Women of Color in the Academy: Where’s Our Authority in the Classroom?

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Feminist pedagogy has revolutionized the academy and has powerfully informed and transformed teaching and learning. By addressing the power issues that are inherent in the classroom, feminist pedagogy has asked academicians to examine their individual practices, curriculum, and perspectives for subjugation by gender, race, and class. Furthermore, feminist pedagogy has encouraged teaching practices that empower students because it asks teachers to develop styles that are nonauthoritative and nurturing. There is no one-size-fits-all feminist pedagogy, however, and the combination of feminist pedagogy and women of color can make for a dangerous liaison.

A Search for Place and Importance inside the Academy

In the fall of 1995 we both ventured into a women’s studies classroom at a Southern research university to begin our academic lives as teachers. The undergraduate course, Multicultural Perspectives on Women’s Lives, was one that we developed and would coteach every quarter for the next two years, building the student enrollment from a low of eight to a high of 150 students. Within the confines of the course, we not only honed our battle skills but also began what has become a career-long balancing act between our belief in feminist pedagogy and the reality of being women of color in a hostile academic environment.

In those early days we were often the only women of color in a sea of white women and men who felt free to vocalize their surprise that we were their instructors and free to speculate openly about whether we belonged. Based on our after-class debriefings and our teaching journals, we chose three incidents to represent our early teaching dilemmas: being interviewed by a student before he would consent to take our class, receiving evaluations that centered on how we dared to be different and not fit the stereotypes that students had of Asians and African Americans, and coteaching with another women’s studies professor with disastrous results. Implicit in each incident are points of conflicts between feminist pedagogy and the lived classroom experiences of women of color professors. Succinctly expressed, these situations were incidents in which the nurturing and caring teaching environment of the feminist classroom was intruded upon by the racism and sexism of our larger society. In an effort to express our perspective, we will discuss how these three experiences have shaped our academic lives.

The first incident began quite innocently. During our first year of teaching, we received a call from the director of women’s studies, who said that a prospective student wanted to
meet with us. We naively agreed to the meeting without asking about the student or the nature of the inquiry. As it turned out, a young white male student wanted to see our vitas and ask us a few questions before he would agree to be taught by us. Although it turned out to be a quite affable meeting, with us politely fielding his questions on socialist and Marxist theory, we still are not quite certain why we endured this affront. Even eight years later, when we discuss this we are surprised by his arrogance and remain stunned that we both agreed to be subjected to such treatment, while smiling throughout the process. Maybe it was our newness to the academy or our gendered need to please that made us agree to this bizarre meeting. However, the one factor that we cannot explain or rationalize away is why our seasoned director set up such a meeting. For us, this incident illustrated several points: that our place in the academy was a tenuous one that was not undergirded by institutional power, that we should be prepared to have our knowledge base questioned, and that our authority would often be challenged.

The second incident turned out to be a recurring and persistent theme in our student evaluations. We learned that, despite our classroom demeanor and teaching methods, which we varied and experimented with in those early days, students always perceived us as gendered and racialized beings. For example, they commented on our evaluations and to us that “Ming-yeh did not smile enough,” “was not pleasant but was talkative,” and “was not like other Asians.” Several students found it problematic that Juanita was not “nurturing” or “motherly.” What the students were saying is that we did not fit their comfortably stereotypes.

The third incident was the most devastating and shook us to the core of our feminist pedagogical roots. In our last and final quarter of teaching together, we invited another women’s studies professor to coteach with us. It was our way of introducing other colleagues to the course, because the course’s popularity necessitated that several sections be developed. Although we were teaching a course that we had developed and taught for two years, the new professor attempted to relegate us to second-class status by publicly making condescending and derogatory remarks during class sessions. In addition, even though all the students knew that this white woman professor was new to the course, they deferred to her as the expert on the subject matter and on occasion would ask her to explain a situation to us or to intercede with us on their behalf. The students made it clear that she had the power and that we did not. After two weeks of this behavior, we divided the course by subject content, chose our special topic areas, and never again occupied the classroom simultaneously with her. We had innocently assumed that the rhetoric of sisterhood and fairness that was touted among university liberals and progressives was practiced. What we learned from that coteaching experience was that some of our colleagues saw us through the same eyes with which our students beheld us: the eyes of white supremacy.

