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ABSTRACT

This study used feminist poststructuralist analysis to examine ways in which the relationships between college students and faculty influenced the enactment of feminist teaching. It used open-ended interviews with 22 faculty, the majority of whom were either affiliated with the women's studies program or were in a department in the School of Education, all of whom were employed at a large midwestern university, as well as observations of the teaching strategies and philosophies of two of the participants. Using the interview and observation data, the study examined how feminist teachers incorporated student experience into their teaching, identity construction in feminist teaching, political identity, and identity as a teaching tool. (Contains 27 references.) (MDM)

Responsive work: Student impact on the construction of feminist teaching

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Responsive work: Student impact on the construction of feminist teaching

Examinations of the intersections between feminism and higher education have produced considerable scholarship in the academic arena. Whether looking at feminist research, service, or teaching (Bezucha, 1985; Brown, 1992; Bunch and Pollack, 1983; Culley and Portuges, 1985; Frye, 1980; Giroux, 1989; Gore, 1993; Gumport, 1990; Heald, 1989; Lather, 1991; Maher and Tetrault, 1994; Shrewsbury, 1993), many scholars have explored the possibilities and struggled to conceptualize what it means to engage in feminist education. Feminism truly is being applied to higher education in myriad ways in our academic communities.

While continuing to escape firm definition, many authors have attempted to present their conceptualizations of feminist teaching. Roberta Bennett (1991) suggested that feminist teaching generally supports attempts to create nonhierarchical, egalitarian classrooms where participants value context-related thought, rather than memorization. G. Honor Fagan (1991) emphasized in the classroom that "all education is political," thereby drawing attention to the conviction that choices in education have political and personal consequences. Further, Jennifer Gore (1993) suggested that feminist pedagogical discourses have often emphasized student experience and voice, along with a simultaneously occurring empowerment for social change. Pedagogical discourses and definitions often change depending on the given context in which they are occurring. As Adriana Hernandez suggested (Eichhorn, et al., 1992), because of the strong and immediate ties of feminist pedagogical discourse to what happens to individuals in everyday life as they try to apply classroom interactions to a larger sphere, it is necessary to view feminist pedagogy as "an ongoing pedagogical practice that redefines itself constantly in terms of personal and social investments" (p. 321).

My task in this paper is not to clarify what is meant by the term feminist teaching, although the data presented here are undoubtedly undergirded with understandings of their own. The purpose of this paper is rather to examine one aspect of the contextual forces which serve to (re)create and (re)shape the many understandings and implementations of feminist teaching in higher education. Through discussions with many educators practicing feminist teaching situated at one university, I explore the many ways that students have shaped their expression of and philosophies of feminist teaching.[1] I describe how feminist teaching so often is constructed as a

[1] I chose to address only the impact of students on feminist teaching in this work. I have addressed the impact of departmental, institutional, and disciplinary factors on feminist teaching in previous work (Ropers-Huilman, 1995), and am currently looking at teachers' belief systems and characteristics and the ways in which these affect their enactment of feminist teaching.

response to classroom participants. Feminist teaching becomes responsive work.

In this analysis, drawing on feminist poststructural philosophy led me to look closely at the ways in which power relations and negotiations between students and teachers shaped the enactment and construction of feminist teaching. I addressed the question, how does the relationship between students and teachers affect and construct feminist teaching? In addressing this question, I came to understand two broad themes. First, because those practicing feminist teaching generally view students as a large component of the environment in which they teach, their teaching practices attempt to reflect the varying positions of those students. Therefore, those practices are largely situation-specific. Further, because those practicing feminist teaching recognize the importance of social identities in the classroom, they are critically aware of the ways that they and their students are being constructed throughout their interactions.

Framing the analysis

While scholars and educators have taken a variety of perspectives on a wide span of theories and pedagogical styles, the labelling of paradigm(s) as poststructural is a relatively recent phenomenon in much educational literature (Capper, 1993). I chose to approach this research from a feminist poststructural point of view as I find it provides useful tools for examining the contradictory and complex positions of teachers who are engaging with/in feminist pedagogy.

Like any other philosophical framework chosen for research, there are underlying assumptions in research that claims to be feminist. In feminist research, even when the focus is not specifically on differences or similarities between the genders, "Feminist researchers see gender as a basic organizing principle which profoundly shapes/mediates the concrete conditions of our lives" (Lather, 1991, p. 71; see also Bunch, 1983). Feminist researchers are constantly open to the possibility and the probability that multiple forms of oppression are playing significant roles in the relations that exist at any particular moment. They also draw on lived experiences, rather than merely abstractions or "objective" knowledge bases, to create guidelines and theories that are useful politically to feminist movement and social justice (Acker, 1987; Weiler, 1988).

Definitions and uses of poststructuralism as a philosophical framework may be slightly or radically different depending on the person who is articulating its meaning and the situation in which it is being applied. Sue Middleton (1993) described her conception of this somewhat elusive philosophy as follows:

> I understand this to mean a disbelief, skepticism, or suspension of belief in universal truth or in the possibility of a totalizing master narrative and, instead, a focus on the various master narratives, disciplines, or theories as regimes of truth--as historical and socially constructed knowledge with varying and unequal relations to various apparatuses of

power. (p. 58)

By presenting poststructuralism in this way, Middleton provided a way to begin conceptualizing the possibilities for application of this philosophy or approach to specific situations or discourses. Further, she pointed to the possibilities for connection and interaction between poststructural and feminist theorizing and practice.

