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## Practicing a Culturally Responsive Feminist Pedagogy in Higher Education: An Examination of a Feminist Classroom from the Perspective of Transformative Learning

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# **Practicing a Culturally Responsive Feminist Pedagogy in Higher Education: An Examination of a Feminist Classroom from the Perspective of Transformative Learning**

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**Abstract:** This study focused on how non-White professors, a Black female professor, and an Asian male professor, co-created a feminist classroom and facilitated an environment that promoted transformative learning.

**Keywords:** feminist pedagogy, gender, higher education, transformative learning, race

## **Introduction and Background of the Study**

Feminist pedagogy has been widely used by many practitioners in education to create safer and more inclusive learning environments. Feminist pedagogy is the art and science of teaching using woman-centered and feminist approaches that aim “to encourage the students...to gain an education that would be relevant to their concerns, to create their own meanings, and to find their own voices in relation to the materials” (Maher & Tetreault, 2001, pp. 3-4). Feminism is both a social justice movement as well as a framework through which to understand women’s experiences in male-dominated societal institutions. As a movement toward promoting equality between women and men, feminism has served as one of the most effective and liberatory social movements in the U.S. and abroad (Freedman, 2006). Feminist pedagogy also allows students and teachers to understand how knowledge and viewpoints are multifocal instead of uniform. Practicing feminist pedagogy is valued in contemporary postsecondary education, especially when the institution provides feminist components and a woman-centered curriculum. However, traditional ways of operating feminist pedagogy can be complicated by the positionality of instructors and learners (Johnson-Bailey & Lee, 2005). While feminist pedagogy enables educators to enhance and promote an understanding of social justice from a gender perspective, in the field of Women’s Studies it has often focused on White heterosexual female perspectives. Research shows that women who are not White heterosexual females are more readily questioned about their authority and knowledge when they engage in or practice feminist pedagogy (Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger, & Tarule, 1986; Maher & Tetreault, 2001).

As an Asian male professor and a Black female professor, we, the authors, have been discussing one particular graduate course on feminist pedagogy for over ten years because the class was particularly difficult. Teachers usually talk to each other to share their educational narratives and try to understand what is going on in their own teaching practice (McNiff, 2017). Oftentimes, they use their narratives as a way to explore their own journeys as educators. We found ourselves locked in this narrative loop as we tried to figure out just what went wrong in the Spring Semester of 2007. Even though we had co-taught the same class for several consecutive years, this time the outcome was disastrously painful for the students and for the faculty. This study is based on our joint teaching experiences in a graduate level Feminist Pedagogy class at a predominantly White institution in the Southern region of the U.S.

The purpose of this study was to explore how non-White professors, a Black female professor and an Asian male professor, co-created a feminist classroom and how we negotiated our power in that classroom environment. In particular, this study focused on how critical incidents occurred in the class that we believed were directly related to the reaction of students to us based on their positionalities as White women and on our positionalities as a Black woman

and an Asian man. The critical incidents centered on the students collective disorienting dilemmas that led to what they described to us as “transformation.” The research questions that guided this study were: 1) what does a feminist classroom look like in higher education; 2) how does the intersection of race and gender influence feminist pedagogy; and 3) what strategies can adult educators and practitioners use to deal with the disoriented dilemmas that occur in a higher education feminist classroom.

### **Relevant Literature**

Feminist pedagogy has revolutionized the academy and has powerfully informed and transformed teaching. However, it is not always the case that it is implemented effectively or wholesomely. Some strands of feminist pedagogy bear a strong relationship to both critical pedagogy and multicultural education literature and yet others have no relationship (Tisdell, 1998). Most scholars describe feminist pedagogy as a viable framework through which to create and foster learning environments that center the voices and experiences of women and other marginalized learners (Johnson-Bailey & Misawa, 2017; Maher & Tetreault, 2001).

Feminist pedagogy also seeks to “create learning environments where learners can critique social conditions and understand how their gender, race, sexuality, or class affects their personal, work, and social lives” (Merriam & Bierema, 2014, p. 218). Feminist pedagogy has encouraged teaching practices that empower students because it asks teachers to develop styles that are nonauthoritative and nurturing. Notable characteristics of feminist pedagogy are to:

Share authority and decision making with learners, candidly discuss how power dynamics affect the topic, honor the experience of the learners, analyze effects of background and status on social life, empower learners through creating respectful environments where they have multiple opportunities to be heard, help learners develop voice, address power relations and authority as they arise in the classroom, challenge learners to think critically, raise issues related to sexism and heterosexism and consider how society can be transformed (Merriam & Bierema, 2014, p. 218).

In addition, feminist pedagogy foregrounds the development of critical thinking skills, building a community of learners and raising consciousness through linking personal experiences to structural issues (hooks, 2003). We define feminist pedagogy as “the art and science of teaching from a caring-centered and social justice approach, which focuses on fostering a safer and more welcoming learning environment and attempts to create an open dialogic atmosphere” (Johnson- Bailey & Misawa, 2017). By addressing the power issues that are inherent in the classroom, feminist pedagogy has asked academicians to examine their individual practices, curriculum, and perspectives for subjugation by gender, race, and class (Johnson-Bailey & Lee, 2005; Johnson-Bailey & Misawa, 2017; Tisdell, 1998). However, there is no one-size-fits-all feminist pedagogy, and the combination of feminist pedagogy and teachers of color can make for a “dangerous liaison.”