MING-YEH’S JOURNEY

After two years of working as a teaching assistant and with terminal degree in hand, I accepted a full teaching position at an urban, West Coast teaching college. My experience of working with Juanita was great prejob training on racism and sexism, but it did not fully equip me to handle all the isms that are perpetuated at my institution. Although the demographic makeup of this university on the West Coast is much more diverse compared with those in universities in other regions of the country, students here consistently demonstrate attitudes of superiority, distrust, or resistance toward me when they see that I am young, Asian, and speak with an accent. I had an older white female student tell me on the first day of class that I was “such an intelligent young woman” who looked exactly like one of her Chinese American high school students. One Asian male student stormed out of the classroom after my lecture on Carol Gilligan’s foundational study on women’s moral development. Although the student reported to my department chair that
he would never take a class taught by me again because I did not know anything about teaching, to this day, I am still unsure of what really drove him away. I can only assume that it was the woman-centered curriculum.

When students see me, their immediate reaction is often that I am either a teaching assistant or a lecturer, so most of the time they address me as Ms. Lee instead of Dr. Lee, despite the “Ed.D.” that I put next to my name on the syllabus or mention in my introduction on the first day of class. That students directly challenge and question my authority affirms my belief that neither teaching nor knowledge dissemination is neutral; when students hear and see me, they have made their judgment about what kind of teacher I am and the ways in which they want to relate to me (Banks).

Juanita’s Journey

My years of teaching with Ming-yeh are past, but unfortunately my experiences have stayed the same. Teaching graduate students in women’s studies has not been different from teaching undergraduates. My environment, which is predominately white and where diversity means having some black students and colleagues, remains a place where I am the “other.” It is a political location where the feminist pedagogical landscape remains more treacherous for me than for my students.

As a teacher who returned to higher education thirty years after receiving my undergraduate degree, I find teaching a joyous act—especially when working with adult students, who give me a special charge. The academy, however, is not the democratic setting that I imagined. No matter how often I try to provide the idealized climate that Malcolm Knowles described, I am faced with students who confute my critique of whiteness and the courses I teach that examine oppression into a hatred of whites and of white men in particular. Such claims are made in spite of overwhelming evidence to the contrary: my close relationship with my white male mentor, an eight-year history of working with and traveling with white graduate assistants, and collegial and personal relationships with a close-knit circle of diverse women professors. Perhaps the most heart-breaking example of my mistreatment occurred early in my professional teaching career. On this occasion a new student approached me in the hall and asked me to come into a classroom to render assistance. On arriving in the classroom, I discovered that the student wanted me to clean up a spill. She assumed that I was the housekeeper and had apparently overlooked my briefcase and my best professorial navy blue suit. As I stood there stunned, she stood there looking at me as if I should start cleaning. Speechlessness consumed me, and in what is a rare act for me, I silently exited the room.

Sometimes, as I pass a housekeeper in the hall, I recall this incident and I remember that the African American housekeeping staff and I always greet each other and know each other by name because we realize that the invisibility and indifference of this environment bind us in an intimate and sorrowful way.

Because of these incidents, I enter my classrooms with an embarrassing amount of trepidation. I long for teaching situations like the ones that Stephen D. Brookfield describes in which the teacher facilitates and the respect seems bidirectional. The feminist pedagogy I know is one in which there is no sane and orderly negotiation of the themes of knowledge, mastery, voice, positionality, and authority (Maher and Tetreault Feminist). As a woman of color professor, the feminist pedagogy of my experience leaves me asking, where’s our authority in the classroom?

Understanding, Embracing, and Struggling with Feminist Pedagogy

The literature abounds with definitions of feminist pedagogy (Belenky, Clinchy, Golberger, and Tarule; Boxer; Fisher; Golberger, Tarule, Clinchy, and Belenky; hooks Teaching; Maher and Tetreault Feminist; Weiler). For our discussion, we define feminist pedagogy as a method of teaching and learning that employs a politi-
cal framework that attends to or encourages consciousness raising, activism, and a caring and safe environment. Implicit in this form of teaching, which is rooted in social justice, is an understanding of the universality of gender oppression and a critique of Western rationality, androcentric theories, structured inequalities, and unequal societal power relations. In addition, the practices that flow from feminist pedagogy center on connected teaching (Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger, and Tarule), which involves the teacher and students jointly in constructing knowledge, engaging in self-reflection, and practicing self-revelation.