Poststructural research, then, can be seen as an "enactment of power relations; the focus is on the development of a mutual, dialogic production of a multi-voice, multi-centered discourse" (Lather, 1991, p. 112; see also Foucault, 1978). Thus the focus of poststructural research is not "finding objective answers," but rather coming to better understand knowledges and situations that are already understood to be tentative, partial and relational. Patti Lather further suggested:

> Poststructuralism helps us ask questions about what we have not thought to think about what is most densely invested in our discourse/practices, about what has been muted, repressed, unheard in our liberatory efforts. It helps us to both define the politics implicit in our critical practices and move toward understanding the shortcomings of theories of political transformation. (p. 156)

The attempts of some feminist scholars to break down traditional, universalized notions about social constructs and to give careful attention to the concept of difference are aided by poststructuralism's focus on the specificities of constantly fluctuating power relations and knowledge sources.

I used a feminist poststructural analysis to examine the ways in which the tenuous and ever-changing relationships between students and teachers influenced the enactment of feminist teaching. Subsequently, however, the presentation of this work has been made relatively difficult because of the assumptions which inform it. If multiple knowledges exist not only in the classroom, as Elizabeth Ellsworth (1989) described, but also in the positionalities of each one of us in our various contexts, and if those knowledges are shifting and ultimately unknowable, the presentation of the "knowledge" constructed in this research becomes problematic. This research is informed by the voices of others; however, the ultimate construction is mine. In my interpretation, the participants at times spoke harmoniously in tune with each other. At other times, however, I sensed a dissonance in their words and understandings. In this work, I tried to highlight those harmonies and dissonances through a structure which undoubtedly provides a limited lens. I believe that this is in concert with feminist poststructural philosophies about knowledge and truth production.

Methodology and Data Source

Throughout the construction of this research, I was operating under the assumption that it

is important for feminist teaching to be approached and understood by listening to and observing those who in some way were identified as seeking to combine feminism and education as they reflected on and engaged in teaching. I wanted to participate in providing a forum where both the truths of experience of these teachers as well as my own truths based on these understandings could be expressed. While I attempted not to unduly privilege one interpretation over another, it was ultimately my interpretation which was presented.

My two primary instruments for data collection were open-ended interviews and observations or participant-observations of classroom teaching. Interviews, which lasted between 50 and 90 minutes, focused on philosophies and strategies of feminist teaching as well as on factors which shaped the participants' individual styles, thoughts, or methods of implementation. I conducted these interviews with 22 teachers[2], the majority of whom were either affiliated with the Women's Studies Program or were in a department in the School of Education, all of whom were employed at a large midwestern university. All interviews were transcribed.

I also entered classrooms to observe the teaching philosophies and strategies that two participants in the study chose to employ in their classrooms. I attended class meetings and completed class assignments and readings in these two settings. Throughout, I took extensive field notes on my observations and experiences. Further, I gathered class materials such as syllabi, outside readings and suggested activities, and assignments so that, through a document analysis, I could gain a better understanding of the teachers' philosophies and strategies as well as the conditions that contribute to a variety of forms and styles of feminist teaching. It is on these interviews, field notes, and document analyses that this work is based.

Students' influence on the enactment of feminist teaching

While it may seem apparent that students are a large part of any classroom experience, feminist teaching practices generally consider student experiences and expectations as integral in

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[2] The label "feminist teachers" is problematic for various reasons. Many of the teachers with whom I spoke claimed themselves to be both feminists and educators (teachers); however, they were uncomfortable with the label of feminist teacher. In one case, a teacher considered herself to be a practicing feminist in her personal life, but had concerns about the ways in which feminism was applied in academic circles. Another teacher felt that she had not yet read enough literature specifically on feminist teaching and was therefore uncomfortable claiming a label whose meaning was still unclear to her. In both cases (and several others), these teachers saw themselves as having multiple identities which may have encompassed their conceptions of feminist teaching, but moved beyond them as well. For the purpose of this work, because the majority of interviewers claimed themselves to be feminist educators, I continue to use the label feminist teacher with the above concerns.

teaching and learning. To varying degrees, feminist teaching attempts to reflect the varying positions of those students. I propose that feminist teaching paid attention to student experiences in the following ways. First, feminist teaching shifted the content and expression of that content to better respond to students' learning positions. Those practicing feminist teaching attempted to be cognizant and respectful of a variety of student experiences. Second, those enacting feminist teaching were aware of fluctuating roles and identities that were available to both teachers and students; they, therefore, attempted to address and construct these roles in ways that would be most helpful for educational processes.

Recognizing and valuing student experience

Feminist teachers incorporated student experience in many ways in these classrooms. They encouraged students to examine their personal experiences as they related to the content at hand. Assignments and discussions often reflected this commitment. Additionally, how students were experiencing and learning within the teachers' constructed educational environment was deemed as important to the further development of the course.

Vicki[3] explained how she tried to incorporate students' experience in a flexible sense which largely depended on the context of the classes in which she was teaching. She described her valuing of student experience in this way:

> I use experience and the issue of experience in all my classes from intro to advanced graduate classes, but I use it differently in different classes and depending in many cases on the size of the class. When I taught the large Intro to Women's Studies in Humanities, for one portion of the class, we had students...write a journal. We invited the students to be connecting their personal experience to what they are reading. They might be reading a section of the Bible, Adam and Eve and learning to see what is imbedded in that story, how it relates to them. What are their experiences in religion? In other words getting them to think of education not something abstract and divorced from the rest of one's life, but thoroughly integrated with it. Helping to construct what your personal experience is and reflecting experience.

