The Interests of Full Disclosure: Agenda-Setting and the Practical Initiation of the Feminist Classroom

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Introduction

Several theoretical and pragmatic questions arise when one attempts to employ feminist pedagogy in the classroom (or to study it), such as how to strike a balance between classroom order and instructor de-centering and how to productively address student resistance. I believe, however, there is a more fundamental question: How, specifically, is a feminist classroom initiated? Via group consensus? Through the syllabus? In class discussion? By the teacher’s open goal-setting? Further, do these acts of initiation need to take place on the very first day? Are the words “feminist” or “radical” ever spoken?

As an English Ph.D. student looking forward to my very first semester of teaching, the above questions seemed central, yet terrifying, to me. It is not surprising that I began my final project for a Gender and Pedagogy course (a requirement for the certificate in Gender Studies offered by the Women’s and Gender Studies Program at my university, and the experience that spawned much of what follows) by posing them. I felt that I needed desperately to know how to explain my commitment to feminist pedagogy to my students, and I wanted to know the best way to do that. At the same time, I wanted to know how the very act of explaining might conflict with my anti-hierarchical ethics. Looking back after having taught three courses of my own, I am not entirely sure that I have any, much less all, of the answers. What I do have are some initial reflections on my own attempts at openly “launching” a feminist classroom—which I present in the second section of this article—and the still-nagging sense that the literature on the feminist classroom and feminist pedagogy has not yet fully engaged with these initial queries.

In undertaking this project, I looked for anthologies, volumes, and other scholarly work that addressed “the feminist classroom” as such—though it must be noted that most of these took issues of race, class, ability, and sexuality, and not simply gender, into account. (I think it is fair to say that most who write on this issue see “feminist” as a broad term covering an array of progressive, radical, or liberationist ideologies.) Most of these materials were university-focused—though my first
section looks briefly at secondary instructors and “the feminist classroom”—and some, but not all, made a distinction between undergraduate and graduate classes. In the first part of this article, I examine several of these works. In the hopes of illuminating the further work that needs to happen around the issue, I discuss what instructors/theorists do and do not express—in their writings and to their students—about initiating feminist classrooms. I also establish some working definitions of the feminist classroom from both the literature and my own field interviews with instructors and students. The reasons for the above inquiries are, I believe, manifold. While “the feminist classroom” is an admirable ideal, it is also an enterprise that undeniably brings several risks and potentially negative outcomes—making its initial implementation all the more fraught with controversy and complexity. Therefore, the precise “machinery” of its implementation, and how the student functions within that matrix, seem highly deserving of both attention and criticism. I believe that such a focus can lead us to honest, effective, and directly applicable feminist pedagogical practices. Moreover, it can push us to be honest with ourselves and with beginning instructors—not just about what happens as the feminist classroom unfolds and develops, but also about the very first steps taken toward its creation.

Part I: Current Literature

THEORIZING AND ENVISIONING THE FEMINIST CLASSROOM

Although most recent (and older) writings on the feminist classroom emerge from a humanities or social science context, it is important to note that feminist classrooms are certainly not limited (at least in the minds of theorists/instructors) to “Women’s Studies, Race and Ethnic studies classrooms . . . or any classroom that centers on . . . ‘Liberation Studies’” (Macdonald and Sánchez-Casal 4). Recent anthologies such as Sara Munson Deats and Lagretta Tallent Lenker’s Gender and Academe: Feminist Pedagogy and Politics discuss the feminist classroom in the context of everything from graduate-level counselor training programs (Eleanor Roffman) to literary criticism (Deats), while others pay attention to the vastly undertheorized realms of science and technology (Maralee Mayberry’s “Reproductive and Resistant Pedagogies,” showcased in Meeting the Challenge). Debate about issues of execution and definition abounds—for example, Mayberry’s science-grounded essay makes an explicit distinction between collaborative learning and feminist pedagogy, whereas Berenice Malka Fisher, coming from a women’s studies background, states that “collaboration is basic to . . . discussion itself [in the feminist classroom]” (181)—but it seems fair to state that certain ideals about the feminist classroom are commonly, if not universally, held by instructors/theorists. As Macdonald and Sánchez-Casal summarize, “the feminist pedagogical practices that guide our classroom strategies . . . [are:]\[initially] decentering the authority of the professor . . . [legitimizing personal identity and experience . . . discussion-based classes, [and] emphasis on student voice” (5).