This definition of feminist pedagogy has been a wellspring to our praxis. The pedagogical practices and tenets recommended by feminist pedagogy have provided a sound political and ethical framework for our academic classrooms. This feminist pedagogy, however, is the one of our dreams. As Rose Chepyator-Thomson reminds us, this is not a perfect world, and many factors enter into how we want to and intend to practice: “Education, an apparent instrument of anything 'good' to be passed on from generation to generation, depends on whose educational knowledge and whose 'goodness' is being passed on and who is doing the passing” (10).

Therefore, there is no generic feminist pedagogy. The feminist pedagogy of our practices is one that is informed and honed by our position- alities as a Taiwanese woman assistant professor and as an African American woman associate professor. Such a pedagogy must take into account not only how our cultures shape our practices but also how our colleagues and especially our students respond to what they perceive as our cultural “uniqueness” and accompanying mandatory racialized and gendered agendas.

This “otherness,” as Simone de Beauvoir has stated, is defined against the norm of maleness and in today’s context is additionally extrapolated and defined in contrast to the normality of whiteness. Phyllis Baker and Martha Copp state the dilemma more succinctly: “Faculty members who violate the white male, able-bod- iesed stereotype must also experience students’ contradictory expectations regarding gender, race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, and physical abilities” (42). Baker and Copp go on to note that students actually see professors who do not fit their stereotypes as inferior and that they also see the professors’ various positionnalities as “liabilities.” We have pondered the issues of mastery, voice, positionality, and authority, as set forth by Frances A. Maher and Mary T. Tetreault in their groundbreaking text The Feminist Classroom. In this exploration of feminist pedagogy they describe many circumstances that we have encountered. However, the dailiness of our feminist practices, the cognizance of our social positions, and the perceptions of us have forced us to grapple with biases against nonnative English speakers and stereotypes that compound what traditional feminist pedagogues describe as the dilemmas of the feminist classroom. These issues are tangible in our classrooms and often manifest themselves in student resistance. To explore how we manage our classrooms and practice our pedagogies, we examine the themes set forth by Maher and Tetreault (“Learning”) from our perspectives as women of color professors.

Mastery

Mastery, as defined by Laurie Finke, is the comprehension of ideas presented by experts on the subject matter. The traditional purveyors of ideas in Western society are white and male. In the academy, only 4.5 percent of all faculty positions are held by women of color, with African American women representing less than 1 percent of college faculty (Bowman, Kite, Branscombe, and Williams; Menges and Exum). Women are concentrated in the junior ranks of faculty tiers, and most African American women work at historically black colleges and universities. Given the scarcity of women in the academic ranks, students are not accustomed to seeing them as sources of knowledge, let alone as people who generate or produce that knowledge.

Examples abound in our collective and in-
dividual practices of students who challenge the information imparted in our classes and students who ask for complete citations, even though the information is found in texts written by white males. Our "otherness" seems to be a filter or barrier that complicates, distorts, or perhaps delegitimizes the information. Further complicating the issue of mastery is the presentation of unfamiliar material that criticizes or questions traditionally accepted knowledge. According to Baker and Copp, controversial class content seems to add a layer of difficulty that impedes students' willingness to accept and process new information. For example, as junior faculty, we have used the same syllabi as senior professors and have encountered claims of "talking too much about gender and race" or of selecting materials that are biased against whites. The senior white male and female faculty who had used the identical course materials told us that they had never received such complaints. The literature supports our supposition that students react to the messenger and the message. In Juanita Johnson-Bailey and Ronald M. Cervero's study of classroom power dynamics, it was noted that teachers of color received more challenges to their knowledge despite their academic rank, gender, or personal teaching style.

VOICE

Voice, as conceptualized by Gilligan and by Maher and Tetreault (Feminist), refers to the ability of students to represent their own interests and to speak for themselves.¹ As a concept, voice can occur on both the internal level (psychological) and the external level (the actual spoken word). According to a feminist pedagogical perspective, the teacher should endeavor to encourage students to come to voice by providing a safe environment in which no voice dominates—including the teacher's voice. A feminist classroom should be a place where students are free to express their innermost thoughts and to openly reflect on their personal experiences while using those reflections as a way to connect with the course content.

