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Teaching the Feminist Minority

Barbara Hillyer Davis

In women's studies conferences during the past few years, I have heard many descriptions of pedagogical approaches to specific student groups—working women, displaced homemakers, business majors, and so on. I admire and learn from these presentations and at the same time I am uneasy. For some reason my classes are never like those described. The longer I teach them, the less homogeneous they seem. I am working out my role as a women's studies teacher in a university in which—as in most others, I suspect—no class consists of just working-class women, just reentry women, just Native American women. It is time to discuss the work of the feminist teacher in a mixed classroom, where any constituent group may be a minority—and the smallest consistent minority group is feminist students.

When the field of women's studies began its phenomenal growth about ten years ago, teachers and students alike were beginners in a process of self-education. Most of us had been socialized as "traditional women"; we learned together what that meant. By the time women's studies classes were offered in our region—the Bible Belt—there were valuable resources, printed and experiential, to facilitate this reeducational process. Our first classes were demanded by women who had learned feminism from books and xeroxed essays and who had experienced its practical necessities in the state legislature, in marriage, in consciousness-raising groups. These women, self-educated feminists like their teachers, filled our first classes.

My own first Women in Literature course was very conservative in its content: it focused mainly on Victorian literature and included such male authors as George Meredith, Thomas Hardy, and D.H. Lawrence. My students and I, however, were very well informed about the legal and sociological condition of women in our own time. We brought our personal and political experience into a conventional university classroom and examined the relationship between the two worlds. Together we reread traditional literature in the light of our experience and in the light of contemporary feminist theory. Our expectations of the university classroom itself were traditional; we had no idea that conventional class discussions would soon be inadequate in terms of feminist process. What was radical in our approach was our collective questioning of course content.

That was in 1972. By now the situation has almost reversed itself. Gradually the course has changed, literally one volume at a time, so that it now includes "nontraditional" forms, and only women authors, for example, Zora Neale Hurston, Harriette Arnow, and Sarah Wright. A much smaller percentage of the students are feminists, and their awareness of the legal and sociological situation of women in our society is less specific and exact. Less well informed about sexual politics, the majority now are reading nontraditional literature from a more traditional perspective than the earlier students, who had lobbied for the ERA before they petitioned for women's studies.

Both traditional and feminist students are with us still, but their proportions are reversed. This is a sign of our success. Women's studies enrollments are much larger: women from a much wider range of backgrounds now see the study of women as appropriate to university classrooms. The class, therefore, is not for an initiated group only, but for all women and some men. In these circumstances the norms of the university are much more influential. The challenge to me as the teacher is no longer to explore with feminist colleagues the relationship between the legal-sociological condition of women and the literature I learned in graduate school, but to educate students who know relatively little about either.

The "traditional" woman assumes as she enters my class that she will spend her life in conventional subordination to men (boyfriend, husband, professor, boss) and, because she has not examined the implications of this assumption, she believes this to be a desirable outcome, freely chosen. "Feminists" share an impatience with the traditional perspective and a belief, ironically similar to that of the traditional students, that women who accept traditional subordination have freely chosen to do so. I am in fact less a peer of these students than I was of the earlier ones; I know more about women's literature and about feminist theory than they do, and I embody the contradictions fostered by the institution in which we work.

The university has taught us well how learning should be done. Because I do "know more" than most of my students, I am easily persuaded that I should impart knowledge for their reception. The institutional pressure to do so is reinforced by the students' well-socialized behavior. If I will tell them "what I want," they will deliver it. They are exasperated with my efforts to depart from the role of dispenser of wisdom.

On the other hand, what I know about feminist process makes me feel an obligation to renounce the professorial role, to serve instead as a role model for sisterhood, disclaiming any stance of superiority and presenting myself as one who learns instead of teaching. Struggling to maintain myself between these conflicting pressures, I work out a role as teacher which leans toward a peer relationship but includes enough of the professor to reassure those students who feel comfortable in a more traditional classroom.

This photograph of Alice Mary Robertson, Oklahoma's first and only Congresswoman (1921-23)—ironically, a staunch opponent of woman's suffrage—appeared in From Buffalo Chips to Senate Seats: Women at Work in Oklahoma, a booklet produced by one of Barbara Hillyer Davis's women's studies classes.
In their midst sits a feminist minority — women who have rejected
the condescension of the professoriat and who have themselves read
some feminist theory. What they want from me is a model of sister-
hood, and from the other students, emotional and intellectual support.

Every year, then, I am teaching, at the same time in the same
classroom, “kindergarten” and “graduate school,” though it is some-
times very difficult to tell which is which. Some students who consider
themselves “advanced” in women’s studies are separatist/ elitist; some
who have never before given feminism any thought have a sort of
instinct for sisterhood.