It also seems fair to say that such conceptions of the feminist classroom—as a space wherein student voices are engaged and validated, and wherein hierarchy is
broken down—often seem more readily applicable to the college or university setting than to primary and secondary institutions. British scholars Amanda Coffey and Sara Delamont recognize that their job as feminist teachers involves “confronting patriarchy and critiquing malestream knowledge in the classroom” (1), although, perhaps because they teach at the secondary level and have a certain investment in maintaining order, they do not address the necessity or possibility of confronting “malestream” knowledge in themselves or in their own teaching styles. Moreover, they do not speak of a “feminist classroom” per se, though they clearly envision some such notion; their introduction discusses their desire to “discover the discursive, institutional and material spaces through which women teachers are able to shift from powerless to powerful agents of classroom and social change” (13). Most strikingly, and, again, perhaps because their discussions center on elementary and high school teachers, the pair claim that a “major task” of the teacher in her or his “everyday work is the control, organization, transmission and reproduction of knowledge” (14, my emphasis), which is quite a different vision from the non-teacher-centric “co-producer-of-knowledge” model that bell hooks, Macdonald and Sánchez-Casal, and others clearly favor.

GAPS AND OMISSIONS

For all the attention paid to the concept of the feminist classroom, my exploration of the literature ultimately revealed that the issue of initiation is all but ignored, except by a few theorists who approach the issue somewhat nebulously. Berenice Malka Fisher, in her insightful No Angel in the Classroom, offers a laundry list of what she envisions as her duties in the classroom and to her students: “I try to articulate a grading process that reflects my feminist teaching values . . . I seek to express a balance between the traditional requirements of reading . . . and the less familiar ones of practicing . . . and reflecting,” and so forth (107). Although hers is undeniably a feminist classroom by virtue of the terms laid out above, Fisher does not discuss whether or not she makes her students aware of this fact, if they are involved in discussions centered around it, or how students might influence her choices to implement these features and to be communicative (or not) about them. Linda Woodbridge’s otherwise-perceptive essay on “The Centrifugal Classroom” indicates a more conspicuous silence. While she claims that her innovative “problematizing of literary meaning” is “also a feminist project[,] since feminism endorses the multiple rather than the unitary” (137), she does not articulate a concern with conveying the same understanding to her own students. This might not seem like such an omission were it not for the fact that Woodbridge later states that, when she makes it “clear at the beginning of the course that I’m a feminist,” many students “react as if they’ve been slapped” (147). Since, judging by this essay, Woodbridge’s classroom is not only successful but very popular, it seems that she may be sidestepping a critical teaching opportunity. Indeed, she concludes her essay by stating that her classroom “offers a sense of feminist community” (151, my emphasis)—but, apparently, no concrete knowledge for students of what that means. In other words, I argue that reflecting on the pedagogical choices that students find appeal-
ing, and then linking these choices to the instructor’s “admitted” feminism, would be a powerful move in the context of the classroom.

The essays in Mayberry and Rose’s anthology further highlight initiation-related gaps in the literature on the feminist classroom. Their introduction, which touches on many other salient topics, states that “the contributors [to this volume] attest to feminist scholars’ commitment to creating educational processes in which . . . ‘a community of learners’ is empowered” (viii, my emphasis)—with student commitment to the same processes going unmentioned. Further, the editors note that the first of four major themes running through the anthology is the articulation of “the desirability of infusing feminist scholarship and pedagogy into the core curriculum” (xvii, my emphasis). This desire, apparently, belongs to the teacher—at least initially. Mayberry and Rose do not discuss agency on the part of students who will be learning from this core curriculum. Do they have such desire? If they clearly understood what feminist pedagogy strives to offer students, would they develop such a desire? If not, how can instructors/theorists reconcile lack of student investment in a feminist classroom with the choice to nonetheless implement a feminist classroom? If the “ultimate good” is invoked in such a reconciliation—as it often, somewhat silently, seems to be—how do instructors/theorists grapple with the paternalistic undertones of such a concept? This anthology, and other recent ones like it, gloss over what I see as these very salient questions.