A broad spectrum of feminist literature embraces the notion that the ideal classroom is a refuge for all students and is a site of caring, but these concepts of safety and caring are questioned by women of color. It is hooks (Teaching; Talking Back) who reminds us that safety is a different issue for women of color than for white women. We maintain that the classroom is rarely a safe space for women of color, as students or teachers, because the classroom is merely a microcosm of our larger society and is therefore representative of the hierarchical systems that order the nonacademic world. Furthermore, we believe that when the "other" is the teacher, the class environment can become a "contested terrain" (Vargas 360), where battles for voice can occur between the teacher and the students. The struggle for academic place and airspace is fraught with unique challenges when women of color in predominantly white environments teach about difference (Rains; Romney, Tatum, and Jones; Williams, Dunlap, and McCandles). Commonly, an inordinate amount of stress and student resistance occurs in this intense setting (Romney, Tatum, and Jones). According to Michelle Williams, Michelle Dunlap, and Terry McCandles, student resistance, in the form of talking back, hostile nonverbal behavior, inappropriate chatting, and rigid body language, can be a means of silencing uncomfortable dialogue. It is also a way to challenge or interrupt the voice of the teacher, thereby making the classroom an unsafe and stressful place for the teacher who is the "other."

An important component of the safe classroom is the idea of the teacher as a caretaker. The belief that an ethic of care as described by Gilligan should be a guiding principle for feminist praxis also takes on a different meaning for women of color. Implicit in the notion of being cared for is the concept of privilege. Only those who are privileged are cared for, and the caring is usually done by those who are less privileged. Historically, women of color have been the caretakers for our society. Audrey Thompson cautions that too often caring is presented as a color-blind notion that masks the white-
ness of the problem or the situation. Will students be predisposed to care for their women of color professors when society tells them that women of color are the “strong” ones who are capable of surviving against all odds? Who is concerned for the needs of women of color in the classroom when our traditional Western perspective warns against such thinking? To further complicate the examination of caring in the safe and secure place of the classroom, we ask, can a woman of color teacher confront and examine oppressive power structures while simultaneously providing a caring atmosphere for her students who may benefit, however unwittingly or unwillingly, from those oppressive structures?

A final layer to examine in this discussion of voice is the position of nonnative English speakers. As a nonnative English speaker, Ming-yeh is often confronted by students who find what they perceive as an accent to be a communication barrier. The research on the attitudes and perceptions of students toward nonnative English speakers reveals overwhelmingly that students accept or reject the messages of nonnative speakers according to their preconceived ideas of the speakers’ group membership rather than on objective measures, such as the speakers’ competence or academic background (Rubin and Smith; Rubin). In addition, students hold a prejudiced view that nonnative English speakers make poor instructors, so students routinely attempt to complete the sentences of such teachers, more readily interrupt them, and commonly restate their ideas in an effort to reframe the language according to the teachers’ cultural frame.

For nonnative English speakers, voice can be an even more crucial site of struggle (Hase). As Donald L. Rubin and Kim Smith point out, “Language variation is a powerful prompt for cuing listeners’ cultural stereotypes about speakers” (339). Rose Chepyator-Thomson, a Kenyan-born professor, asserts that even after a decade of teaching successfully in a European-American school, students continue to comment on her accent. One student referred to this in a course evaluation: “The teacher’s English was hard to understand. This makes learning and understanding difficult [and it is] frustrating when paying tuition to have to struggle just to understand her speaking” (14).

For women of color, voice is a different phenomenon than the one routinely referenced in the feminist pedagogy literature that encourages feminist pedagogues to help students come to voice. Although Paulo Freire maintains that it is incumbent on those who wish to engage in liberatory education to use a dialogical model to decolonize their students’ minds, where does a feminist educator of color find her place in this complicated feminist pedagogical quagmire as she herself struggles to claim and exercise her own voice?

**POSITIONALITY**

Positionality refers to the place assigned to a person based on group membership, such as gender, race, class, sexual orientation, and age. However, this theme is more context specific than the themes of mastery, voice, or authority because it involves the interlocking nature of the multilayered positionalities of teachers and students. The positionalities of the actors in the classroom shape the teaching and learning environment. One major factor that affects positionality, particularly for women of color, is the stereotype assigned to women of color by our society.

In a study conducted by Johnson-Bailey and Cervero it was found that students consistently regarded women of color as racialized and gendered beings while failing to accord a race or gender status to white male instructors. This phenomenon of not seeing white males as “raced” beings occurred even when the white male instructors presented progressive social justice agendas and taught course content that centered on race. When the teachers were from marginalized groups, however, the students could not separate the teachers from their “otherness.” Most students in the study could not reach beyond their idea of the teacher’s position in the larger societal context. It was surmised that in the students’ internal dialogue,
white males as professors are the norm, represent rational thought, and fit almost invisibly into the atmosphere of the classroom, while women of color are the highly visible “other” and act as interlopers.