Teachers of women’s studies have standard devices for bringing
these buried contradictions to group or individual consciousness: class
journals, small group discussions, readings of feminist essays. The
problem is using these tools on two (or ten) levels at once — starting
where the individual student is “here and now” when collectively they
are in many places. Initially designed to encourage the development of
consciousness among traditional women, these devices still seem to
work more effectively with that group. We use them in institutions
which assume that students-as-beginners and the teacher-as-expert are
the norm. Students or teachers who do not share these expectations will
seem out of place, even to themselves.

It is a commonplace among us that studying women is a painful
experience for women, and that women’s studies classrooms should
provide an environment in which women can support one another
through this pain. But there is also joy in the process, as we discover
mutual support and rejoice in the recovery of women’s past and
women’s culture. My recent experience is that this pleasure comes
more frequently to “traditional” than to “feminist” students. The
process is not, initially at least, so helpful to the small minority whose
“consciousness has already been raised.” They come to the women’s
studies classroom with higher expectations, gained especially from
feminist literature and also from some limited work in women’s
groups. They expect, for example, that as they meet the emotional
and intellectual needs of other women, their own needs will be met — that
their growth into more complex feminist modes will also be supported
by the group. But the majority do not know how to support people
whose pain is over factions in the women’s movement instead of
housework.

A traditional student, asked to examine the sexual politics in litera-
ture or history, very quickly sees its relationship to her own life. She
will grow and change and learn faster in small group discussions with
other women who are already clear about their feminism. As tradition-
al students learn from feminists how to analyze their lives as women,
they also develop some respect — perhaps even admiration — for the
feminists’ nontraditional choices. But the feminist students, however
“advanced” their intellectual and emotional grasp of feminist issues,
often lack empathy with or respect for the hard choices and important
conflicts of traditional women.

It is as important for feminists to learn to listen as to be heard—
to understand the complexity of traditional women’s lives as to present
the alternatives of their own. Otherwise, no one is “advanced”; we are all
still in first grade. The challenge to us as teachers is to keep these two
groups together long enough to facilitate their forming relationships
and beginning to listen to each other.

The challenge is complicated by the ambiguities in the feminist
teacher’s dual roles as sister-peer and professor. We may have a
commitment to the sister-peer role that makes the conservative major-
ity’s obedient cooperation with the professorial role problematic. Our
experimental solutions confusingly encompass both roles. We may use
professorial power to “require” disclosure, to control group formation,
to “facilitate” communication.

This is not all bad. People have to write journals for a while before
they understand their importance; they have to stay in a group to
develop its effectiveness. To provide structure may be the best way to
encourage growth. Having acknowledged this, we wish that we could
do better for the feminist students. Precisely because their reasons for
making additional demands are feminist ones, we want to meet them.

One of the easiest ways to alleviate the distress of feminists in a
conservative classroom is to permit students to segregate themselves
into “beginning” and “advanced” subgroups. If we permit encourage
such segregation, we may in the guise of “freedom” be encouraging a
decision to avoid a more difficult but potentially more rewarding
choice. If, on the other hand, we insist that the groups remain “mixed,”
we must beware of oppressing the feminist minority. We don’t want
feminist students to go away, nor should we expect them to become
adjunct teachers whose own needs for growth and support are not met.

The most typical ways of helping the desired female bonding to take
place are variations on traditional women’s roles. We may choose to
play superwoman, wife, or mother. Superwoman is a feminization of
the professorial role: by adding responsibilities for interpersonal rela-
tionships to our work as discussion leaders, evaluators, role models,
and paper graders, we “humanize” the classroom. Feminist students
courage the teacher’s superwoman role because they, too, have been
trained by the educational system that learning is transmitted from
teacher to student. Anticipating a different quality of learning from the
women’s studies classroom, they expect to be reinforced and supported
as feminists, not “just as women” (I quote a student). Since (because
the institution shapes the way we expect education to take place) even
feminists are more comfortable with being told than with being shown,
they expect, like the majority, a better experience through conventional
forms, and therefore prefer additions to those forms, not substitutes for
them. So we play the role of superwoman, killing ourselves with
overwork and denying the students’ responsibility for their own
relationships.

The role of wife is more insidious. “Let me help you be more
comfortable,” we suggest. “You’re OK, dear, and I will work to
reassure you.” The role is closely related to that of mother—the role
both we and our students probably prefer. I want to meet the student’s
needs and she wants me to—nurturing, protecting, loving. The catch
to these two solutions is that the proper correlative roles are those of
husband and child, neither of which seems appropriate to a feminist
classroom.

None of these responses to the plight of the feminist student works
very well, but all are serious efforts to work as women—not in the
professorial father role. What we need — and what I believe we are
learning to do — is to develop a new role for teachers of these mixed
groups, another way of learning, which blends realism about the
institutional context with belief in the feminist future.