### **Methods**

In order for us to recapture our own teaching experiences of this particular feminist pedagogy class, a retrospective narrative approach was implemented, a method widely used to examine critical incidents, phenomena, and cultures in social sciences (Clandinin & Rosiek, 2007). Retrospective narratives are usually told from the point of view of a character looking back on past events to clearly demonstrate how the events led to personal growth and some degree of transformation.

For this study, multiple sources were used to construct, re-construct, and co-construct stories (Johnson-Bailey, 2001). We decided to use our personal and teaching journals and notes

from our various conversations that occurred over ten years. In our teaching journals, we kept our thoughts on our experiences in class and on our teaching plans outside of the class. We followed Brookfield's (1995) reflective strategy, *teaching logs*, to capture what we thought was important in our teaching and planning processes each week. We tried to capture the moments in the particular week where we felt most connected or disconnected in class. In addition, we tried to address the incidents or events that were surprising or distressing to us. To incorporate the perspectives of the students, we asked some of our former students in the feminist pedagogy class to provide us with their own reflections on the class and their thoughts on their own experiences in the class. We sent a nine-question questionnaire to former students that we perceived as student leaders; we received four responses and followed up with telephone interviews; and we triangulated the data using a thematic analysis.

### **Findings**

The class composition was a bit unique for the institution with us two non-White co-instructors (a Black female professor, and an Asian male professor) and 15 female students. The class was racially diverse: two Asian female students, four Black female students, and nine White female students. We identified three major themes: Confrontation, Resistance, and Hostility.

**Confrontation.** The first theme is "Confrontation," an argumentative situation between instructors and students. The symptom of such circumstances is a disrupted learning environment where bullying, abusive power dynamics, and dismissiveness of others' voices can occur. This theme is important because it demonstrates how a student could be an agent who changes the classroom atmosphere from a positive nurturing environment to a negative environment. Mitsu recalled what he thought was a confrontation from a White female student:

When I was talking about how each person's sociocultural identities such as race, gender, and sexual orientation influenced a specific context of the southern community, and I pointed out that it was important for us to understand how positionality shifts in a different social context, one of the White female students suddenly stopped me and said, "You are a man. And, you are not from here. So, you do not understand what feminism means and how women were treated." From my perspective, she did not know what feminism meant because feminism empowers people to examine how our positionality would be influenced when we interact with the other people and were open to and accepted other types of minorities. Also, I had studied feminism, obtained my Ph.D., taught women's studies courses, and could think from a woman-centered perspective.

Juanita also recalled a similar incident with the same White female student in the class:

A White female student questioned the readings, remarking that one reading in particular seemed racist and alleged that it was indicting and attacking White women students. When she was told that the reading was written by a White woman, she expressed disbelief and rejected the assertion. However, she never checked to ascertain the writer's background.

The incidents of confrontation were also obvious to other students. One of the participants, a White woman working class student, recalled one class session where other White female students became angry that we were trying to address issues from feminist perspectives:

I remember both Juanita and Mitsu were very open about their identities and experiences; however, it seemed that some White female students tended to use this as a way to illicit emotion work from them, particularly Juanita although I remember this also being true of Mitsu when we discussed sexualities. It seemed not only strange (feminist classrooms aren't therapy sessions) but also when Juanita would push back against this labor,

students would act frustrated and angry. I remember some White female students even leaving in the middle of class. The semester seemed like an example of questioning the feminist classroom as a safe space and for whom.

Confrontations such as these seem to stem from the difference in our positionalities. Some of the students saw us as co-instructors who embodied different places -- in terms of gender, race, sexual orientation, and nationality. The confrontations mostly reflected on the positionality of the agitated students as White heterosexual female Americans in the classroom environment where they felt empowered and entitled to question our knowledge, expertise, and authority.

**Resistance.** The second theme of the findings of the study is “resistance,” meaning that students refused to accept or comply with the learning process and materials in class. Mitsu remembers his interaction with a White female student when he was addressing the feminist movements from a historical perspective:

I remember when I was addressing different waves of the feminist movement, one of the White female students raised her hand and started saying, “I am a southern woman. I have been oppressed in a patriarchal society. I know all about feminist movements. I do not want you (a man) to tell me about the history of the feminist movement.” I was shocked because what she said was not fair to me because I was a feminist scholar. But it was more shocking to me that she used her gender identity to resist what I was delivering to the class. Basically, she told me to shut up because I was a man. A feminist classroom was supposed to be open and accepting of diverse perspectives. I wondered that if I were a female, would she listen to me talking about the feminist movement.

Similarly, Juanita also had a situation with the same student:

In addition to the confrontation, the White female student explicitly resisted and refused to understand the instructors’ perspectives on the class discussion topics and reading materials and their delivery methods in class.... The student did not want to see non-White scholars’ life stories and perspectives that were related to feminist pedagogy.