While many other teachers described their use of student experience as a critical analytical piece in their educational experiences, several also acknowledged that this was not always easy to do. In some cases, students were resistant to incorporating their thoughts because this request for disclosure and incorporation of their experience was not typical in their other educational situations. Others were not willing to acknowledge that their experiences could be valuable

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[3] For confidentiality purposes, pseudonyms are used throughout this work.

learning tools.

In the two classes which I observed on a regular basis, both of the teachers addressed this issue explicitly in class. In respecting the students' comfort level in sharing experiential information, they explicitly stated what they did and did not expect in terms of personal revelation. As Rosa was describing an assignment in class, she recounted how she had asked people to do an autobiography in the past, but because it was painful for some, she created another option for people to choose. She also commented that she didn't want anyone to feel that they had to reveal something they didn't want to. In her words, "I don't think it's our privilege to know everything about everybody. This needs to be a safe place."

Cheryl made a similar request that students not disclose information or experience with which they are uncomfortable. In capital letters on an assignment which had, as an option, the incorporation of personal experience, Cheryl wrote, "DO NOT FEEL COMPELLED TO SHARE THINGS ABOUT YOURSELF THAT YOU WOULD RATHER NOT SHARE!" She then explained this further in class, and, using humor to get her point across, said, "Don't feel like you're cheating if you don't tell me about that time you stole something...I don't want to be an accomplice to criminal behavior!" Both of these teachers provided options, so that students could utilize their own experiences as educational tools to the degree that they were comfortable, and thought it useful, to do so.

These teachers not only cared about the experiences that students brought into the classroom from previous situations; they also cared about the ways in which students were experiencing the current classroom environments which they were co-constructing. Chris talked about the ways she tried to improve students' experiences in her classroom. She said,

> I'm enthusastic--I try to present (content) in an interesting fashion and so on. And I am respectful of them for what they have to say. I think that if you set that up as a basis, some of the other things aren't as important--if there is basically a good atmosphere and good morale in the classroom...When there is that basic good feeling, that feeling of good relationship between faculty and student then you can deviate a lot, you know, you can do more lecture and less discussion or more discussion and less lecture. That those things aren't as critical.

Cheryl described her thoughts in a slightly different way, noting that classroom experience was important for herself as well as for students. Cheryl explained,

> I try to make us feel like--and I'm stretching the word--family, but there is something that is social, like bringing in food for class members, it's very convenient that we meet over dinner. So there is a rationale for it. But I think when you have those kind of obligations

> to each other, it tends to bring people together....We're connected to each other. And I've never been happy in a classroom that doesn't have that. It's important.

Through a commitment to each other in terms of class experience, in this case by bringing food, Cheryl crafted an environment in which students valued their own and others' classroom experiences.

In line with their efforts to value student experiences both in and outside of the classroom, feminist teachers attempted to shift the content and their teaching expression in a way that encouraged and enabled student learning. Depending on the situation, oftentimes feminist teachers would slightly shift the content or expression of the content so that it would be easier for students to understand or relate to it. Julie asserted that part of this is not assuming that everyone has the same viewpoints or rationale for being involved in the course. She said,

> I was shocked my first semester here. I was shocked and depressed. There's a huge number of people here who really, the excitement of learning is not what they're here for. They're here because they need a university degree to get a job. And my challenge is always--can I win them over? But I also have to value that that's a decision--this isn't going to be as important to everybody as it is to me....One of the things that I have to really work hard on in my teaching is just because we eat, sleep and drink feminism and want it in our teaching, some students just need three...credits. What's the big deal? Why is anybody getting all excited about this? They just want to know how to get an 'A' in the course. So real different things happen.

Julie works hard not to exclude any of the students in her class who choose to enroll for any reason. In her words, "A whole lot of feminist teaching is not excluding anybody."

Andrea talked about the ways in which students shaped and inspired her classroom presentation. She said,

> The students are really important to me so my lecture styles (and) the interaction the class is really about them...I structure all the meetings, I know what's important, I lecture on what I think is important, but...what the lecture turns out to be is based on them. I mean they might not realize it, but what they say motivates things I say in the front of the room.

Many teachers crafted their teaching in response to their perceptions of students' experiences and expectations.

While teachers tried to be responsive to their students in their teaching styles and content presentation, they also realized that students' viewpoints, beliefs, and preferred learning styles changed over time and between semesters. Eileen said that the interactions among class members produced different environments depending on the semester and topic. In her words,

> The first thing is always understanding that what's going to (be) produced is changing. That is part of the sensitivity of who is in this particular group. How did this group of people come together this year in a way that is not like last year? How might, in this setting, this set of people feel empowered by some aspect of their own production?

This "reading" of the group of current students did not take place only once at the beginning of the semester. Several teachers continually tried to discern the degree of comfort and engagability of students throughout the semester. Rosa talked about the effects of this in her classroom.

