

## **Empowerment and the Construction of a Safe Space in a Women's Studies Classroom**

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*One of the original goals of women's studies programs in the United States has consisted in empowering women to enable them to take control of their own lives. In order to achieve that goal, feminist scholars have developed a new pedagogy aimed at empowering students through the creation of equal relations between faculty and students, as well as among students in the classroom.*

*In this paper I address the paradox raised by a concept of empowerment as applied to a site like women's studies and argue that the role of instructors' authority and power in the construction of a safe space is in this case fundamental to students' empowerment. The argument is based on data collected through semi-structured interviews conducted at a research university in the United States. Research participants narrate that the creation of a learning environment where students feel safe to express themselves on delicate issues of gender, race, class, or sexuality, and where they can voice their personal experiences, is necessary for empowerment to unfold. However, my research suggests that there are a number of obstacles that hinder the emergence of a safe space in women's studies classrooms. These involve the presence of fault lines of class, race, and sexuality, as well as the rise of strong emotional intensities. To overcome those obstacles, the interviewees revealed that the role of instructors was central; instructors exercised power and authority in the classroom and constructed a safe space from "above." The interviews suggest that the type of power in operation in the women's studies classroom helps overcome obstacles to empowerment rather than prevent it. In conclusion, I suggest that the seeming paradox of empowerment is produced by the conceptual association of "power" with a coercive, rather than an enabling definition of its effects.*

### **1 Introduction**

One of the original goals of women's studies programs in the United States has consisted in empowering women to enable them to take control of their own lives. Feminist scholars have

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often argued that one of the objectives of women's studies was indeed to liberate women from multiple oppressions by educating university communities (e.g., National Women's Studies Association, 1977 [1982]; Stimpson, 1986). The point was nicely summarized by hooks (1982, 1989, 1994), for example, who argued that since academia, in general, discriminated against women and other marginalized groups and had historically been dominated by white, middle-class male perspectives, discrimination was perpetuated within higher education. The necessity to liberate women by empowering them, by giving them the tools that would free them from masculine domination, was therefore fundamental.

In order to achieve that goal, feminist scholars developed a new pedagogy involving new educational techniques (Buhle, 2000; Fisher, 2001; Kennedy, 2000), such as calling teachers and students by their first name or engaging in criticism/self-criticism, including criticism of the instructor. These techniques aimed at de-centering the instructor's authority and having students take control of their learning, while at the same time, introducing women's perspectives and personal experiences to the practice of knowledge building. Through the use of these techniques, feminist scholars tried to deconstruct the traditional teacher-student relationship and promote a movement whereby students could claim personal authority for the construction of their own learning. The new pedagogy aimed at empowering students through the creation of equal relations between faculty and students as well as among students in the classroom.

In this paper I address the paradox raised by such a concept of empowerment and argue that the role of instructors' authority and power in the construction of a safe space conducive to empowerment is fundamental. The paradox was clearly formulated by a number of critics of feminist pedagogy (Ellsworth, 1989; Gore, 1992, 1993; Luke, 1996) who claimed that the very idea of empowerment requires that another power be exercised, one that helps create the conditions for empowerment to begin with. To what extent, these critics ask, is what is called empowerment simply a reflection of this other power rather than a genuine liberating force? To what extent does this power reproduce itself among students, serving just as a new structure of domination? I shed some light on these questions by studying how students of a women's studies program indeed speak of the role of instructors in the construction of a "safe space," of an environment conducive to empowerment.

The creation of a learning environment where students feel safe to express themselves on delicate issues of gender, race, class, or sexuality and to voice their personal experiences is necessary for empowerment to unfold, as it is for incorporating a multiplicity of voices in the classroom. However, my research suggests that there are a number of obstacles that hinder the emergence of a safe space in women's studies classrooms. These involve, precisely, the presence of fault lines of class, race, and sexuality, as well as the rise of strong emotional intensities. To overcome these obstacles, my study suggested that the role of instructors was central: instructors exercised power and authority in the classroom and constructed a safe space from "above." All the interviews that I conducted, without exception, suggested that instructors exercised power and that their power helped construct the environment within which students' empowerment could unfold. Although in this paper I discuss only student's perspectives, the narrations of both instructors and students lead us then to reconsider power relations in women's studies. The view of power that the narrations provide disagrees with the views of both advocates and critics of feminist pedagogies, and suggests the presence of an authority that helps overcome obstacles to empowerment rather than prevent it. Instructor's power, the narrations suggest, enabled students to face their own prejudices and softened the intensity of their emotions, while keeping differences of race, sexuality, and class prop-

erly controlled.

