Bragging about Bragging

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BRAGGING ABOUT BRAGGING

One of the most important functions of women's studies is to establish an understanding of the crippling effects on our egos and self-esteem of our second-class status. I have developed a technique that I use in my women's studies classes that offers one approach to this task. My course, called "The Problems and Potential of Women," meets once a week for a three hour session and is limited to fifteen people.

The first night we go around the room and each woman talks a little about herself and about why she's taking the course. We try to begin knowing each other. I talk about how we brag about themselves. They answer no. About "people who aren't humble, self-centeredness, etc." I ask them if they can think of when it might be appropriate to brag about themselves. They answer no.

A quick glance at my notes and another apparent change in direction. We begin to talk about how bad the current job market is. I explain that when the market is bad, it's worst of all for women; that women are the last hired, the worst paid, the slowest to be promoted. I pass out a breakdown of U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics.

Finally, we talk about the job interview situation. Again, those who have been through it are encouraged to share their experiences. I tell them mine. "If you're married, you won't be a stable employee. Your husband might be transferred." or "We won't waste our money training a single girl. You'll just get married and quit." or "What? A young married? No thanks! You'll be pregnant and leaving just about the time you learn the job." Ad nauseum.

Then we do a little role-playing. I describe a job that sounds interesting to the class. In fact, together we create the fantasy job. Then we help each woman invent her own vita, her own work history. I grant each a B.A. with some kind of honor and all of them equivalent work experiences. One might have been a waterfront director at a summer camp for six years; another a director of volunteer workers at a home for the elderly. They're each given both an experience in administration and supervisory activities that involve contact with people, as well as experience as a typist, cashier, etc.

That leads to my role of Mr. Lecherous Interviewer. I say to each, "Well, Missy, I have here the dossiers for twelve girls, each apparently well qualified. Tell me why the chick I choose should be you; what makes you special; what makes you think that you can do this job?"

I sit back and let my eyes wander speculatively, judgmentally, up and down her torso while she flounders for words. Finally she stammers something like, "You'll just have to figure that out," or "If they're so much better, I guess there's not much sense taking up your time." The best anyone has come up with is: "Well, I really want the job a lot and I'll do my very best." They don't know how to identify, let alone maximize the presentation, of their assets. They don't know how to brag.

Instead of on the basis of measurements and face. I point out the similarities between accenting your "good features" with make-up, or a small waist with a wide belt, and conceptualizing about your executive experience and abilities. Most of them know how to brag already about physical matters.

Having returned to our discussion of bragging, we read from Hogie Wyckoff's essay, "Radical Psychiatry in Women's Groups":

We can become familiar with what insidiously keeps women down; not only the obvious overt male supremacy which we are all aware of and struggling against but also oppression which has been internalized . . . It is the incorporation of all the values which keep women subordinate (telling her she mustn't outdo men, etc.) . . . This oppression can be easily illustrated by using a technique we call 'bragging.' (The Nature of Prejudice in the chapter "Traits Due to Victimization."

I suggest to the group that we take a fifteen minute break and return, each prepared to brag. I ask each one to tell us something that she has done, accomplished or developed in herself, something that she is responsible for and proud of.

The first night it took fifteen women one hour and forty minutes after the break to get all the way around the group. They talked about something they could say. One woman in that class, very witty, dean's list, law school oriented, after much anguish, twisting her hair and turning in her chair, said, "Well, one thing I do know: I have beautiful boobs."

The majority of the other "brags" weren't that depressing, but almost all of them reflected the judgment of significant others in the lives of these women, and most of those significant others were fathers, boyfriends, and male teachers. None of the brags reflected personal assessments. None had resulted from self-initiated action or self-determined goals. Most frequently, they bragged about disciplined personality traits springing from an internalization of "feminine" ideals.

Afterwards we returned to the topic of women's low self-esteem. I'd quoted studies and statistics, famous writers, scholars and feminists, all sorts of provocative fictional and poetic material. They had been unaffected by and personally indifferent to the concepts, the information I was trying to turn them on to. I now returned to it, after the bragging session, and they leaped on the ideas, they hungered for the explanations. I had made existentially real for them that concept of low self-esteem.

Each week after that we spend fifteen minutes at the beginning of each session bragging about something that has happened within the past week. Sometimes the whole group decides not to take time to brag, but even then some woman may burst out with a brag. We are always delighted. We try to relate the brags to the course concepts. We begin to carry these concepts into our lives.

In midquarter, I don't come to class one night until an hour late. Instead, I contact one of the students, ask her to meet me and give her an envelope containing copies of the following instructions:

1. Separate into small groups of three or four.
2. BRAG.
3. Relate each brag to the women's movement. How does what you bragged about relate to our identity as women? How does it relate to all women living in a sexist society?

(continued on page 6)
BRAGGING (continued)

4. Can you turn your brag around, reverse it so that you are complaining about a problem? Relate this to being a woman in a sexist society.

5. Can you develop a generalized feminist analysis? What does each woman’s triumph, achievement, self-esteem have to do with the other members?

6. Having developed a report together, choose a reporter to share the conclusions of your group with the rest of the class.