> I think what I try to do is feel out the temperature of the group. And as the semester goes on and people are more and more comfortable saying hard things about the readings and to each other about each others' comments, then I try to make the group consider a different dimension of something. I don't believe in levels; I don't think it's bringing the conversation to a higher level-- that's not the kind of conversation I would have. Rather, I'm trying to bring out a different dimension of the conversation.

And finally, Cheryl talked about how this attention to and development of the relationships with and among students in her classrooms fosters a positive classroom environment. In her words,

> So this class in many ways is further ahead of many of my classes because the interpersonal relationships seem to be coming together. And I think that is a key ingredient in people's level of satisfaction and they are willing to really say what they believe. That they aren't afraid of the other people.

A continual awareness of student experiences and expectations resulted in a classroom environment and teaching practices which consequently shifted class content and teaching practice to match students' positionalities.

There were also instances in which teachers took into account student experiences, but chose to approach the class in challenging ways that urged students to expand their frames of thinking. For example, Sarah consciously chose to teach about an approach that was contradictory to that of many other Women's Studies faculty. She talked about the teaching decisions she made in relation to this experience. In her words,

> In the context of the program that had already spent many years suggesting (a certain) approach, I sort of introduced this book to give a different perspective. But it's also my perspective. On the other hand, I didn't test the students on it. They had to do a response paper, but if they did the paper, I gave them credit for it. So it wasn't a question of them having to change their minds. It was a question of what do we do with the material. Sometimes I think that's enough of a challenge. You know, if they know you're going to do this material and they have to read it and confront it. Testing them on it might be

above and beyond the call of what you can expect students to do.

Andrea challenged her students in another way, encouraging them to seek and develop their own truths about the course content, rather than "providing" them with the truth that they may have come to expect in formal education. Andrea said,

> There are multiple knowledges out there that sometimes I access, sometimes the students access...But we don't all believe them all in the same way. Sometimes students will ask me "truth" questions. We spend a lot of time talking about (that)....They really want some truth. They want me to tell them something. And you know, I don't, and that totally pisses them off and that's really hard for them.

Finally, at the end of a particularly intense discussion on assessment, Rosa explained to her class,

> One of the reasons I spoke from the right or whatever tonight is because the tendency when talking about assessment is to come up with the solution...and I think it's more complicated than that...I don't think there's an answer to this--it's an art.

There were many situations in which teachers enacting feminist teaching acknowledged the locations and positionalities of their students and encouraged them, through challenging class material, to consider those positions further.

Troubling the use of student experience in feminist classrooms

As discussed above, many of the teachers with whom I spoke asserted that they tried to respond and pay attention to student experiences in the classroom. At the same time, they discussed how this response changed over time and was never "figured out" once and for all. Feminist poststructural approaches highlight several problematic questions for consideration when incorporating experiences, many of which may have been troubling the teachers with whom I spoke.

A constant awareness to others' experiences and efforts to include them in decisions and actions is certainly admirable. Yet, as Elizabeth Ellsworth (1989) asserted,

> Although the literature recognizes that teachers have much to learn from their students' experiences, it does not address the ways in which there are things that I as a professor could *never know* about the experiences, oppressions, and understandings of other participants in the class. This situation makes it impossible for any single voice in the classroom--including that of the professor--to assume the position of center or origin of knowledge or authority, of having privileged access to authentic experience or appropriate language. (p. 101)

In constructing action based on teachers' understandings of students' experiences, Ellsworth offers a caution about assuming that "authentic experience" can ever be fully perceived by

teachers.

Further, as bell hooks pointed out (1994), bringing one's experiences into the classroom can create unsafe environments for those who feel unsure about the judgment of those experiences that may follow their disclosure. Magda Lewis (1993) voiced a similar concern in the following way,

> As a feature of classroom dynamics, the unpacking and uncovering of deeply submerged social practices of domination/entitlement experienced by the "other" as subordination/oppression, can itself become another source for experiences of oppression. Alternately such experiences of oppression can foster a powerful desire for change, or they can become a deeply destructive experience ultimately resulting in reactionary responses from men *as well as* from women. (p. 165-166).

While the incorporation of experiential content and preferences for teaching practices may provide a more inclusive environment for teaching and learning, social forces which influence relationships and discourses outside of the classroom continue to do so within its walls. The limitations and norms of interaction exist within educational structures, and justify a cautionary approach to understanding and utilizing student experience in classroom discourse.

Identity construction in feminist teaching

I now turn to look closely at one aspect of the roles of those who use feminist teaching in their classrooms. After focusing on teaching practice as a response to students, I now consider how teachers and their students struggle with and create the identity of "teacher," and what this construction may mean for teaching and learning. As I discuss below, identity constructions and perceptions influence the range of options and understandings that teachers and students are able to choose from in developing a classroom discourse. I propose that teachers are both subjects and objects in relation to their own identities. In other words, teachers take part in constructing their own identities, but others take part as well as they bring socially constructed expectations and assumptions about a feminist's and a teacher's identity into classroom discourses.

I focus on three main themes which heavily influenced identity constructions of teachers within feminist classrooms. First, I examine how teachers decided to present themselves in terms of their feminist or political stances. Second, I discuss how both students and teachers related identity construction to classroom authority. I look at how this relationship between identity and authority was created, understood, questioned, and problematized through classroom dialogue and activities. Finally, I consider how teachers used an examination of their identities and identity constructions of the teaching role as an educational tool for understanding and critiquing assumed or constructed identities in the larger society.