Perhaps part of the reason that few theorists discuss the actual founding of the feminist classroom, what role students play in it, and how it may (or may not) contradict the goals of “student-centering,” stems from the nature of feminist pedagogical literature itself. Coming from academics who are highly educated and well-versed in theory, it is no wonder that so much critical work is preoccupied with the teaching end of things rather than the learning end, and with pedagogical practices rather than experiences—even though such ruminations are ostensibly geared toward the final goal of student empowerment. A cursory survey of essays on the feminist classroom reveals that they tend to be structured entirely from the instructor’s viewpoint and entirely in her or his own words or paraphrasing. Again, this is an understandable outcome, as these are written and edited by instructors who have a particular investment in their own classroom outcomes. But it also seems somewhat troubling, especially when such essays feature real-life anecdotes about students. For example, Twenty-First-Century Feminist Classrooms includes essays such as “Feminist [Instructor] Reflections on the Pedagogical Relevance of Identity” (Sánchez-Casal and Macdonald), “Antiracist Pedagogy and Concientización: A Latina Professor’s Struggle” (Maria Eva Valle, my emphasis), and “Student Resistance and Nationalism in the Classroom: [An Instructor’s] Reflections on Globalizing the Curriculum” (Michiko Hase).

Though the latter essay centers on student behavior, it includes no direct quotations from students. Hase claims that her “experiences teaching global gender issues . . . include a set of challenges . . . [that] revolve around student resistance” (92), but she does not consider the possibility that student resistance can be both productive and informative, and that
student resistance itself is a response to a “set of challenges,” quite often the particular challenges of the feminist classroom. I do not mean to suggest that an instructor’s struggles are unimportant, or that her/his position vis-à-vis students is always one of power and dominance. As Allison Dorsey insightfully and provocatively notes in her essay, “‘white girls’ and ‘Strong Black Women’: Reflections on a Decade of Teaching Black History at Predominantly White Institutions (PWIs),” “I have . . . yielded my authority in the classroom . . . [but] at other times, the reality of being a racial minority in a largely white classroom has precluded [me from] engaging in this feminist exercise” (207). Certainly, feminist pedagogical theory should be concerned with such realit[ies].” But we should, nonetheless, also be concerned about the lack of student perspectives in discussions of the feminist classroom, and its initial mobilization in particular. In fact, considering these questions alongside the issue of instructors’ non-privileged positions might give us a better understanding of when, and how, students’ racist, xenophobic, or otherwise prejudiced attitudes intertwine with their resistance to feminist pedagogy.

**Discussing Repercussions and Risks**

Several theorists problematize what I refer to as the “fallout” from the feminist classroom: the negative feedback from students on everything from feminist subject matter to feminist teaching styles, to the female (though not necessarily femininst-coded) teacher. Some of these discussions get closer to answering my initial research question, though they rarely reach the level of dealing with initiation. In other words, the responses that many instructors and theorists report in the literature on the feminist classroom center on student hostility to the inner-workings of such a classroom, though not necessarily to the concept of it, and certainly not to its explicit initiation. The phase of explicit initiation—or the decision not to be explicit about it—is largely elided in such discussions. To take one example, Sandra Bell, Marina Morrow, and Evangelia Tastso-glou’s essay, “Teaching in Environments of Resistance,” analyzes student resistance by (retroactively) investigating students’ backgrounds. As they summarize, white, lower-class males who were hostile to a particular course’s instructor and to her discussions of affirmative action may have been displacing anger about their socio-economic status onto women and people of color in the same educational system. Therefore, the authors conclude that feminist instructors should “view students’ resistance as a positive factor . . . [and] respond to resistance as an ‘active discourse of struggle derived from a complex set of meanings’ in which student ‘practices are invested’” (42). However, their discussion does not consider how student resistance to the particular issue of affirmative action might have been informed by, and related to, the larger framework and “agenda” set by the instructor (that of a feminist/radical classroom), and how that agenda could instead have been introduced in such a way as to preempt or address such resistance. Options could include, for example, having preliminary discussions about class-conscious feminist theory, and/or articulating how non-hierarchical (feminist) classrooms operate from such positions of concern.

Interestingly enough, another section of Bell, Morrow and Tastso-glou’s essay discusses a somewhat contradictory prob-
lem: the authors recount how students in a seminar titled “Feminist Methodology and Directed Research” “refused to engage in the required literature review and would not adopt any structure in their research agenda,” in “protest against what they perceived as the instructors’ antifeminist practices” (31). One student argued, “Why would we want to . . . read other peoples’ research? Aren’t we supposed to write about our own experience[?]” (31). Such over-enthusiastic adoption of the student-centered, experience-valuing aspects of feminist pedagogy seems to be a clear case not only of (misguided) resistance to a feminist classroom, but also of the perils of not clearly establishing what such a classroom should entail. The authors conclude that “of concern [is] the extent to which student challenges impede a fuller understanding of . . . the extent to which one considers a theoretical framework to be of importance in a feminist classroom” (34), rather than allowing that those student challenges may very well highlight a real and dire need for a framework, one that is foregrounded from the very beginning of the course. To do so would mean laying out expectations, definitions, and goals, and opening those up to student discussion. Such practices would, I believe, not only contribute to a more “feminist feel” in the so-called feminist classroom, but also circumvent reactionary, simplistic positions such as those adopted by the protesting students.

