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## *Feminist Teaching*

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For over a decade I have been involved--variously as a reader, as the book review editor, and now as a co-editor--with a peer-reviewed journal titled *Feminist Teacher*. During that time, I have come to believe that the words in the title suggest the two practices most feared by many in the academy--the practice of feminism and the practice of teaching. While I realize that this is (I hope) something of an exaggeration on my part, one reason I have come at least partially to believe this stems from the number of times I have been asked to write letters of support to be included in the tenure files of some of our authors. I have not been asked to write as an external expert in the candidate's field, however: instead, I have been asked to confirm that *Feminist Teacher* truly is a peer-reviewed journal and that yes, writing about teaching can actually be a scholarly activity.

When the founding editors chose the title for the journal (then called a magazine) twenty years ago, they looked to another journal, *Radical Teacher*, as a kind of guide and knew that the word "feminist," like "radical," would raise red flags for some people. The original editors, as well as the current ones, knew that many academics in all fields continued to think of the academy as a place of pure knowledge and believed that adding feminism to the mix politicized something not inherently political. Other people believed, however, that the academy is anything but apolitical and using feminism in the classroom merely makes the politics somewhat clearer.

But the founding editors also realized that the word "teacher" was similarly provocative. They didn't choose "professor" or "pedagogy": they chose the word "teacher" because that word placed classroom practice at the center of the discussion, and it included teachers from all educational levels, as well as people who taught outside the traditional classroom. The use of this word meant that the sometimes-unspoken hierarchy of teaching would be leveled. A colleague at another university describes *Feminist Teacher* as a "journal of praxis," and those of us who edit *Feminist Teacher* have found that to be a useful and apt description. In fact, among the comments we most often give to would-be authors are "This is an interesting theory, but have you used it in a classroom? How many times? What was the course? What did your class look like in terms of size,

diversity (of gender, race/ethnicity, age, etc.)? How would you describe the institution in which you teach?" In other words, if they have not tried out their theories in the classroom, we do not yet know the usefulness of the theories to our readers, and we most likely will not accept the manuscript for publication.

I began this essay with *Feminist Teacher* because working with the journal combined with my twenty years of teaching a wide range of students at a variety of universities has kept me in constant contact with the dynamic relationship between theory and practice and with the various ways that I and others teach as feminists. The editors of the journal, all teachers at the university level, spend a substantial amount of time discussing feminist teaching among ourselves and talking about the ways in which our own teaching practices have changed over the years. We have had the privilege to experience personally the joys and frustrations all teachers find in the classroom along with the opportunity to read innumerable essays, in varying states of sophistication or readiness, by other teachers struggling to teach the best they can--and to do so as consciously feminist teachers. This brings me to a brief discussion of the meaning of the concept and practice of feminist teaching.

Just as there is no single definition of "feminism," there is no one definition of feminist pedagogy, but some generalizations can be made. Most obviously, gender is always a focus in feminist teaching. This does not mean that it is a focus at the expense of other considerations, nor does it mean that everyone except boys or men are studied (in fact, masculinity is often studied, as is the construction of a range of gender identities and performances). But it means that the presence of various genders is never ignored. Instead, gender is always seen as part of a dynamic relationship with other markers of identity, including but not limited to social class, race/ethnicity, age, geography, sexual and gender identity, and so on. Feminist teachers do not believe that ignoring gender makes our academic fields of study objective or neutral. In fact, silence about particular people or ideas can speak volumes. Teachers who practice feminist pedagogy notice gender as it is illustrated in their textbooks, used by experts in their examples, used in problem-solving, and so on; they notice the language they use and the attention paid to particular ideas. While attention to language use can easily be exaggerated and belittled as being merely politically correct, word choice and tone can very clearly transmit one's ideas about the subject being discussed or about the students in the classroom.

Because gender affects the dynamics of the classroom in terms of the relationships among the students as well as between teacher and students, feminist pedagogy includes a thoughtfulness about classroom dynamics, in classes from small seminars to large lecture classes to distance learning courses. How that dynamic operates and how the teacher organizes her or his classroom are crucial. That is more complex than the idea that teachers and students simply share power or that arranging chairs in a circle makes a classroom feminist. How a classroom is arranged physically might--or might not--matter but who is or is not in the classroom, who is spoken or listened to, who is spoken about, do matter.

Finally, feminist teaching does not take place just in gender studies or in classes about feminism; in fact those classrooms are not inherently more feminist in practice than any other

classroom. Instead, feminist teaching takes place in all academic fields and, like feminism in general, can have a profound effect on the students and on the academic subjects being taught. Many believe that including feminist ideas and practices in subject areas in which girls and women have traditionally been underrepresented can help remedy that under representation. With that in mind, the short bibliography I have attached includes a substantial number of books about the sciences, math, and engineering, because those are the fields people often feel are least amenable to feminist pedagogy.

This short essay and bibliography are meant to offer some preliminary thoughts about and resources that address classroom practice and feminist pedagogical theory. But ideas about feminist teaching and pedagogical theory are neither new nor static, and the field is meant to provoke new ideas and thoughtful discussion about the role of gender and of feminism in education.

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In addition to *Feminist Teacher*, journals that regularly publish articles on feminist classroom practices include *Women's Studies Quarterly* and *NWSA Journal*, as well as feminist journals in many specific academic fields. A useful guide to the scholarship of feminist teaching is available for downloading at <[www.NWSA.org](http://www.NWSA.org)> the website of the National Women's Studies Association. The guide is titled "Defining Women's Studies Scholarship: A Statement of the National Women's Studies Association Task Force on Faculty Roles and Rewards" and offers useful information for

feminist teachers as well as for departments or college tenure and promotion committees. It includes a partial list of feminist journals.