Political Identity

Crafting a political identity while playing a teaching role is difficult in a society and university environment which has traditionally primarily valued "objective" and "apolitical" knowledge. As an assumed leader of a classroom, deciding when to make explicit one's political identity can be a significant and class-changing decision. Additionally, when that political identity is termed "feminist," an additional set of resistances and questions must be considered. As Sue Middleton (1993) pointed out, in her case, "Developing a feminist pedagogy involved taking professional as well as personal risks" (p. 18). In this section, I discuss how the teachers with whom I spoke sought to negotiate, with their students, their constructions of themselves and their identities as political beings within and outside classroom walls.

Feminist identity

Many feminist teachers chose to make explicit their feminism within the classroom. They often chose to do so because they believed that their students were looking for feminist role models or "styles" that they could learn from and potentially emulate. Sarah commented in this way,

> I often think that our students are looking for intellectual models. But I also think that they're looking for personal models. They also...want someone--a woman preferably, many of them--with whom they can identify. They can say this is somebody that I want to be like. And they also want to find thinkers that they want to be like--who present arguments they want to be like or they want to model themselves after.

Several teachers commented that they believed it appropriate and useful to their students to identify themselves as feminists both in their teaching and in other work that they do. They felt it useful to suggest that feminist instructors teach "how to read as feminists," as well as feminist skills of analysis. Another teacher, Rachael, also commented, "One of the nice things about teaching with feminist in the title of the course is I would have felt no hesitance about positioning myself politically." These classes and situations, however, were largely dependent on the course content and the political leanings of students who chose to enroll.

Often, students labeled teachers as feminist before the class even began. In some cases, the teachers hadn't yet identified themselves when this happened. Sarah commented,

> Sometimes you're marked as a feminist even before you declare yourself one. And I think in certain situations...just the way you live your life, the way you conduct yourself, the way you talk about yourself, your self-presentation, gets you labeled as something before you might even say, 'Oh, this is what I choose for myself.'...You're asking different questions. You're raising different points.

Many teachers described this experience of not identifying as explicitly feminist, or feminist in a certain way, until students questioned them. In a few cases, teachers claimed the term "feminist," but were hesitant to identify as feminist teachers because of their unfamiliarity with the literature in the area or because of their unwillingness to classify themselves in one way to the exclusion of others. They established that their identities were multiple, shifting, and situation-specific.

When deciding when, how, and whether they would make their feminism explicit in the classroom, teachers often recognized that students don't always share their commitments. As Chris told her class, "I'm a feminist and there are varieties of feminism and I'm certainly not a radical feminist by far and some of you will probably find me too radical and some of you will find me not radical enough but that's just who I am." This identification of oneself as feminist is not necessarily done in a way to try to get students to grasp feminist ideals, however. In one specific case, Julie said that she wanted students to learn about her political commitments from her, rather than from another source. In her words,

> I'm real honest about my own bias, partly because I'm very visible. So I say, "I'm not going to have you see me on the 10 o'clock news and not be honest with you that I'm actually working for women's right to choose, but I do not expect you to agree with me."

Whether providing feminist role models, teaching feminist skills, or merely making explicit and struggling with one's own feminist identification, many teachers with whom I spoke suggested that constructing feminist identities in their classrooms affected the teaching and learning that took place.

Cultural political identity

While feminism could be considered a part of one's cultural identity, I focus here more specifically on culture in terms of one's political background as related to race, gender, class, age, or intersections among these identity components. Many teachers talked about the inevitability of their identities entering into classroom discourses. Kathy commented in this way,

> My own identity was sculpted very clearly....There was just no way that I couldn't come in and say, "This is where I am socially. This is why I'm concerned about these issues. Not because of being politically correct right now. But because this is who I am. And all I'm asking you to do is sort of situate yourself and find out who and what you are as related to this course." And that tends to play very well. I can really make a connection.

In several cases, teachers' understandings of their own ethnic identities largely influenced their classroom and teaching presentations. Deborah talked about her experiences in this way,

> As a teacher standing in the front of the class, on a platform (as I did this semester), of course I realize I'm very much on display. I'm extremely and always conscious of this and

> this consciousness affects my physical presentation. I'm first of all conscious of being a (woman of color)[4] in a largely Caucasian place. I dress conventionally to counteract the strangeness that I expect others are experiencing as they look at me.

Yet another teacher, Rosa, considered the large influence that her identity has on the content of the courses she teaches as well as the underlying philosophies that guide her research, teaching and service.

> I'm a (woman of color), I'm second generation, and so it's personal as well as theoretical. I try with all the material I read to ask questions that focus on who makes the choices in society and the outcomes for different people of various decisions.

Both Rosa's and Deborah's presentations and overall belief systems were strongly influenced by the ways that they identified with their ethnic heritage. They constructed their identities based on the presumed implications of those constructions for others both inside and outside of the classroom and academic institution.

Another teacher emphasized that it is the intersections between her various identities, rather than any singular aspect, which most significantly influence her decisions about teaching. Cheryl described her teaching as multicultural and stated, "I think that if anybody embodies the sort of intersection of multiculturalism, it's women of color with a working class background. So there's race, class and gender right there."

