and accommodation issues, the reality of graduate studies for many women is still incongruent with the reality of their lives (Guppy & Davies, 1998; Johnsrud, 1995; Lapidus, 1997; Pruitt-Logan & Isaac, 1995; Rossman, 1995; Seldenthuis, 1995). Demographics, dispositions (attitudes, values, and beliefs in relation to graduate education), and expectations that locate graduate students have changed. These changing profiles of graduate students must be considered along with another academic fact of life in Canada and the United States: Women comprise the majority of students in graduate education (Guppy & Davis, 1998; Johnsrud, 1995). This state of affairs challenges academics, graduate students, and others with interests in improving academic adult education and other forms of higher education as fields of study and practice.

Women students comprise a diverse group by virtue of their different identities, subjectivities, identifications, socialities, cultural locations, histories, and knowledges. Recognizing the complexity of the politics that locate different women differently, we investigate positional models of feminist pedagogies as ways of knowing that deal with location. They can help us frame policy, programmatic, and pedagogical issues, and set possible directions in graduate education. From this perspective, we focus on graduate education for women students in this essay. We provide background for this project by discussing the historical sociocultural location of the homeplace and the difficulties women students encounter because of the traditional distance between the homeplace and the university. Then we draw on themes

and concepts pervasive in positional models of feminist pedagogies to help us frame issues and concerns in graduate education for women students. We also explore these models to help us speak about new directions that might enable women students in graduate adult and higher education to have inclusive and transformative learning experiences. We conclude by speaking to the value of these models.

## Homeplace Matters and Graduate Education for Women Students

The homeplace is a central site for identity formation, relationship formation, and labor, for most women. It is traditionally expected to be the center of women's allegiance. As a consequence, when women students pursue graduate studies, one of the challenges they must often address is the incongruence that arises when this loyalty is questioned within the patriarchal context of university traditions. Many practical and emotional conflicts may arise when women students are expected to attend to the needs of two "greedy institutions" – a term that Edwards borrows from sociologist, Louis Coser, to define institutions that demand complete obedience and loyalty. In her study of the experiences of mature women students returning to university, Edwards (1993) notes that the traditional concept of the student in higher education is modeled after the singular, 'bachelor male,' that is, one who is unencumbered with domestic or family responsibilities. Women graduate students are uneasily aware of the discrepancies between their own daily-lived experiences in the homeplace and the world of the university. They often feel caught between two opposing, equally demanding institutions, where the work in one place is often not valued in the other. As a consequence, many women

must not only work exceptionally hard to prove that they are meeting the demands of each institution, but they must also do it in a way that this work is invisible, so as not to draw attention to the time and energy expended upon it.

Research on the experiences of mature women students in higher education exposes a number of structural and cultural barriers that impede possibilities for success. First of all, there are challenges within the homeplace. Societal expectations assert that women are to be the primary caregivers for children and other family members. They are also to be responsible for most of the household labor, regardless of other obligations. Many women find it politically difficult to assert the need for their own time and interests, which is prerequisite in continuing formal education (Fagan, 1991). When women return to education they sometimes receive support from their male partners, but in many cases men feel threatened by the power that education represents. Their reactions may range from subtle discouragement to blatant acts of violence (Mendelsohn, 1989; Campbell, 1993). Luxton (1990) notes that when conflicts arise over the distribution of household and childcare responsibilities, it is usually treated as an individual concern to be negotiated within each homeplace. However, the inequities and expectations that determine women's experiences are related to structural relations of power that are systemic within the larger culture, and that impinge upon the household. To address these concerns, therefore, we need to understand how gendered divisions in labor and responsibilities may serve to put women students at a disadvantage.