## 2 Note on Methods

The data for this paper stems from a qualitative study conducted at Great Lakes University, a research university in the United States. The Women's Studies Program at Great Lakes is one of the oldest and had in previous years run a curriculum with a strong focus on students' empowerment. As of May 2009, I conducted individual semi-structured interviews (each taking approximately sixty minutes) with a total of twenty-five women. Among these were fifteen former students who majored in women's studies or took women's studies courses intensively, including four women who were subsequently hired as part-time instructors. Ten of the twenty-five women are present and past faculty members or instructors in the department who did not graduate from Great Lakes. I also gathered information about the Program from official documents such as syllabi and brochures, reviewing the program's official website, and by reading faculty members' publications.

## 3 Safe Space and Power: Theoretical Framework

Arguments about the need for a safe space in bringing about empowerment are not uncommon (hooks, 1994; Weis & Fine, 2000). For example, Weis and Fine (2000) discuss the importance of having a "safe space" in which collective work and critical thinking can be employed to struggle against social stereotypes and cultural domination (pp. 57–59). The space, they suggest, is free of hegemonic power relations and may actually produce counter hegemonic practices. These are spaces, they explain, that "spring from the passions and concerns of community members; they are rarely structured from 'above'" (p. 58). In this sense, they emerge from the work of grassroots movements that aim at resisting mainstream politics and actively attempt to transform society from the local level. These spaces include, for instance, "the corners of the African American church where young men ponder how to 'take back the streets' to 'save the young boys,'" or "the lesbian and gay center carved out quietly by working-class late adolescents and young adults, seeking identities and networks when their geographic and cultural contexts deny them sexual expression" (p. 58). Spaces like these, they argue, are needed in order for grassroots social movements to overcome oppression. "These spaces hold rich and revealing data about the resilience of young adults, without denying the oppression which threatens the borders and interiors of community life amidst urban poverty" (p. 58).

My paper refines Weis and Fine's argument by suggesting that in some cases a safe space can be constructed from above. Without instructors exercising their power from above, the construction of a safe space conducive to empowerment in women's studies would be virtually impossible. Women's studies students do not constitute a grassroots movement. They are individual women from diverse racial, class, and sexual backgrounds who I suggest need to be shaped into a collective.

#### 4 Students' Perceptions of Safe Space

In narrating their experiences of gaining voice, which they undividedly associate with empowerment, the graduates recount the feelings that they owned prior to enrolling in the women's studies program: feelings of fear and pain, of being out of place, and of oppression. The students' feelings were omnipresent, affecting and restricting their thoughts and actions, causing them to feel threatened, constrained and insecure. For them, the women's studies classroom provided a safe harbor; it was the very first setting in which the students did not feel as though they had to confine themselves to the dominant social norms and discourses, and could engage in fashioning their own voices.

The graduates invoke several explanations as to why they felt the women's studies classroom was a safe space. Emily, who received her bachelor's degree in 1999, started teaching as an adjunct in the program in 2003.<sup>1</sup> A Ph.D. student at the time of the interview, she associates her discovery of a safe space with the terms of a changed environment:

I don't say people in your department are less caring, I don't know, maybe it has to do something with the fact that, you know, most of the time, it's all women. Maybe that, you know, something that, you know, so it's a safe space.

While Emily points to the general sense of safety that an all-women environment tends to produce, her answer is tentative, and she has trouble identifying the specific reasons behind her feelings of security. Yet, to her, it is clear that the absence of men has something to do with it. In a place free of men, she suggests, women are more inclined to show "caring."