Identity and Authority

Constructing one's identity is closely related to authority in the classroom. Feminist teachers have emphasized sharing power with or empowering students in an effort to share classroom authority and to diminish the effects of traditional classroom hierarchies (Bennett, 1991; Dewar, 1991; Luke and Gore, 1992). However, others have suggested that teachers' and institutions' power must be recognized in order to make explicit power relations which will inevitably exist in these educational situations (Gore, 1993). In either case, learning to negotiate teachers' authority in higher education feminist classrooms related strongly to identity constructions.

Teachers' authority & identities

In some cases, the ways a teacher sought to construct her identity helped to establish that

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[4] In order to preserve confidentiality and yet acknowledge the importance of ethnicity of which these teachers spoke, I removed specific ethnic identifiers and replaced them with "woman of color." While this choice risks placing all non-white women together in an unproblematized category, it simultaneously helps to avoid the risk involved in assuming the experiences of one members of a group are able to be assumed for all members of that group.

she had or was worthy of authority in the classroom. Among the teachers I talked with, authority was closely linked to appearance or style of presentation, professional background and age, and gender.

Several teachers said that they consciously constructed their appearance and style of presentation to help establish and maintain their authority. They anticipated socially constructed reactions to their appearances and crafted themselves to achieve a desired reaction from students. Deborah talked about her beliefs in this way,

> I realize that power can reside in appearance and clothing. Wearing a jacket makes a difference and gives me authority. Wearing high heels gives me height....If you are a professor, you have to look like a professor. And you can't look like a professor unless you dress like one. So there's a little of that, you know, I'm sort of on this generational bridge trying to adapt and yet feeling that I'm not going to look the part if I don't dress the part. People won't take me seriously. If I go to meetings with Deans and other Chairs, then I have to dress up more. When I don't teach, I dress down.

Another teacher's statement supported that view, but added that she at times felt she was compromising--perhaps to the point of "selling out." Julie stated,

> It's real fun for me to look at the many different ways I bring who I am. I mean, literally changing clothes. That's an interesting one. I used to...feel I didn't have to dress up for Women's Studies students. Now, I'm realizing more and more that how I dress is important to Women's Studies students....It's fascinating for me to watch all those different layers and figure out who I want to be. I constantly struggle with which are thing of selling out and which are things that I'm willing to do in order to have people listen. And I come down on real different sides on different issues.

Sarah talked about her experiences with authority in the classroom as related to her physical presence. In her words,

> It helps to be in the kind of physical body that I'm in. I have friends, for instance, who are short and look much younger and say that they can't always claim that authority. (They say) that students project or read them through certain sort of screens of their mothers, their friends, their sisters.

Finally, yet another teacher considered how she has revised her appearance in order to establish a greater authority and acceptance among her students. Bridgett questioned the various ways that she presented herself.

> When I started teaching this class (another teacher) said, "Go in heavy on authority. Dress up. And just have an authority. You can always relax after that. But you're young and

> thev are going to feel that they don't have to respect you. Or some of them." And in many ways I've done that. I dress up more when I'm teaching, I wear makeup when I'm teaching, which I don't when I'm not; but I also question that as well....I have a sense that if I make more visual concessions, that then I can say more radical things without getting dismissed....If I am, in my appearance, to a certain extent conceding to proper professional appearance, then I can say more controversial or challenging types of things without having them think she's one of those radical, hairy-legged, etc....And at the same time I don't want that to be true.

For the teachers with whom I spoke, appearance and choice of dress impacted their ability to establish the kinds of authority they desired within their classrooms. However, when and how to compromise were decisions that were not easily made.

Age and experience or professional background also helped teachers establish their desired classroom authority. Several felt confident that students knew their ages and professional backgrounds well enough that they were willing to grant them a measure of authority based on those experiences. Chris talked about her understandings of this occurrence,

> I think students at a lot of universities are very savvy-- my name is known. Students talk about me as faculty. There is a lot of word of mouth about courses so they know I've been around here for a long time. They know I authored a textbook and all that kind of stuff....(They know) what your status is.

Vicki agreed that professional background affected students' perceptions of her; however, she also considered the possibility that this was also related to age.

> It may be a factor of age. It may be because the students know that I come from a discipline in Women's Studies which is not usually discipline...I think they accept that difference as they notice that I accept whatever differences they have and bring. Most of the students are (from other disciplines) and they know from the beginning that I do something else. And I told them that there will be very big differences. That with my training and cultural background and context.

Finally, another teacher was unable to describe exactly why students more easily grant her authority in the classroom, but felt strongly that it had something to do with her experience as a teacher in this academic environment. When asked to comment on her power in the classroom, Eileen said,

> I think that it's complicated by lots of factors. Like I must be different too, I must conduct myself differently. There were kinds of insecurities that were written all over me when I started teaching here. There are kinds of problems that I used to have in the classroom

> that I never, ever, ever have anymore. I think that particularly they were about young men competing with me for power in the classroom. Nobody does that anymore.... I'm no longer perceived as available for that.

Many teachers believed that age and professional experience greatly affected the degree of authority that students granted them. However, they simultaneously recognized that because they were operating within societal and institutional norms, making a choice to have a certain degree of authority--whether more or less--did not necessarily guarantee that outcome.