Adding to the racial dilemma of otherness is the difficulty imposed by the otherness of gender. Overall, women are seen as different from men and are assigned characteristics based on this position. Women in Western society are to be pleasant and kind, nurturing and soft-spoken, obedient and cooperative (Gilligan; Humm; Richardson, Taylor, and Whittier; Tong). Women are expected to manifest these traits regardless of their positions. So, women professors are to mind the p's and q's of their gendered characteristics in their practices. According to feminist educators (Boxer; Fisher; hooks Talking Back; Maher and Tetreault Feminist), women teachers should be nurturing, friendly, warm, and respectful of authority. These exemplary teaching characteristics are complicated when layers of race and ethnicity are added (Brown, Cervero, and Johnson-Bailey; Maher and Tetreault “Learning”; Tisdell). In contrast, the ideal teacher, who is coincidentally male, is authoritative, critical, and objective.

Because the professor is supposed to exude authority and supreme knowledge, women are caught in a precarious and contradictory situation. For women of color the classroom is even more treacherous because race adds another layer of supposed attributes. Our specific ethnic backgrounds present us thusly: Asian women are docile, smiling, deferential, and exotic creatures, and African American women are argumentative andemasculating (Amott and Matthaei). These stereotypes follow us into the classroom and cause our students to see us through veils of societally imposed biases.

In her own study and in one with Leonard Gordon, Rose Weitz found that the teacher’s race influenced students’ assessments of the teacher’s classroom behavior and that students assigned different emotional evaluations to the same trait depending on the teacher’s race. White, Hispanic, African American, and Jewish women teachers were evaluated according to different standards, with the evaluative measures showing more leniency toward the white women and less toward the women of color. Lucila Vargas concluded that the students’ biased perceptions not only predisposed them to find fault with women of color but also hampered them in overlooking the teacher’s mistakes, no matter how trivial.

Although women of color professors should stand center stage in the classroom because of their earned status as professors, the cultural statuses of women and women of color strongly influence our experiences and our world. While our positionalities are simultaneously points of celebration that inform our research by providing us with an outsider’s critique that we find integral to our research, we also recognize that our positionalities force us into daily negotiations in which our white counterparts may rarely engage.

**AUTHORITY**

Authority centers on the notion of the teacher and student as actors in the classroom. From our perspective, authority involves a teacher’s ability to influence the classroom environment. More directly, it involves the power that the teacher has to negotiate the teaching/learning setting. We interpret power through the lens provided by Michel Foucault and readily recognize the ambiguous and diffuse nature of power.

For women of color who practice feminist pedagogy, authority can be difficult to gain because students tend to be more resistant when women of color are in positions of authority than when someone else is (Chepyator-Thompson; Johnson-Bailey and Cervero; Omolade; Smith; Vargas; Williams, Dunlap, and Mc-Candles). Such resistance, although not always conscious, is reported throughout the literature as significantly impacting the teaching/learning environment. At best, student resistance is operationalized as apathy, and in the extreme, as open hostility. Moreover, student resistance is not always a weapon aimed at the teacher. Student resistance can be a self-defense mecha-
nism to protect the safe classroom environment that is being challenged by new and uncomfortable ways of thinking.

The classroom is a study in how power is accorded and exercised in our society. Students use subtle means to keep their vested power and attempt to enforce and replicate the status quo in the classroom. We are not categorizing this as negative but instead consider it a natural behavior in a hierarchical society. It is in this atmosphere of diffusive power relations that women of color as feminist educators find themselves—the land of cognitive dissonance, where they are caught between the ideal of feminist pedagogical theory and the reality of prescribed places in the world. Our conscience and training remind us that we should not be concerned with acquiring and maintaining power. Yet, our experience tells us that we do not have the luxury given to our white counterparts, who can rely on students to respect them and not to push too far beyond the boundaries of this new world where the teacher is ceding power to the students. Indeed, white women teachers have power to cede. They have some privilege and authority given to them by the larger society. They cannot divest themselves of this authority no matter how neutral and non-authoritarian they make their classrooms.