Another student, Emma, who graduated in 2000 and was working on a bachelor's degree in nursing at the time of interview, invoked the growth of a sense of intimacy among the students. She speaks about the sense of safety that she experienced during one of her writing seminars:

One of the courses that we had to take was a junior writing seminar, and there were, all of us wrote these incredible papers about personal experiences and some of us wrote things that I don't think we never told other people. And it was, a big theme at the time was feeling safe to do that, feeling like a classroom was a safe place to talk about yourself. And that was very intimate. There were some very intimate moments in that, you know, there were women who talked about sexual abuse, there were women who talked about, you know, their relationship with their mothers, hum, they began, just, their parents were dying, what that was like, they were all really truly incredible papers, and that was incredibly personal.

To Emma, safety created a space of intimacy, a space where each student could express what she had never expressed before. Like Emily, Emma points to a special quality that is found within the social relations of women's studies, namely, the existence of an environment within which all students can express themselves openly. This, she says, was actually "a big theme." The collective efforts of the class allowed for "some very intimate moments," during which time the students did not feel insecure, restricted or threatened. They could finally relieve their feelings of oppression.

Jessica, who graduated in 2000 and is currently working as a curriculum developer, advanced a very similar idea, although it was not a sense of intimacy that she spoke of, but of a sense of

shared experience:

[The] very first class, when I took the introductory class, the first week I just remember being blown away by it and, and feeling for the first time like people, other people understood my experience, and other people had similar experiences, and that this is a safe place to talk about experiences that you had had in your life as a woman, that there weren't necessarily just private things, there was a political context for experiencing sexism and violence and [she pauses briefly], history, you know, that I wasn't aware of women's history.

Jessica speaks openly about her initial experiences in women's studies, freely admitting that she was extremely hesitant about enrolling in her first class because of the stigmas attached to women's studies and feminism in general. As she recalls, her feelings of connectedness with other students were aroused immediately, during the very first session. She felt, for the first time, that "other people understood" her experiences as a survivor of sexual abuse, and that other women shared "similar experiences" brought about by sexism. She could contextualize her experiences.

In a way, all three graduates associate the sense of safety that they experienced in the classroom with finding a space that appeared to be free of power relations. While this association is quite explicit in Emily's case, as she (albeit tentatively) attributes the safety of the classroom setting to the absence of male-female relations of power, it also seems to be the case for Emma and Jessica. For, even though they do not speak openly of a space free of power, the two point to a space in which participants do not oppress one another. Jessica not only invokes the similarities in experiences that the students share, she also speaks of the "political context for experiencing sexism and violence." The classroom, she suggests, is outside of that context, providing a space where students can examine their experiences with a clear vision. Within this space, which is similar to the intimacy of the classroom that Emma describes, students are sheltered from oppression.

The safe space that my interviewees speak of resonates with Weis and Fine's (2000) descriptions above. However, unlike Weis and Fine's descriptions, the safe space that emerges in the women's studies classroom does not emerge from "below." It is not the effect of a grassroots campaign, in which young women congregate on their own in order to gain voice and empower themselves. This is indeed a space structured from above—it is part of an academic institution, created within boundaries that are highly embedded with hegemonic power relations. Moreover, as I mentioned above, the classroom is comprised of a rich diversity of students, both in terms of their social and racial backgrounds and their purposes and aims. The interviews elucidate that there is always a chance that the fault lines of race, class, or sexuality will break open, and that the risks associated with intense emotional involvement would manifest.

I would like to suggest that the space described by Emily, Emma, and Jessica is not a space that is free of power relations. In the interviews, the graduates actually recognize the existence of power relations, both inside and outside of the classroom. If anything, the graduates often express frustration over instructors who do not guide the class. Emma, for example, voices this frustration in clear terms:

Sometimes when you try to be egalitarian, you try to be . . . it's too much, it's too much. There is no structure, because you are trying to get everybody's—it's almost like it went over the top. If you tried to hear everybody out all the way and if you try to incorporate everybody's idea, you never have an idea, because you are trying so hard to integrate every-

thing. Sometimes, somewhere on their line, somebody needs to make a choice.