Secondly, within university structures there is blindness to the concerns of women graduate students. This blindness afflicts all levels of the administration as well as many faculty members. As a consequence, there is an unwillingness to address policies that create structural forms of discrimination (for example, the insistence upon a residency requirement for doctoral studies). Having equal policies for male and female students assumes they are equally affected. However, the life experiences of women students are different, particularly if they become mothers. Peets (1999) argues that we need to value the different choices that women make, whether they stay at home to look after children, or work full time in the paid labor force. In the same way, we need to respect that women should be able to make choices regarding how they manage their studies and their domestic and childcare responsibilities.

The insistence upon a full-time residency means that women who choose to do their doctorate are told that they must make a full-time commitment to academia, and that they cannot make a full-time commitment to mothering. This is something that should be an individual choice, not an institutionally determined decision.

In addition, universities need to be more sensitive and aware of other issues that create challenges and barriers for various women students. For instance, universities need to address safety concerns so that women feel safe walking around on campus, and they need comprehensive policies to address issues such as sexual harassment (Vezina, 1998). They also need to address adequate, affordable childcare, which is a priority for mothers engaged in formal study (Johnson, 1998).

Finally, faculty need to assess their own willingness to engage critically with issues that are central to women's lives by validating the learning that comes from the homeplace. Within academia, the value of knowledge gained from learning within the homeplace is overlooked and often disparaged. Women students learn quickly that while experiences from the paid workplace may be considered valuable experience to bring into classroom discussion, the same recognition is often not given to experiences in mothering, domestic forms of labor, and other caring types of work that women engage in within the homeplace. Hart (1997) suggests that acknowledgment of the significance of motherwork would provide a radical challenge to academic discourses that currently exist. Litner, Taylor and Rossiter (1992) argue that we need to encourage women students to assess critically their own lived experiences within the academic context. They assert that assessment and validation of women's multi-perspective knowledges are crucial in efforts to challenge, question, and assess information raised within the academic realm.

### **Using Positional Models of Feminist Pedagogies to Inform Graduate Education for Women Students**

Poststructural feminist discourse has significantly influenced the development of positional models of feminist pedagogies. In their influential edited text, *Feminisms and Critical Pedagogy*, Luke and Gore (1992) present key essays in the emergence of poststructural feminisms in education. These essays help to construct a discourse of interrogation, interruption, and intervention. This counter-discourse refuses and resists a patri-

archal coordination of knowledge, theorizing, and pedagogical relations.

As models of poststructural feminist pedagogies emerged, they have been viewed as a way to build an enhanced pedagogical framework that focuses on positionality (matters of disposition, connection, context, and relationship). They aim to enable inclusiveness and transformation in learning environments (Tisdell, 1995). In the theory-research-practice interactions embodied in positional praxis, subjectivity, history, experience, voice, authority, and difference are significant determinants that gauge identities, identifications, and possible actions. In addition, the politics of knowledge production, exchange, and distribution figure significantly. Positional pedagogies locate teachers, learners, and their experiences amid forces situated in the culture-power nexus. They contour the pedagogical moment as a political engagement, and they contribute to the possibility of transformative learning experiences.

In academic adult education Tisdell (1998) has developed a model of a positional pedagogy that builds on work first presented in her 1995 typology of psychologically oriented, liberatory, and positional models of feminist pedagogies. Tisdell's model of a positional pedagogy highlights the importance of the positionality of the educator in relation to issues of knowledge production, voice, and authority. In keeping with a poststructural feminist perspective, she maintains a key focus on gender as a category of analysis, and she investigates the gendered nature of experience and its relationship to adult learning. Tisdell suggests that the trademark of her variation of a poststructural feminist pedagogy is its emphasis on the positionality of the instructor as an actor with authority and capacity to influence the learning environment. In her theorizing and practice to build what she calls "a feminist emancipatory adult education theory-in-practice" (p. 145), she problematizes the locatedness of instructors who, like learners, act and interact in the intersections of gender, race, class, sexual orientation, and other representations of positionality. She believes that the positionality of the instructor is always caught up in classroom dynamics that affect the teaching-learning interaction. She asserts that instructor positionality influences the production of instructor and learner knowledges, the connection between the learner and the social context, and the possibility for social change leading to emancipatory education.