COVERT OPERATIONS?

Some of the current literature on the feminist classroom shows an impulse toward covertness in that classroom’s founding—an approach that is either treated as a necessary evil, or with an almost cheerful lack of self-criticism. In “The Centrifugal Classroom,” Linda Woodbridge writes that she “rather sneakily” (148) introduces feminist and other radical theories to her students; moreover, she indicates that she considers such covertness to be worthwhile. Cheyenne Marilyn Bonnell’s essay, “FreshMAN Composition: Blueprint for Subversion,” suggests that feminist instructors saddled with a freshman composition course “feminist-ize” it with gender-related content. As she says, “popular culture has, to some degree, normalized gender issues, so when they surface on a syllabus there is less of a feeling that the instructor is importing exotic material” (215, my emphasis). Bonnell’s tone and diction—“surface,” “exotic”—not only allow that gender issues might constitute an artificial curricular insertion, they also invoke the notion of a covert operation. One must also note that her “subversion” is aimed at student expectations and knowledge, not those of an institution, system, or administration. Although we may admire the goals and/or end results of instructors such as Bonnell, important opportunities may be lost when feminist instructors carry out course-long projects that have been imagined, and executed, in cagey or evasive terms. One stands to lose student trust, the democratic aspect of the feminist classroom, the occasion for learning about feminism, instructor respect for student intelligence and willingness, or all of the above.

STEPS IN THE RIGHT DIRECTION

Though it seems that the question with which I began this article—how, exactly and specifically, one initializes the feminist classroom (or how one might justify the decision not to openly do so)—has
not been fully engaged with in recent writing, some theorists have hinted at the cracks in the wall, so to speak. Frances A. Maher’s essay, “My Introduction to ‘Introduction to Women’s Studies’: The Role of the Teacher’s Authority in the Feminist Classroom” does not directly address the issue of founding that titular space, but does acknowledge that space’s limitations and suggest that greater explicitness might begin to ameliorate or at least address these limitations. Maher explains that she intended for a past course to be “built on [student] questions” (25), by allowing students to pick their readings from a very large list of options organized by general topic. However, this led to the overwhelmingly white class routinely picking white authors, at which point Maher felt obligated to step in. As she reflects, “often, I think teachers set up a pseudodemocracy in the classroom . . . we pretend that everyone gets to choose . . . and then resort to manipulation to make sure that our own agenda gets covered somehow” (30). Acknowledging one’s “reluctance to use (and therefore explicitly name and describe) the roots and nature of [one’s] own power and authority in the classroom” (27) seems to be one of the preliminary steps toward full disclosure about, and in, the feminist classroom, and toward truly involving students in the creation—or at least the informed adoption—of such a space.

CONCLUSIONS FROM CURRENT LITERATURE

Although some of the aforementioned accounts attempt to concretize theory and give practical examples of work within the feminist classroom, few, if any, get to the bottom-line question of how one initially launches this classroom, practically and specifically. The reluctance or refusal of feminist/radical pedagogy theorists to discuss this stage (or, perhaps, to see it as relevant) contributes to the sense that some believe it “just happens”—i.e., that through some combination of teacher technique, applications of theory, and student engagement, the feminist classroom simply comes into existence. On the other hand, it is clear that the feminist classroom is the brain-child of the teacher in essentially all cases; the range of possibilities for who stands behind the initial agenda and whose knowledge or expertise is being harnessed at the moment of this classroom’s inception is narrowed to a single, central figure. Even in the most radical and critical of analyses, this centralized figure creates serious problems for the de-centered teacher model espoused by bell hooks and others, and for the notion of the feminist classroom as a collaborative project—problems that, at the very least, could be alleviated by greater honesty and disclosure. If the success of the feminist classroom sometimes depends on its explicit assertion (as I will discuss in Part II), and, conversely, if resistance to the feminist classroom stems from “students’ partial understanding of feminist pedagogical practice” (Mayberry and Rose x, my emphasis), it is clear that coherent, well-articulated explanations of implementation need to happen in the feminist classroom, as well as in the related literature.