Time: one hour

After an hour, I come to class, the group reunites, and we begin to share experiences. We find women taking control of their lives; women breaking through and beyond internalized “feminine” self-images; women feeling powerful and independent; women establishing goals for themselves that grow out of their own desires and self-knowledge and that are not dependent on other’s expectations of or desires for them. Self-fulfillment and self-development replace self-sacrifice. Brags of their own desires and self-knowledge and that are not dependent on other’s expectations of or desires for them. Self-fulfillment and self-development replace self-sacrifice. Brags about achievements begin to replace brags about attributes. Instead of “I am proud of myself because I am such a good listener,” we hear, “I am proud of myself because I finally got up the nerve to take the GRE’s and I know I did well,” or “I told that bastard to get his hands off of me and I didn’t apologize or worry about hurting his feelings.”

At the end of the quarter—we have our final bragging session during a twelve hour marathon project presentation we have instead of a final exam. By now brags begin to include: “I designed a powerflow chart for the University administration and figured out what to do to get money for a women’s self-defense course”; and “We held a meeting to plan an all-Ohio Women’s Coalition Weekend for next fall, we figured out how to manage and structure it for two hundred people.”

Or “I wrote up a prospectus for the book I want to do on American women artists and sent it to a publisher.” It was important when one woman bragged that she had masturbated to orgasm—the first in her life—after five years of marriage—and “wasn’t going to fake a damn thing ever again.”

For fear of misrepresenting myself and my class, let me add that the experience is never totally successful. I don’t manage to reach all of my students, even in a class that small. Those students who are not reached are not necessarily unchanged because the technique is at fault, however. Some of them, I’m afraid, sign up because it is a pass/fail course and they think it will be easy. I try to avoid this by insisting on a personal interview with each student before she is permitted to register—but sometimes I miss them. However many opt out after the interview when they realize how much work will be required. And then there is the student who takes the course as part of a general self-improvement program that also includes transcendental meditation, modern dance, health foods, and yoga—as well as “The Problems and Potential of Women.” Her final brag had to do with having risen above anger and general earthly cares. And, too, there are those occasional students who listen, participate, but decide that the changes will be too hard to make, the struggles too great.

Although the bragging experience is only a small part of what happens in this course, I think it is a valuable technique for beginning to solve two of our most important classroom problems. How do we help our students make existentially significant connections between their intellectual experiences in the classroom and the rest of their lives? And how do we help our students move from a sharing of individual feelings, concerns, and experiences to generalized principles and abstract social analysis?

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TO BECOME A TEACHER:
HIGH SCHOOL FEMINIST CHALLENGES
ELEMENTARY READING GROUP

Can a high school student make a real impact in the struggle against sexism in education?

Naomi Slifkin, a high school student in Chapel Hill, N.C., is receiving special high school credits for teaching in an open elementary school classroom at Estes Hill Elementary School for two hours every morning. She has been actively involved in the women’s movement for several years, and when she began helping in the teaching program in the elementary school, she grew angry about the sexism she found in the children’s readers.

Totally in charge of a reading group of six third and fourth graders, meeting for about twenty minutes every day, she chose for their reading text Leah Lurie Heyn’s Challenge to Become a Doctor: The Story of Elizabeth Blackwell (Feminist Press Children’s Book Series). “I think that it is really best to incorporate this book into a reading group. This way you knock out the horrible sexism of their readers and at the same time they are learning some new and interesting history as well as vocabulary. I have noticed a beautiful enlarging of vocabulary and their general reading has really improved from when we first began the book.”

As the class reads, Ms. Slifkin points out places on the map and brings up for discussion what she feels are the very important lines and issues in the book. For instance, on page 5, Samuel Blackwell says, “Our girls have to make their own opportunities.” The reading group discussed what they felt that meant: “Hannah B. said, ‘Most girls grow up to marry and raise a family,’ and then I asked them if that was all girls could do, and what things women did do for occupations. We discussed how many of the girls wanted to just get married and have children and what jobs they would like to do.”

Throughout the book, Ms. Slifkin tries to relate the issues in Elizabeth Blackwell’s life to the present lives of the children in her group. They compare the racism that Reverend Cox tries to fight with the racism that exists today; and the discrimination Elizabeth Blackwell faces in trying to become a doctor with the discrimination women face today.

Besides going through the book slowly in a group and incorporating discussion into the reading experience, Ms. Slifkin prints up worksheets for the class to use. “I try to make them so that they are on the easy side so the kids will gain confidence. And I try to make them fun, so that the kids will remember the basic ideas.” Her worksheets include crossword puzzles and matching words to definitions, using the vocabulary from the book, and scrambled words testing their grasp of what has happened in the story. For example:

1. The kind of good health Elizabeth wanted to teach people ehnegl: ..................

2. A doctor who specializes in helping children to be born setobritinca: ..................

3. The country Paris is in afencr: ........................

Ms. Slifkin summarizes the experience, “All the kids were able to grasp and apply the book to their own experiences. I urge people to bring this kind of book into a reading group.” She plans to use Susan Brownmiller’s Shirley Chisholm in her series next.