Women of color, however, although artificially vested in the robes of power with the accompanying markers, degrees, publications, and academic rank, are often seen as academic imposters (Chepyator-Thomson; hooks Talking Back; Omolade; Vargas). Additionally, women of color academicians, though part of a power system, have little power to control and affect the larger academic environment. In fact, the students, who often look more like those traditionally in power than do women professors of color, have more power. Our all-too-familiar experiences of being questioned, such as facing student appeals and complaints without enjoying the direct support of university administration, tell us this is so.

Finally, we view authority through the eyes of the adult educator. As adult educators who attempt to practice feminist pedagogy, the idea of authority is made even more complex by the field's mandate to facilitate rather than teach as authority figures. We acknowledge the importance of the concept of facilitation to our discipline (Apps; Brookfield; Knowles), and, indeed, we view the facilitator's role as a compatible and important component of feminist pedagogy. Yet we also understand and acknowledge the difficulty of using facilitation to conduct and negotiate our classrooms when we are not necessarily seen as having authority. When we facilitate and abandon the active authority role of the teacher, we provide students with the opportunity to control and order the environment. When this occurs, students often recreate the larger social context, where places are allotted along gender, class, and race lines and where authority goes to those who resemble the "norm." The replication of the rank order of the outside world can put professors and students of color at a disadvantage. Our predicament is aptly expressed by Smith: "I am alone but in charge. But am I really in charge? What shapes students' perceptions of their teachers? Why am I concerned about their perceptions? Can I be an authority and a minority in practice and theory? In theory, I am both; however, in practice I am often, foremost, a minority" (69).

Recommendations for Educators

What recommendations can be drawn from our experiences in practicing feminist pedagogy as women of color faculty? And how have our positionalities as Taiwanese and African American women informed our practice of feminist pedagogy?

QUESTIONING STUDENTS AND USING GROUP DEBRIEFING

By offering opportunities for collective debriefing on the verbal and nonverbal dynamics in class, students can see the taken-for-granted power structures. For example, when male students take extensive class discussion time, we may invite the class to observe the interactive speaking patterns: Who listens? Whose
comments are being attended? Or, as part of our introduction on the first day, we may make students aware of their own stereotypes by addressing pivotal questions: Have you ever been taught by women of color before? How can a teacher’s gender and racial background affect the course? How do you perceive us—an African American woman and Asian immigrant woman—as instructors? How can your perceptions affect our credibility and power as teachers in the classroom? These questions usually help sensitize students to their own stereotypes about us and create a reflective opportunity to explore the impact of sexism and racism.

In addition to articulating questions directly related to power structures, we purposely create different class dynamics by inviting white male and female guest speakers. Often we find that students relate to guest lecturers differently; they tend to be more respectful, submissive, and cooperative. Given such experiences, we encourage students to collectively reflect on the different behaviors they demonstrate and then discuss their rationale behind the varying interactions. We believe that this debriefing process allows students to reflect on, attend to, and make sense of their here-and-now behaviors as opposed to forcing them into accepting our interpretation of the classroom dynamics. Many teachable moments may emerge as a result of using group debriefing.

USING TECHNOLOGY TO MANAGE SENSITIVE DISCUSSIONS

A guiding principle of feminist pedagogy centers on creating a safe and caring environment so that the students can freely and fully share their emotions and inner thoughts. Given the power structures that permeate most classrooms, however, those spaces are hardly refuges for students or teachers of color. Technology can be particularly effective in engaging students in dialogues on sensitive issues by increasing students’ comfort levels. For instance, in online discussions, students can participate in dialogue freely or professors can use interactive software that offers predetermined questions that engage participating members in dialogue. These devices can create a more equitable, color- and gender-blind setting because students can participate in discussions anonymously, without worrying about being judged.

CLAIMING OUR AUTHORITY

Feminist pedagogy literature, as informed by Freire’s critical pedagogy, often suggests that instructors can democratize the teaching setting by sharing power with students. Unfortunately, the power structures of the classrooms often mirror those of the society, in that women of color who teach have limited power in affecting the classroom. So when students perceive us as having less authority and power than they do, to what extent should we share power with them? What purpose does sharing power serve when students are privileged by the social structures and, hence, have more power than women of color professors? If the instructors share power to resist the existing power structures, should women of color instructors work first to establish authority?

Instead of sharing our limited power and authority, we believe it is essential to first claim our power and authority in the class. It is never easy to purposely claim authority in classrooms, particularly when our students see us as academic imposters or feel threatened by our position. The methods we use are simple techniques. For example, in a classroom setting, we purposely choose to stand or take the center seat. When in front of students, we address each other formally as “doctor” rather than by first names. We never rely on facilitation as the primary strategy, but engage people through a combination of multiple methods, including lectures. We monitor classroom discussions closely by encouraging silent members to voice (sometimes through writing) and by monitoring and possibly censuring class members who monopolize discussions.