Part II: Field Interviews

DEFINITIONS OF THE FEMINIST CLASSROOM

To add an experiential dimension to my research, I interviewed the then-associate
director of the Women’s and Gender Studies Program at my university, as well as a number of undergraduate and graduate students who had ties to the program. Regardless of their status as student or instructor, all of my interviewees had remarkably similar working definitions of the feminist classroom, ones that stress equality among students and/or equality between students and instructor. These concepts, of course, do not always mean the same thing; equality among students might still mean inequality between students and instructor. As one student astutely stated, feminist classrooms are ones in which hierarchy is “minimized” (Kate Stivers),7 not necessarily abolished or even minimal. Nonetheless, collaboration and a non-hierarchical ethos seem to stand out as the main features of the feminist classroom, for both students and instructors. They made such remarks as, “[the feminist classroom is] a collaborative environment not based on the banking model of education” (Jeanette Lee); “it’s a [classroom] where equal weight is given to all contributions to class . . . even if they do not mirror what the professor is saying” (Lauren Garcia-Williams); and “the feminist classroom will allow everyone to speak and diffuse hierarchical systems as much as possible” (Christine Bowles). Respondents also said that discussion, rather than lecturing, has to take precedence for them to feel as if the classroom is a feminist one; one student wrote that “there will be as much discussion as lecture” (Bowles), and one instructor concurred, “I never lecture, in upper level classes, particularly” (Lee).

However, despite their consensus on equality and collaboration as hallmarks of the feminist classroom, the interviewees clearly feel that this is not a typical state of affairs. Rather, it is one to be sought after and fought for—echoing the sentiments espoused by many of the theorists I looked at, and also confirming the accuracy of feminist pedagogical language, with its emphasis on “transforming . . . environments” and “foster[ing] institutional change” (DeSole and Butler 217). In fact, if we are to see feminist pedagogy as part of “the project of democratizing educational work to the end of developing a more just society,” as Berenice Malka Fisher does (2), then it might not be a stretch to say that feminist classrooms model such processes of change, albeit in miniature and with restrictions and limitations. As one student stated, the feminist classroom is a place in which “the status of the students and the status of professor are more equal than usual” (Bowles, my emphasis), indicating a palpable and perhaps even calculable change in the eyes of students—not just the instructors who espouse an ethos of revolution and transformation.

**CONTRADICTIONS AND TENSIONS**

As indicated by the latter student’s designation of students and professors as “more equal” rather than simply “equals,” the feminist classroom often retains an inherent power imbalance. However, it is difficult to say whether this is a residual effect of the “banking system” model that Paulo Freire has discussed at length, or an ultimately inescapable feature of all conceivable classrooms.9 In fact, the aforementioned student went on to say that “unfortunately, I think instructors establish everything in a classroom,” although feminist ones allow “more of a collaborative effort” (Bowles). The instructor I interviewed also readily admitted that she “establish[es] a basic structure,”
and that “it’s unfair to pretend that [her higher status] doesn’t exist” (Lee)—all of which indicates that collaboration and equality are better characterized as products of the feminist classroom, rather than a priori features. Moreover, it seems clear from these responses that the feminist classroom is usually an enterprise brought about by the instructor, even if students are indispensable in its ongoing maintenance and/or development. When asked to qualify whether or not students themselves seem specifically invested in a feminist classroom per se, the same instructor replied “no,” adding, “I haven’t heard of [a class] steering a course into a new kind of structure unless the professor has allowed for that possibility” (Lee). One student agreed, “I don’t think students often set out to establish a feminist classroom beyond . . . personal contributions to discussion” (Bowles). Most interestingly, one student specifically said that “in order to establish a feminist classroom the goal must be named and agreed upon at the outset” (my emphasis), something “some women’s studies professors attempt . . . but that most do not achieve” (Stivers). Perhaps this is why literature on the feminist classroom so rarely addresses initiation: because so few instructors feel they have executed that step in a defendable, positive, or successful way. We fear that students may not be agreeable to embarking on a feminist journey of learning. Paradoxically, of course, that seems to be all the more reason for addressing, not ignoring, the particular issue of initiation.