Positional models of feminist pedagogies provide further ideas to frame and debate issues and directions

in graduate education. Tisdell (1995; 1998) contends that positional models of feminist pedagogies intend to advance the cause of experiential and transformative pedagogies in at least four ways. First, positional pedagogies promote the mutuality of theory and practice, and focus on experience and its conceptualization in terms of intervening forces. This is particularly important to women students in graduate education who explore diverse theoretical perspectives to gain insight into ways of knowing what Freire (1998) calls the word (the text and its context and subtext) and the world (experience and its situatedness). Making connections between theory and practice helps students to understand connection, disconnection, conflict, and change in their own lives, which provides them with an expanded knowledge base as they negotiate the realities of homeplaces and formal learning places like the university. To assist this process, graduate programs need to be designed as spaces where critical reflection on everyday life merges with knowledge gained through formal study. This unifies theory and practice in ways informative to intellectual cultural work (hooks, 1994).

Second, positional pedagogies interrogate relationships of power in larger social and cultural contexts, and they investigate how the power-knowledge relationship affects the production, exchange, and distribution of knowledge at the macro-level in education and culture. Third, they interrogate relationships of power-knowledge at the micro-level in particular learning environments such as formal classroom spaces in the university. These related goals of positional pedagogies elevate issues of power and voice as they question which knowledges are taken up in specific situations. They point to the requisiteness of asking the question "What knowledge is of most worth?" at policy-development and program-design levels in graduate education. They also point to the importance of addressing corollary issues such as criteria for setting academic standards since these criteria are usually developed to uphold dominant culturally valued knowledge.

Fourth, positional pedagogies keep teacher authority an open issue, and they investigate power disparities and issues of responsibility in the teacher-learner relationship. By focusing on issues of authority and responsibility, positional pedagogies speak to the danger of graduate education that wears a cloak of neutrality as it aids and abets the maintenance of hegemonic structures and accords that fail to address issues of subordination and disconnection in higher learning. As part of al-

addressing these dangers we need to monitor programs and courses and, as necessary, challenge choices of texts, teaching methods, and evaluation procedures. Program coordinators, faculty, and students should all have a role in this front-line monitoring process, which is bounded by larger academic infrastructure and processes. After all, syllabus construction is a political act not simply tied to the politics of the educator's situatedness. It is also tied to a larger politics and authority reflected by departmental guidelines, programmatic requirements, university policies and procedures, and academic standards. Thus monitoring program and course designs, and certainly attempting to change them, are profound challenges.

### **Concluding Perspective: The Value of Positional Models of Feminist Pedagogies**

Many women, variously situated in the intersections of gender and other relationships of power, come to graduate education with different identities, knowledges, histories, experiences, and motivations. Acknowledging this, positional pedagogies challenge universities to shape policies, programs, standards, and procedures to value women's different positionalities and ways of knowing. They challenge academics to engage in inclusionary and transformative educational practices. These challenges involve recognition that formal learning spaces are political places where possibilities for transformative learning demand a collective engagement with educator and learner positionalities. They also involve emphasis on connection in learning so that homeplace and other situated knowledges have value in academe.

Positional models of feminist pedagogies help us to assess problems in graduate education and they provide a framework to guide our intervention in their solutions. Analysis of these models provides theoretical and pedagogical lenses to help us explore and address changes in the realities of graduate education. These include changes in the goals and objectives graduate students set for themselves, changes in the time it takes to finish graduate school, altered student perceptions of the role and purpose of graduate education, and altered research interests and job and career ambitions. Positional models of feminist pedagogies provide themes, concepts, and ideas to help guide the process of rethinking educational policy, standards, program design, and educational practice. They also provide graduate faculty with insights and understanding to guide their work as knowledgeable and responsible advocates for graduate students.

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