Teachers talked about the ways in which their authority was compromised or challenged because of their own identities or identity constructions. Many of these challenges or compromises were, they believed, because of cultural identity positions, usually relating to gender or race. Their classroom authority was often greatly compromised because of larger societal assumptions about and expectations for women. Sharon commented in this way,

> Women stepping into a classroom do not have the same authority in a student's mind, that men have. I just believe that deeply, the students are always processing the teachers as female. Frequently this means, depending a little bit on the age the teacher is processed as mother. Mothers are supposed to give all forgiving love and not be critical. So I frequently, in my Women's Studies classes, before I hand back papers I will announce "I am not your mother. I am critical of your work and I am doing that because that is my job and because I want to help you grow," etc., etc. The issue of authority is something that all women teachers have to deal with whether they deal with it consciously or not. If you use experience and self-disclosure there is no question that you run the risk of making the class seem less academic, of falling into the trap of functioning psychologically as mother or sister or buddy, depending on your age. Those are difficult lines to cross.

Another teacher agreed with her, and commented on a specific class situation to substantiate her claims. Alex put it this way,

> It's been unusual because this has been the first semester where I've had more men than women in the class. And I had a couple of men who have been like prototypical male conversation style types, jumping all over women's words, not letting them finish. And they do that to me. One man, actually did this in class, and I had to make a concerted effort to put on a plow and when he interrupted me I would just keep going. So I had to change my conversational style to make sure that my words were heard. And it was interesting because I saw other women who do the same thing. And it happened in about two weeks where we found that--and people didn't talk to each other--they'd just keep going. Also, I think that these things kind of had a devaluing (effect on) the activities in

class.

Several teachers spoke of their struggles to create a basis for authority when, because of their gender, students were hesitant to grant it.

One teacher strongly questioned the notion that institutional power can be enough to compensate for the lack of power or authority that is ascribed to the female body. In Sarah's words,

> It's a very Foucauldian notion, that anybody who's a part of the institution speaks for it. But that seems to run counter to many of our students' notions here that women don't, by virtue of their positions as women, by gender, don't have authority and they're not used to seeing women as ultimate authorities. So you've got two contradictory positions. For me, I think gender wins out over the institutional authority. Students tend not to pay as much attention to women as they would to men. And so you're sort of looking at contradictory issues. And I think they pick up on those contradictions. I think feminists did themselves a disservice by sort of saying, 'Well, we're going to be here to give over some of this power that the institution has invested in us'--when in fact, the students' first reaction is not to give women that same kind of investment of power that they might give men. Not to say that it's not conflicting--I think that it's very conflicting for students. They see a woman in a position of authority and they don't know whether to react to her as a woman or as an authority figure and they tend to try to figure out which one to appeal to her on. What ends up happening is that the woman is sort of divided....So we're constantly working against contradictory expectations from students.

Sarah went further to discuss the different type of authority and conception of empowerment that she tried to establish and instill throughout her classroom interactions. She talked about her understandings of a feminist authority as such,

> I think it's much clearer with students if you come in and say, 'Yes, I'm a woman. Yes, I'm part of an institution. But I'm going to combine these two different kinds of authorities.' And one of the ways that I do it is by appealing to feminist authority and say, 'There's a certain kind of authority that feminists set up that's different from the authority of just a woman teacher or a male teacher. And that authority is vested in this notion of social justice. (The) agenda I have is trying to advance an ethical position--a position that says we're going to have equal time, but we're not just going to have equal time, we're going to try to find some collaborative or collective goal.' And that is the kind of authority that's not just for the self, but for the collective whole that you're trying to represent as well.

Teachers anticipated and responded to students expectations of their appearances, professional

backgrounds, ages, and gender in ways that they hoped would afford them with the opportunity to create an educational environment conducive to learning.

Identity as Teaching Tool

How then did identity constructions impact feminist teaching practice? In these educational environments, many teachers talked about how they worked with students to examine identity constructions in order to better understand and make explicit assumptions and "common sense" understandings of how various aspects of one's identities affected the educational process. They focused on the various components that worked together to create understandings of their roles and identities. They further discussed how they incorporated aspects of their own experiences, which comprised their identities, into the classroom for educational purposes.

In one case, Rachael encouraged students to talk about her role as a teacher and to understand the measures that enabled her to occupy that position or identity.

> What I'm really interested in is sort of a clarity about what is going on institutionally as a larger context for the classroom and making clear why it is the class is being taught. Why it is that I'm teaching the class. How it is that I got there. Not hiding (the) means of production of presentation....So a lot of what I'm interested in is just sort of foregrounding those kinds of institutional operations, which practically for me has meant saying things like, "I'm teaching this course because I was available in these ways. Here are the ways in which I was able to honestly convince people I was qualified and here are my weaknesses in being here."

By doing this, Rachael hoped to make explicit the different factors that shaped both her identity and the identities of others who students will subsequently encounter throughout their educational careers.

Other teachers focused on presenting specific aspects of themselves and making those aspects available for examination in order to ensure that the focus of the course wasn't always centered on the positions of the dominant group. In one case, a teacher asked that students be involved in ensuring that their specific identities don't form an exclusive classroom discourse. Julie explained,

> My very first class I ask the class to help me in that I don't want it to be a white middle class heterosexist young women's class and how we're going to work on that together. Usually students have no idea at that stage what I'm talking about....The first few weeks what we have is the men being real aware that for the first time, they're in a classroom where they're not the center of attention. But what has happened often is that the white women get real comfortable being the center of attention. And even though I'm trying to

> teach against that, clearly because I'm a white person in front, there's a way in which women of color must still feel marginalized....It's real different than if it were a black woman teaching the class.