Here, indeed, Emma expresses dissatisfaction over what she calls a lack of structure. She also articulates the importance of having an effective guide who has clear objectives and who can give students clear directions.

What Emily, Jessica, and Emma perceive of as a safe environment free of power seem to be realized by instructors who control the learning environment, using a power that is institutionally endowed, to make sure that the classroom keeps some structure and facilitates student learning. The classroom does not automatically become a safe space simply because men are absent. Rather, I suggest that in order for a space to become safe in ways that expose the students to possibilities for empowerment, an entire pattern of social relationships has to be generated through an instructor's exercise of power. Unless instructors take control of the learning environment, the danger for the divisions of class, race, and sexuality to result in conflict is always present.

## 5 Fault Lines

Examples of racial divisions are not unusual. Lucy's description of the teaching collective, a class designed specifically to put into practice feminist pedagogies, suggests that a multitude of racial divisions are constantly at work. A Hispanic student, she joined the program in 1987 but had to leave in 1993 because of a pregnancy. She came back in 1999, graduated in the same year, and now does volunteer work for a diversity workshop at elementary and secondary schools. Lucy recalls:

They [in the teaching collective class] mixed everybody, like, you know, white person, color, white person, color . . . and, um, it was so interesting to see. And the person who I was doing it with was just phenomenal, she'd pretty much say the same thing that I would say, but the people of color, we were always viewed like—when they [white students] wrote in their journals—that we were angry. And I mean, I am serious, every different classroom, we were angry, we were upset, and the white instructors could see the very same thing that you are seeing, but for some reason, “it's okay,” and, you know, it was just very interesting, you know, to see that.

Lucy describes how the white students and white instructors in her classes viewed students of color as upset and angry. According to her, everyone saw the same thing, yet the reactions to what they saw were very different. Her use of the word, “interesting,” hides a greater concern. Hence, her account reveals a subtle power at work: the power to label an “other,” to belittle, to refuse the significance of an other's experience.

Dr. Stojkovic, one of the early faculty of the department, tells of similar fault lines running through the teaching collective—in this case, fissures of race and class. At the time that she was a supervisor of the teaching collective, one graduate and one undergraduate student were matched up to teach a session. On one occasion, one of the students was a woman of color whose mother worked as a high class prostitute in a big city and earned enough money to send her children to private schools. The other was a white, working class graduate student who came to see her teaching partner as being very privileged because she had an elite education. The interaction between

the two became complex and, in Dr. Stojkovic's words, was "based on jealousy." She relates:

It [the teaching collective class] was very, you can be very explosive, and a lot of the issues in women's studies are personally very explosive and controversial. Race, poverty, privilege: they are very hard and get it acted out within—in some instances they got acted out in a teaching group because people came from such different backgrounds and a lot of the challenges to each other had to do with different class experiences or different race experiences and they didn't go by formula.

Dr. Stojkovic didn't provide specific details of the event, but her account suggests that the presence of racial and class divisions were not infrequent and that they were sometimes, to use her word, "explosive."

Jennifer, who graduated in 1989, narrates one instance in which racial divisions between students and a faculty member led to a complete breakdown of the student-faculty relation. She speaks in terms of an "issue" that an African American female professor had in one of her classes with a group of white students, including her. "We gave her such a bad time," Jennifer remembers. "I don't know how she dealt with us," she admits. The "issue," her narration suggests, was not a simple conflict arising between an instructor and her students, but a situation in which the power associated with their race allowed students to deny the authority of an instructor of color. As she narrates the event that led to the students' behavior, she indeed wonders aloud about the racial undertones of their actions. The course "ended very badly," she says and, in what her account suggests is an understatement, she adds, "because we didn't treat her very well."