The above responses point to major contradictions and tensions within the theory and practice of the feminist classroom and further highlight gaps and omissions when read against the current literature. For one, many theorists conceive of the feminist classroom as a reaction against normal hierarchical set-ups, rather than recognizing that it (usually) stems from a normal hierarchical set-up. That is, the instructor gets to set the “agenda” not just of the course content, but of the attendant (feminist) pedagogy as well; as one student put it, the “professor definitely sets the tone of Feminist [sic] class” (Garcia-Williams). To be fair, many if not most feminist pedagogical theorists admit that they do possess greater power, and that they tend to inadvertently command the respect and even deference of students. As my instructor interviewee candidly stated, “there’s a hierarchy there because I’m the one grading the class” (Lee). However, the inherent contradictions of those two positions (de-centered and central) are not treated with much candor, nor is the possibility that feminist or radical pedagogical practices can “be” or “feel” forced upon a student as much as conservative ideology or banking-system thinking. It seems clear that the field of feminist and radical pedagogy would benefit greatly from an increase in honest discussions about how such tensions are resolved, and how instructors can best reconcile the paradox of “mandating freedom,” so to speak. Moreover, we need more criticism that specifically discusses the possibility that there may always be a fundamental, and fundamentally troubling, misfit between the utopia of the feminist classroom and the fact that it must be implemented by a person in a power position.

VALUING EXPLICITNESS

Considering the above issues, I believe it is imperative for feminist instructors (in their roles as both teachers and theorists) to be forthcoming about their goals. Such
candor and self-reflection can begin to diffuse the centrality of the instructor as much as institutional structures will allow, and perhaps even overcome the hierarchical atmosphere that may still hang over the (instructor-initiated) feminist or radical classroom. Moreover, it may encourage students to participate in or even take responsibility for the feminist classroom. As my instructor interviewee stated, “I . . . regularly have conversations with [students] about how the class is going (i.e., ‘I want to try this exercise today because it puts all the control in your hands—I’ll just be a participant’)” (Lee). Such statements clearly acknowledge hierarchy, but begin to deconstruct it by reifying it in the first place. More importantly, they allow students to feel empowered in the feminist classroom by stressing that that very empowerment is the actual goal, not just a byproduct—regardless of the fact that the classroom’s initialization may have emerged from the instructor’s empowered position.

However, despite the aforementioned instructor’s honesty—she further states that “I tend to be very open about the choices I’m making—I’m certainly very open with my classes about the fact that I’m a feminist”—she also admits that she does not necessarily say, “I’m teaching this class using a feminist pedagogical model” (Lee). There may be many reasons for such reluctance, beyond those identified above: as Fisher states, feminist teachers face the challenge of creating courses that fulfill feminist goals but do not “call into question . . . the legitimacy of the course or [one’s] own teaching competency” (107). On a less charged level, there may be a fear that students will be “distracted” from the actual content or curriculum of the class when the theory behind it is invoked. Nevertheless, I suspect that such lack of disclosure may have equally detrimental effects. For one, such disclosure can, in the context of the classroom, have the effect of demonstrating and modeling the meaning of feminist theory. Further, it may work against the pervasive erasure of feminism in, and by, our allegedly post-feminist society. While recognizing institutional restraint and possible student bias against feminism, perhaps more theorists can begin to look at the “pros” (rather than just the “cons,” as a few have) of full disclosure about the initiation and subsequent operations of the feminist classroom.

“FEELING” FEMINIST

There are several other reasons why the explicit initiation of the feminist classroom is important. Although an instructor responded to the question, “Can a classroom ‘be’ or ‘feel’ feminist without it being specifically designated as such?” with “Sure—absolutely” (Lee), the students I interviewed were not so sure. One specifically said, “I do not believe so” (Stivers), while another said she supposed it could, but that she had not had “either [sic] of these experiences” (Bowles). Further, the latter recounted the fact that she had been in a class with a male professor who was “very conscious of feminist perspectives” but “never came out and admitted [his] . . . were feminist views.” In other words, it seems as if the effectiveness of the feminist classroom agenda (in the most positive sense of the term “agenda”) may depend quite heavily on the instructor’s articulation and/or endorsement of that agenda. My respondents also identified yet another important aspect of the explicit initiation of a feminist classroom: their own comfort and well-being as self-
identified feminist students. One allowed that a classroom could “be” or ‘feel’ feminist” without being designated as such, but noted that “it feels safer if I know upfront that [the] professor is aiming for that goal” (Garcia-Williams). Moreover, the specific invocation of feminism, more than “just” emphasis on collaboration or discussion, may help open up such collaboration and discussion to begin with. The same student said that she values an “environment where women’s oppression is recognized, unlike other classes where I have to explain [about feminism] before I can make a feminist critique and be taken seriously.” In other words, it seems as if feminist statements may suffer from decontextualization or run the risk of being stigmatized by their minority status, when a feminist “agenda” is not clearly introduced at an early point in the class.