A more effective, more intellectual, and more feminist role than that
of superwoman, wife, or mother is that of simultaneous translator. This
role involves hearing and giving back in other words what another person has just said, and at the same time presenting an explanation in another language which will illuminate the issue for a second group without alienating the first. A statement from a still traditional student will, in this model, be fed back to the speaker in a way that tells her she is indeed being heard and understood while at the same time an explanation in theoretical feminist language is provided for another member of the group. This is a practical illustration of the slogan that decorates many of our office doors: Feminism Spoken Here.

The translator intends to teach the “second language” at the same time that interpretation is occurring and the discussion being advanced to its next stage. The translator works in both languages, without making value judgments about either, but with sensitivity to the nuances of each.

Feminist students have access to a descriptive vocabulary, drawn from their reading of Adrienne Rich or Mary Daly or Susan Brownmiller, which will be new to other students. The concept of translation may enable them to apply this vocabulary to their own behavior in new ways, as that behavior is interpreted to the others.

For example, when some feminist students threaten to drop out because they can’t bear listening to women who conventionally affiliate with men, what they are doing is dichotomizing: dividing women into “good” and “bad” categories on the basis of life style, much as antifeminist groups have done (naming dependent housewives “good” and “women’s libbers” “bad”). Recognizing the dichotomy in the context of feminist analysis of masculinist reasoning is useful both for the students who make such announcements and for the listeners who will be surprised and probably threatened by them. Both groups need to consider how and why such reasoning is masculinist and integral to the institution in which their discussion is taking place.

When students complain that “women are our own worst enemy,” the statement can be explored in terms of what Mary Daly has said about women as the enforcers of mutilation (foot-binding, for example) and also as a further example of dichotomizing. The use of Daly’s language, which engages us in her analysis, reassures the feminist student that we do speak feminism while asking her to see the connection between her own vocabulary and that of traditional women.

Although the immediate goal of the teacher who performs such philosophical or linguistic analysis may be to alleviate or confront the students’ immediate distress, the eventual goal is a change in the teacher’s relationship to both groups. As group members learn the second language, they will begin to use it, becoming translators themselves. And as the teacher shares this role, she becomes more like the sister-peer of her ideology. Although her knowledge may remain greater in quantity, it will have become similar in kind. All will be bilingual.

The translator has to have two vocabularies which are consistent with each other and must be able to slip back and forth in response to nonverbal clues as well as words and other symbols. She connects the philosophical with everyday experience. Students who have already read Mary Daly and Susan Griffin may learn much by developing a sensitivity to the language and perspective of women who have never heard of either. It is seriously feminist, after all, to recognize that some women’s values are important and different from men’s and that traditional women’s language and culture are valuable in their own right.

Students who enter a class with the rigid ideology of the university, believing that good teachers dispense wisdom and good students absorb it, learn only with difficulty how to think critically. Those who condemn past attitudes as less valuable than present ones, or beginners as less deserving of respect than those who have rejected their beginnings, will also learn only with difficulty how to think in other ways. Both groups share a cultural expectation that there are right answers and that they can be learned from good teachers. Since we want students to struggle with questions that do not have “right” answers, we are ourselves struggling against that deeply acculturated expectation.

Recognizing this may enable us to understand the paradoxes of our own behavior as teachers. My own teaching strategies, for example, have become more conservative even as my feminism has become more radical. This reflects the conservatism of my students and my belief that within a conservative institution only carefully constructed support will permit the transition to other modes. At the simplest level this may require me to explain how women’s experience is devalued in our economic and social system, or to state that a group’s frustration may come from the difficulty of attempting a nonhierarchical relationship in a political context that enforces hierarchical norms, so that what we attempt and the ways we fall short become conscious. At a more complex level, what is effected by the process of translation is awareness of the shaping power of language: that understanding of the crucial life experiences of women involves learning to “think like” other women.

Literature is often used to develop students’ empathy for women whose life styles are different from their own. Class members’ experiences can be used in the same way, though the teacher may have to interpret as the novelist has done. When some students describe their own inclination to “mother” their husbands, their dilemma can be interpreted to others who cannot imagine being so male-dominated by references to Adrienne Rich and Nancy Chodorow, but it can also be presented to both groups as illustrating women’s values. The feminist student is thus asked to appreciate the skills involved in balancing the emotional needs of husband and children, while the traditional student comes to understand how the institution of motherhood limits people. This can be accomplished by echoing the language of the traditional students and the language of feminist theory in the same discussion, thus expanding both vocabularies while affirming both.

Citation of feminist theory meets everyone’s expectation that wisdom will be dispensed in the classroom. Translation of that theory into the languages of several populations of the class helps to meet the needs of students who want a more personal satisfaction from a women’s studies course. To the extent that this strategy succeeds, both traditional students and the feminist minority will learn to understand a wider range of women’s experience and the consciousness of both will be gently raised.

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