The event that triggered the "issue" was in fact quite trivial; Jennifer herself refers to it as "stupid" and the reaction of the white students as "totally out of proportion." One day, Jennifer had come to class directly from her place of employment. The professor told her that she looked nice, and her initial reaction was a straightforward "oh, thanks." But later on, one of her classmates told her that she "should have told [the professor] off." When Jennifer asked why, her friend said "she only says you look nice when you wear makeup." Jennifer's reaction changed immediately: "oh, yeah, of course," she said, and then concedes, "that set me off." Though Jennifer now views the scene that followed as totally disproportionate, all of her classmates agreed that the professor's reference to her good looks was outrageous. They got together and confronted their professor in class, nastily, if we are to believe Jennifer's account. The professor started crying and said to them, in a remark that could not avoid bringing to the surface the racial dimensions of the students' behavior, "I feel like you guys are a bunch of Nazis." Indeed, by calling the students "Nazis" the professor was not bringing out her racial prejudices but was responding to the violence that the students' nasty confrontation was doing to her. Jennifer's account reveals a situation in which students took advantage of a minor event, the likes of which were not uncommon, to do violence on the professor and show their power over her. The professor's remark, however, this time "set [all of] them off." Jennifer confesses that she regretted what she did:

I mean, it was horrible. . . . We never talked to her after that. She was really a good mentor to us, especially for me, for my writing, you know. It was horrible, we just made a huge mistake. We didn't even know we were wrong, and it was bad, and I still regret it; I still feel awful about it, because she was this incredible woman who was mentoring us, and it just blew it away, and there were racial undertones, because she was black and we were

white and who's to say that racism isn't in that department? . . . Anyway, I will regret that for the rest of my life.

Jennifer's account suggests that the professor was robbed of her power and authority by the racial prejudices of her students. As she tells the story, the "stupid" event with the makeup was a spark that triggered a reaction marked by racism. The agency and power of the professor was denied by the behavior of the students. This created a classroom environment in which a hostile divide between white students and a professor of color came into being. As I argued earlier, it is imperative that there is a power present that is able to prevent fault lines from surfacing. It is this power and authority, I suggest, that helps generate a safe space—an environment that is free of violence, built on mutual respect, and promotes the self-exploration and mobilization of students' agencies that is central to empowerment.

## 6 Emotional Intensity

As I have already suggested, the narrations of students and instructors show that the environment of a women's studies classroom can become unsafe, not just because of the presence of fault lines but also because of the intensity of the interaction among classroom participants. As discussed earlier, Emma's description of the safe space of her writing class reveals a classroom environment where students share powerful personal experiences with one another and where there are "some very intimate moments." The danger—the fear—that these intense moments can dominate the class whenever they arise is always present. It is the instructor's responsibility to prevent the classroom environment from turning into a huge therapy session, and to ensure that it continues to serve as a space where students can learn and grow.

The former students' narratives hint at the need for such a power, one that is able to channel the very intense, sometimes explosive feelings in the classroom. In the classroom, Jessica tells below, students show their vulnerabilities, their pains and scars, their fears:

I think one of the things about why I signed in women's studies when I did was because I was going through a crisis in my family, I was coming to terms with violence I had experienced as a child and I needed to understand that. And when I started taking women's studies, as I said, it gave me a political context for this very personal, painful thing that I had had as a child. And so all of the sudden it was, like, making sense to me and it wasn't just something that I was experiencing alone; all of the sudden there were, you know, unfortunately, there were three other women that had experienced sexual violence in their lives and that really [she pauses briefly], you know, happened at a very crucial time because it gave me hope that I could do something other than the effect on, um [she pauses briefly]. So I think the combination of joining women's studies and coming to terms with the violence I had experienced happened right at the same time that very first semester of my sophomore year here made a huge difference in my career path and, and in my, hum, my beliefs, in my outlook on life, and those kinds of things, so I would say that was a turning point.

It is not difficult to imagine the emotionally charged atmosphere of the women's studies classroom. Young women talk about their deepest emotional wounds, sharing their stories of violence and dis-



cussing the damage that has been inflicted upon them.