Of course, while making feminist students feel comfortable and making classroom space safe for the expression of feminist opinions are both worthy goals, we may encounter the possibility that other students will conversely feel marginalized, in an enactment of what many students might disingenuously call “reverse discrimination.” Nonetheless, greater attention to the explicit initiation of the feminist classroom may actually help mediate and ameliorate this situation. Naïve as it might sound, I venture that an instructor’s honest “confession” of the goal of a feminist classroom, with forthcoming clarity about just what that entails for her or him, can make a safe space for feminism, do away with some of the myths surrounding it, and draw in reluctant or otherwise uninformed students. (After all, as one of my interviewees noted, “feminism is not the status quo in this culture” [Stivers].) Theories of feminist pedagogy have not been entirely open to the possibility that students might wholeheartedly invest themselves in the “feminist classroom” as such if they were familiar with the aims behind the term—much in the same way that researchers have found that many women reject the label of “feminist,” yet agree with most of the specific tenets of feminism when asked about them. Although, surely, institutional pressures and student preconceptions work against the above possibilities (as many of the aforementioned theorists have noted), they at least seem worth exploring in depth.

PUTTING MY PEDAGOGY TO THE TEST

Having initially drawn the above conclusions from my research in the literature and my contact with the aforementioned interviewees, I was inspired to put my own beliefs into action and include a statement of feminist pedagogy on the very first syllabus I drew up, for an introductory writing course on fiction. This statement has been included on my subsequent syllabi, and has not changed significantly since then. When I first begin teaching a class, I read it out loud along with other policies and information on the syllabus. The statement currently reads,

I also expect to have fun with you in this class! Part of this, for me, comes through teaching from a feminist pedagogical perspective. Being “the teacher” doesn’t make me more intelligent than anyone else, though I might have more information. I also believe that your voice is just as important as mine—if not more so—which is why I place a lot of emphasis on participation. Importantly, I recognize that it is not my place to change your views on any subject (well, other than writing!); however, I
am interested in how we can best challenge, understand, and articulate our various positions.

Ideally, this statement makes several things clear to students: first, that I am not under any delusions about the fact that I am the one in charge; second, that I am, nonetheless, interested in troubling that power to a significant degree; and, finally, that students who may not agree with feminist views, and/or who do not self-identify as feminists, are still a welcomed and integral part of the classroom. Indeed, I feel as if the democratic principles of feminism actually preclude me from actively influencing students’ personal opinions, especially when it comes to feminism itself. My goal, instead, is to help them develop informed, critical, and sophisticated viewpoints—a prospect that, as I have previously suggested, is rather impossible when students are not given working definitions for important concepts, including, but not limited to, feminist pedagogy.

Although my attempts at initiating a feminist classroom begin on the very first day of class, at the level of the syllabus, this is certainly not the last time I attempt to make my ideals explicit for my students. My courses—with which I enjoy a great deal of latitude in terms of design—usually require students to engage with queer, female/feminist, and non-white perspectives in literature. More specifically, I frequently design writing assignments that ask students to take, for example, feminist- or queer-theoretical positions on a given text. Equally as important, I believe, these assignments also make clear that I do not require or expect students to personally adopt these positions. (Further, I offer them the opportunity to discuss an alternative assignment with me if they so choose.) Rather, I stress that I expect them to possess, and demonstrate, a thoughtful and educated engagement with those positions—which is, after all, what we should expect from feminist as well as nonfeminist (or even anti-feminist) students.