One student, a Black woman teaching assistant in her early thirties, recalled how the course momentum changed because of the resistance from some White female students

Since the purpose of this course was to examine and explore feminist pedagogical practices, I was somewhat surprised that my peers were unwilling to share their ideas and at times expected to attend class to simply listen to other course members participate.

Another student, a White woman in her late twenties, also recalled how resistant some of her peers, White female students, were in class:

There seemed to be moments of resistance directed toward Juanita and Mitsu in particular. My experience in this class and my first semester teaching in the women’s studies department led me to do a qualitative project on student resistance in the classroom. I was perplexed at the ways people would refuse to “trust” readings or experiences at times that you don’t see in other classes.... It was emotionally taxing at times. There was a good deal of resistance followed by emotional outbursts from White women (tears in particular) as though rather than understanding oppression and the acknowledgement of privilege as an on-going process they wanted to “be forgiven” and felt guilty. The anecdotal stories of students “pulling themselves up by their bootstraps” was really isolating and infuriating. I often left class feeling emotionally worn out but not able to really process one particular reason why. I will never forget that we read a poem on white guilt and women of color wanting a space for one’s self. Many of the White women were really upset about this.

Resistance in learning environments is problematic for both instructors and learners because certain materials have to be covered within a certain amount of time per semester. Unwillingness to master the class contents due to the co-instructors' positionalities is not acceptable in any educational settings, especially one where instructors and learners should feel free and open to exchange ideas. However, it was not the case for this particular class. The class regrettably became a site for hurt feelings more so than for learning and knowledge exchange.

**Hostility.** The third theme of the findings from the study was "hostility," in this case, some students created unfriendly, oppressive, unsafe, and hostile environments. We remembered one incident where a student felt that she could not share her own feelings and opinions because the White female students had created an environment where the voices of women of color were easily dismissed or misunderstood by them. We offer an example of the hostility from one of the White women student:

During class breaks when one student would routinely send the instructors notes that expressed her opposition to what was happening in the class. Although this student was very vocal about responding to content and answering questions in class, she would not openly share her opinions or opposition to what others had said.

Another Black woman student, who is her third year as a student instructor remembered how difficult it was for her to be in the class when the discussion topic was about White privilege:

When we covered white privilege, I already knew it would be a silent day in class because many of my peers were unwilling and/or unable to think critically about their individual and societal privilege based solely on the color of their skin, which to some degree is understandable. However, what caught me by surprise is the way in which some of my peers chose to disengage. Whenever I teach a course that interrogates race, I find it is absolutely necessary to also engage white privilege. Part of dealing with racism as a form of oppression means we must also engage the dominant group's privilege as well. One would think that given our emphasis on pedagogy, it would be easier for our professors (Juanita and Mitsu) to facilitate an open dialogue regarding white privilege, but this was not the case. I expected minimal conversation, but what occurred is complete shutdown.

A White woman, who was a graduate student in Women's Studies also remembered the classroom environment where students were behaving in a hostile manner:

There was definitely hostility among classmates. The class included Women's Studies students and students from Higher Ed, as it was a cross-listed course. The higher Ed students numerically dominated the class and often either: (a) refused to acknowledge systems of oppression existed or (b) exuded white guilt stories (I really loathed that strange behavior). Both actions diverted the conversation away from discussing the tangible questions for the class of how to practice feminism in the classroom.... I specifically remember students refusing to accept particular readings from the course and experiences. This specifically happened with the Johnson-Bailey and Lee piece, *Where's Our Authority in the Classroom?* Which was strangely ironic.

### **Discussion and Conclusion**

These three themes indicated that power dynamics are pivotal in practicing feminist pedagogy. Feminist pedagogy is supposed to be centered around social justice. That means, that a feminist classroom governed by feminist pedagogy should not devolve into confrontation, resistance, or hostility. However, these negative elements were generated due to our own positionality and that of our students. As feminist pedagogy is the art and science of teaching that focuses on fostering

a safer and more inclusive learning environment with an open dialogic atmosphere (Johnson-Bailey & Misawa, 2017), this concept proved to be the ideal and not the reality for this class. It was not realistic, for us as co-instructors of color because we were perceived as the invalid “others.”

From the findings of the study, positionality greatly influences feminist pedagogy. For example, gender, race, and other sociocultural identities influence how we practice feminist pedagogy. Because of that, it is important for both instructors and learners to be able to unpack their privileges and examine the relational aspects of their sociocultural identities in a feminist classroom (Johnson-Bailey & Lee, 2005). In addition, although caring-centered and social justice approaches are pivotal to feminist pedagogy, contemporary multiculturalism and diversity do not seem to focus on caring and nurturing. Perhaps, contemporary multiculturalism and diversity still focus on one aspect of many areas instead of appreciating and being able to explore the intersectionality of various areas of identity politics (Misawa, 2010).

In conclusion, this study explored how we, as co-instructors of color, experienced teaching a feminist pedagogy course at a predominantly White institution. Based on our own positionality, we feel that race and gender still affect the climate, even in feminist classrooms. Our experiences are not unique but are important to address if we all want to have a democratic and inclusive learning environment.

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