These actions, although completely contradicted by our gender socialization and training in women’s studies and adult education, are in-
formed by our unique reality as women of color faculty. Taking the active role of authority could be educational and inspirational for students who rarely see women of color assume the roles of experts or leaders in public arenas. The ultimate goal of claiming our authority is to use it to address the racism, sexism, and other forms of oppression that permeate the classroom.

FACILITATING THE PROCESS OF UNDERSTANDING NEW AND CONTRADICTIONARY KNOWLEDGE

As discussed by Peggy McIntosh, whites are often taught to ignore the oppression of others. Education is another institution in which oppressive social structures are reproduced through the generation and dissemination of Eurocentric knowledge. Therefore, when students eventually encounter knowledge and opinions contradictory to their traditionally accepted Eurocentric ideology, many manifest emotions ranging from guilt, anger, betrayal, and resistance to denial. We believe it is crucial to acknowledge students’ difficulty in processing new and contradictory knowledge. In an attempt to facilitate the learning, in addition to sharing our similar personal experiences we also provide materials and activities that address both the cognitive and the affective component of the learning process. Being aware of how the interlocking systems operate and one’s role in those systems is a major transformational learning experience, which could cause pain, anger, and distress in students. Faculty members interested in equity and social justice education need to see this transformational experience as an emotionally embedded growth process for adults.

SELECTING CULTURALLY DIVERSE MATERIALS

Curriculum development is a political decision, in that it involves the inclusion and the exclusion of certain materials. This political decision is often informed by an individual instructor’s positionality. The development of a curriculum that acknowledges the cultural background of diverse learner populations should incorporate various cultural perspectives. A culturally diverse curriculum may broaden students’ knowledge base and understanding as they relate to who they are within their integrated multiple identities and how they relate to others in society. It is also crucial for instructors to select materials that portray various populations’ experiences and materials that center the curriculum around a group’s lived experiences. As instructors we need to ask, how often do the readings for class actually reflect diverse experiences? Are my students’ images or experiences represented in the selected readings? If a group’s images are presented in the readings, do the readings serve to empower the group or to perpetuate stereotypes about the group? We need to be conscious of whose interests are served by the selected curriculum and materials.

Summary

Overall, the four themes of mastery, voice, positionality, and authority provided the means for exploring our feminist pedagogical practices. Within these four major themes are many underexplored subthemes, such as student resistance, professor imposterism, and the antifeminism inherent in academia’s androcentric rationality. Our introductory tales about the student who needed to interview us, the student evaluations that underscored our “otherness,” and the colleague who saw with the eyes of supremacy are examples that were provided to explore, critique, and present feminist pedagogy as a different phenomenon for women of color. Regardless of what we have described as flaws or areas of concern, we embrace feminist pedagogy as our preferred means of practice and continue to see it as the best way of providing and creating an inclusive classroom environment. Feminist pedagogy emerged from our experiential backgrounds of having been different and displaced in our academic environments—both as students and as faculty. As a practice, our feminist pedagogy preceded our theoretical development of feminist theory and was based on our need to
disrupt what we had encountered as the normal academic environment.

The recommendations that we share here emerged from our experiences in practicing feminist pedagogy while uniquely constrained by our positionalities as women of color. Above all, our classrooms are places where we make space for knowledge production, where we make space for all voices—including our own—and where we make space for deferred and unexpressed dreams. This is our truest definition of feminist pedagogy.

NOTES

1. "Voice" as used in this article does not include the concept of claiming expertise in one's area of study. Issues such as expertise and legitimacy of knowledge claims are included in the discussion of mastery.

2. In our practices, we have used WebCT to conduct anonymous interactive discussions. However, to override the system's usual format, the WebCT feature that will allow anonymity must be preset. When anonymous discussions are used, students cannot receive credit for their online participation. It is also necessary to carefully monitor these "cloaked" discussions, because these types of discussion more readily allow for abusive and insensitive comments. One author of this article prefers to have a comments box in the front of the class. Each student is required to place an index card, distributed on the first day of class, in the box at the beginning of each week. The cards can be left blank or may contain questions or comments submitted anonymously or with the student's name, but the professor never reveals a questioner's name to the class.

REFERENCES