Bridgett talked about her efforts to encourage students to complicate frameworks when examining identity constructions and assumptions within classroom analyses.

> One thing I try to do is play with pronouns, "we, you, they, those of us who." I try to use that one a lot. "Those of us who are white"--so it doesn't seem like I'm assuming everyone in the class is white. And also there is, of course, difference within whiteness. What is white?...I try to continually complicate the frameworks we're working with--add more and more variables to them.

These teachers recognized the impact that their own identities may have had on classroom discourse and tried to encourage students to look at the ways that the teachers' and students' own identities significantly shaped their educational experiences.

While many of the teachers I spoke with insisted on a "decentering" of oneself and one's identity in order to help students learn that skill and turn attention away from their, largely dominant, identities, other teachers talked about how they carefully used their own identities as teaching tools to enrich students' educational experiences. Vicki put it this way,

> I very often use aspects of that personal experience to bring it to life to bring the sense of struggle to life for students now, who just grow up with all this stuff on a platter in front of them....I think particularly graduate students very often tend to think of feminist inquiry as very academic. Many of them in fact come to it only through an academic groove. They don't come to it through any kind of personal activism, anything they did as undergraduates except course work. It is a set of ideas--exciting, but that is the main thing. So frequently I like to bring sharply to their awareness the relationship of feminism in the academy and feminism as an outsider.

Vicki problematized this experience further, though, when she talked about another classroom experience.

> In a large lecture I also, as the lecturer, would in certain, very carefully thought through instances, use some of my own experience....To use disclosure on the part of the teacher as a way to get students to understand the connection between the ideas we study and lived lives. I stress that I did that with a very careful sense of control because I think that can become very narcissistic. Another danger is that any experience that I personally experienced is reproduced by other women in the class, or it obscures cultural, racial, religious, sexual differences among women.

Teachers' identities and the experiences that shaped those identities can be used in various ways as teaching tools both to make explicit power relations within certain socially constructed identities and to teach students different perspectives based on events or situations that they have not yet experienced.

Troubling identities in feminist classrooms

These teachers discussed their strugglings with identity construction of themselves as feminist teachers in higher education classrooms. They also discussed how they attempted to use and analyze those constructions in their classrooms as educational tools for learning. A feminist poststructural analysis can help us understand these teachers and the struggles they encountered as they negotiated fluctuating identities and the related "status" or authority that often correlated with those identities.

Power relations were not static in these classrooms. Students and teachers all had power in different ways based on their identities--all of which are fluctuating and fluid. Power and authority were not ultimately and timelessly manifested in the institutionally-sanctioned position of "teacher." Rather, societal factors worked to distrubute authority to a variety of positions and create assumptions about various identities held by participants in these classrooms. Kathleen Weiler (1988) asserted,

> The classroom entered by the feminist, antiracist woman teacher is not a neutral environment in which knowledge can be controlled and communicated to a blank audience. She meets and speaks with students who carry with them kinds of knowledge, ways of relating to one another, values, experiences of oppression or privilege that have deeply affected and defined them. While the teacher has access to the power of judgment (marking) and the weight of the institution, she is at the same time fixed according to race and gender and thus participates in dominant/subordinate relationships with students in these terms. What we see in the classroom are complex redefinitions and constructions of meaning, conflicts between different loci of power that have their root in the class, race, and gender divisions of U.S. society as a whole. (p. 143)

Power relations within feminist classrooms can be best understood by examining the many sources, patterns, and exceptions that are present within all social relationships. Mimi Orner (1992) suggested, "For feminist poststructuralism, it is the gaps and ruptures in practice--the breaks, confusion and contradiction that are always a part of the interplay in teaching--that offer the greatest insight and possibilities for change" (p. 84). The intersections of identity among classroom participants often lead to gaps and ruptures, and subsequently more fluid and fluctuating relationships within the classroom discourse.

While the educational experiences presented here are not uniform, they nevertheless lead us to an increased understanding of dynamics within feminist classrooms. They also provide clues for the ways in which identity constructions can both foster and stifle educational efforts. Teachers can utilize constructions of identity and difference as classroom content to problematize assumptions and expectations based on fixed understandings of group identity. They can highlight variations and the fluidity of identity constructions. They can use their own identities and experiences to demonstrate political options and choices. And teachers can help students begin to see the value and necessity of coming to know and question through an examination of the ways that we all construct identity--both for ourselves and for others.

Concluding thoughts

Students and teachers construct the classrooms in which they work, learn, and teach with and for each other. While students' and teachers' characteristics, practices, attitudes, and philosophies are not the only factors which shape this environment, they surely are actors and enactors simultaneously and fluidly in their classroom practices. I have presented a variety of interpretations on how these feminist teachers' identities and practices are shaped by students' expectations and experiences in these classrooms.

The roles and experiences of students and teachers are not able to be fully known or fully understood. As Julie reminded me in a discussion,

> There's many, many, many different ways of bringing feminism into teaching and...the person's politics are going to make it different, the situations are going to make it different, and the receivers (are going to make it different)....it's always going to be very, very complicated.

My hope is that this work will contribute to our understandings of the ways in which feminist teaching practice is complicated, and the ways in which students and teachers make it so. Moreover, this work can provide guidelines for other teachers who have struggled with issues of identity and experience in classrooms and who wish to begin to understand how these issues may inform, and be informed by, their work.

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