Lucy is more explicit, asserting that every single class left everyone “emotionally drained.” At one point during the interview, I mentioned to Lucy that another former student had called the atmosphere of the classroom “magical.” This was her reply:

Um, I don't know if I want to use the word “magical,” but I definitely want to use the word, um, you know, it takes you high and low, but it always picks you back up. Like, you go through these waves of emotions, then that would all make sense as to why you went through these waves of emotion, you know. Um, you know, it's just an emotional learning experience. I guess that's what I can say: I am in an emotional learning experience, and magical to me would mean it was all fairies and Cinderella and princess and stories and it wasn't. Keep it real—it really wasn't, it wasn't good topics that we were talking about. It wasn't, you know, I didn't leave women's studies saying, “Oh, life is so great.” *No*, I said, “damn, life sucks.” You know, I mean, reality is, reality is people go through so much crap, and, you know, and survival, I mean that's what it is.

Given the “waves of emotion” that, according to Lucy, everyone goes through, the danger is, indeed, great for the classroom to become a huge therapy session.

Beatrix presents a similar picture. To her, Lucy's waves of emotion take the form of exhaustion and of a draining classroom experience. In asking her about her relationships with other students, she replies:

Hum, I think all positive, but you know, it's a relation . . . you are constantly, hum, learning about other people's perspectives and trying to put yourself into another people's shoes and that's tiring sometimes. Hum, but I remember everybody being, um [she pauses for a while], I mean, I liked everybody. You know, there wasn't anybody that I really disliked for some reason. I really liked everybody and I learned from everybody, but I think that at times it can be an exhausting experience, hum, you know, to constantly [she pauses]—first of all, you are faced with a lot of problems constantly. You know, it doesn't always seem like there are solutions to those problems so that can be a tiring experience. But Dr. Stojkovic keeps keeping on, so, I don't know. Um, in my experience it can be tiring to constantly be faced with what seems like overwhelming issues at times, you know? And they can be emotional because in some classes you bring in your own personal experience, so anytime something is emotional like that I think it can be a little draining as well; it can be cathartic or it can be draining or a little bit of both, so. . . .

Beatrix, who graduated in 1993 and was a lecturer at a law school, describes the same emotionally intense environment that Emma, Jessica, and Lucy illustrate, mentioning the sustained intensity of the “problems” that the students face in their discussions and the draining effects that they produce. Her use of the word “overwhelming” seems to convey her impressions well. But unlike Jessica and Lucy, she openly recognizes the role of the instructor, Dr. Stojkovic, in maintaining the flow of interactions and keeping the class from imploding.

Other students speak of the encouragement that they felt coming from their instructors, encouragement that involved something more than inspiring confidence and giving hope and courage. Instructors, they suggest, do not just keep the violence inherent in the fault lines at bay, but

enable and effectively encourage the formation of a heated yet collective learning environment. Joan, an untraditional student by her account, explains that the classroom environment frequently became “disconcerting” and that students often found themselves “out of their comfort zones.” She conveyed much enthusiasm for the program and admiration for her instructors. She describes the women’s studies classroom as a space in which students experience great emotional strain, not just because of the intensity of their emotional involvement but also because of the ways in which their entire perceptions of themselves are often challenged. However, she also describes the classroom as a place where, thanks to the encouragement of the instructors and the positive atmosphere that they enable, students learn from one another. “Oh, absolutely,” she insisted, “I mean, I still, you know, just absolutely . . . I . . . it’s just amazing. It’s hard to describe unless you’ve done it, like, being in that environment. It’s a very, you know, positive environment, you know, encouraging.”

Tina, who received a master’s degree in 1990 and was an adjunct professor in the department, speaks explicitly of the role that instructors play in the enabling of a safe classroom environment. She describes how, in her view, a space in which all students feel safe to tell their most intimate and painful experiences emerges from the very act of self-disclosure.

Obviously one of the things that drove women’s studies is, you know, the very kind of basic underpinning that the personal is political. I mean, that’s the one issue of Women’s Studies 101, and so there was an emphasis on, you know, tying the personal experiences to larger political contexts, and because of that there was a lot of self-disclosure. And because of that self-disclosure, I think that what it does, that is what creates and maintains the safe space, and, you know, instructors would self-disclose, the students would self-disclose, and those created this, kind of the safety net around the classroom.

The process that Tina describes seems to involve a contradiction. Unless students feel safe, they don’t self-disclose, but here, she is suggesting that because they are able to self-disclose, they develop a sense of safety. Asked to explain, it is in her elaboration that the enabling role of instructors comes into view:

I mean, I do think it’s kind of circular, you know. I think that, I am now thinking about teaching because that is kind of my closest experience, because being a student is kind of a long time ago, but as an instructor . . . if I gave an example of self-disclosure that would kind of create a space of safety, that students would know that they weren’t the only ones, then here is this person sitting kind of on the seat of power in the classroom, you know? If I did that, that would create an environment where disclosure would happen and then it did, and I think once it starts, I think that it becomes a safe space where you can maintain it, and putting it in a context, right? That, that this is not your individual craziness, that’s what is so powerful, that women’s experiences are not because you are crazy, you as an individual are not the one who is the problem, that this exists in a culture, you know—sexism, racism and class biases and all the rest of it.

Instructors, Tina tells us, indeed set an example by initiating the self-disclosure that will eventually form a safe space. Moreover, they have to continually uphold the sense of safety in the classroom. Their role, Tina insists, is to start the process and keep it going, “because somebody has to start it, you know, and how the instructors kind of handle students’ self-disclosures is another thing,

because I think instructors can shut down that whole cycle too, if it's handled badly or wrongly or inappropriately." She explains that this can occur:

. . . by not listening, kind of dismissing their experiences, by not responding to these experiences, not putting them into context, to kind of not embracing it, or just, you know, the other thing is just spend the whole time kind of on one student's issues and then, not kind of allowing everybody else to kind of join in, to share their experiences. I mean, that's really where kind of the skills of instructors, I think, is really important, you know? I've had classes where the students had exposed so much that I thought, "wow, you know, like, this is starting to border a little bit on unhealthy," and how do you kind of rope that in when somebody is talking about their rape experience, for instance, or experiences of sexual abuse, at such length, and in such details, or mental health experiences, in such details and at such length that it becomes uncomfortable for the rest of the class? Then again, it takes kind of the skills of the instructors to contextualize it and then give other students the opportunity to contribute.

Tina leaves little doubt that without the instructors' example, skill, authority, and power, the environment of the classroom would hardly develop in ways that enable students' empowerment.<sup>2</sup>

## 7 Conclusion

In depicting a learning environment where students feel safe and are encouraged to confront their pain and suffering, the graduates' narrations help us indeed make sense of the seeming paradox regarding empowerment in a women's studies program. For on the one hand, the narrations suggest, in that space of safety students learn to express themselves, develop their own sense of themselves, and fashion themselves in terms of their own agencies. Yet on the other hand this is not a space free of power. Students need to be encouraged to find and use their own voices, while the environment in which they can do so has to be tightly constructed and controlled by a power from "above." This is not a safe space constructed from below, the kind that Weis and Fine (2000) describe in their work. Tina's narration nicely conveys the combination of encouragement and control necessary for students to engage in practices conducive to their empowerment in the women's studies classroom. The power and authority of instructors dynamically engages students in forming their own counter-hegemonic discourses. In a certain respect, then, the voices of my interviewees lead us to reconsider the argument of feminist scholars that aims at de-centering the authority of the teacher in the teacher-student relationship within the women's studies classroom.

As the interviews convey quite clearly, this power is one that opens, not closes, the possibilities for empowerment, and in that respect the voices of the women in my study lead us to reconsider also the arguments of the critics of feminist pedagogies. For the power that we see at work in the narratives is not a power that reproduces itself. It is not a coercive power. It is a power that enables students to fashion themselves in their own terms. I suggest that the apparent paradox of empowerment is produced precisely by the conceptual association of "power" with a coercive definition of its effects. My research invites us to rethink power as ideally exercised in women's studies classrooms as a generative, enabling force rather than an inevitably coercive one (Toraiwa, 2009). A full conceptual elaboration of this idea, however, remains beyond the scope of the present paper.

## Notes

- 1 All the names in this study are pseudonyms.
- 2 I should clarify that by “skill” I do not mean the acquisition or execution of a technique. I use the term in its second meaning as “a learned power of doing something competently: a developed aptitude or ability” (“Skill,” n.d.).

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