I have yet to have any student resist or question the aforementioned pedagogical choices. Perhaps this is because I make it clear that my feminist pedagogy is neither programmatic nor dogmatic. But it should also be noted that my experiences as an instructor are likely quite different from those of theorists such as Michiko Hase or Allison Dorsey, though we may share a few of the same challenges. As a white, U.S.-born person, I do not have to account for my race or ethnicity in the same way that others do—especially considering that the feminist views of nonwhite and foreign-born instructors are often seen to compound their Otherness, or are taken as just another aspect of their “bitter” or “critical” attitudes toward the status quo. As a younger person, I also benefit from not having my views dismissed as “old-fashioned” or “jaded” in the same way that an older self-identified feminist instructor might. At the same time, it is unclear to me if, and how, my perceived sexual orientation may reflect on my feminist views. I do not openly identify my orientation in the classroom, though I have often been read as bisexual or lesbian by students and others—in part, I suspect, because I frequently bring queerness into the classroom dialogue. Moreover, it is questionable whether my students as a whole are immediately prepared to accept a feminist instructor, no matter her race, age, or sexual orientation:
as an expensive, private Southern university, my institution has long had a relatively conservative reputation. It has no notable population of nontraditional, commuter, or part-time students, and in fact its students are sometimes dismissed as “spoiled rich kids” by those outside the undergraduate system, including many of the graduate students who teach them. Although I have personally found that such stereotypes inaccurately reflect the strong work ethic and open-mindedness of the majority of students here, and although I am cognizant of the fact that I am in a relatively privileged position to present a feminist perspective, the challenge of working with students who are not necessarily inclined to espouse radical perspectives on gender, race, class, and sexuality nonetheless remains.

With the above in mind as I was preparing this article for submission, I was inspired to go beyond merely reflecting on my attempts at initiating a feminist classroom, and to actually gather reactions from former students. The semester after teaching an introductory writing course on drama, I contacted former students via email, attached our syllabus (including the statement in question), and asked them about their responses to the statement itself and/or its inclusion in the syllabus. I stressed that they could write as little or as much as they wanted, and that they should not be concerned about offending me. The two students who responded—both undergraduates who are not affiliated in any way with the Women’s and Gender Studies Program, unlike my other interviewees—had striking comments to make. Below, I reproduce the text of two emails in which these young women shared their reactions to my questions.

What initial reactions did you have to it—that is, either to the statement or its inclusion on the syllabus? (Or both.)

(Drew:) I immediately found this statement to be very refreshing. I found that the syllabus was a good place to include this statement. It is far too often that teachers think that their voice far surpasses anyone else’s in the classroom. I like classes where the students get as equally engaged as the professors.

(Sarah:) My initial response was primarily one of shock and surprise because I have never had a teacher be so honest and willing to treat students as peers and equals. In addition it struck me as an odd bit of information to include in a syllabus because a traditional syllabus is usually geared toward describing the course and outlining what is expected of the student, not on how the teacher will act toward the student.

How did it affect your expectations of the class, classroom, or instructor (me)?

(Drew:) Honestly, I knew at that point that I would enjoy the class. I completely agree with this statement and from then on I felt comfortable expressing my views. I knew that my comments made in class would be free of judgment from you.

(Sarah:) I went into the course expecting to have a respected opinion, which really eliminates any fear or hesitations with regards to speaking in class. Including this disclaimer in the syllabus creates a classroom environment where students can feel like mature adults and enjoy a large degree of independence, something I don’t necessarily expect from most classes where I know the professor will do all the talking.
How did it affect your experience in class (if at all)? [Another way to think about this is, would you have thought of the class/instructor differently if such a statement had not been included?]

(Drew:) I do not think I would have thought of you differently if the statement would not have been made. Although, as I did mention above, it put me at ease from the very beginning.

(Sarah:) I would not have thought of the class differently, but that is only because I really believe Nicole lived up to her word in the disclaimer. She did treat us all as adults, and I thought the constant participation among the students was a reflection of the principles outlined in her disclaimer. I would have thought differently of Nicole if she did not live up to her word, especially after including it in written form in the syllabus, which is a contract with the students.

Needless to say, the majority of the above thoughts thrilled and emboldened me. The stress on “honest” and “refreshing” indicated that a small move such as including a feminist pedagogical statement on a syllabus can go a long way toward giving students a unique, and inviting, relationship with one another and with the instructor. And although they did not explicitly say so, it was clear that students came away with a clear (and real-life) definition of the phrase “feminist pedagogy,” which might at first sound daunting. However, I must admit that some of the above thoughts initially disappointed me. Both students responded to the last question (Would you have thought of the class/instructor differently if such a statement had not been included?) by, essentially, stating that the statement itself did not matter very much. After sending out my email solicitation, I fantasized that students might rejoin with, “things just wouldn’t have worked if you didn’t explicitly make this statement,” or, “without your invocation of feminism in the syllabus, this class would not have been as amazing as it was!” But when I read deeper into Drew and Sarah’s responses, I realized more clearly what they were saying. It was not that the statement did not matter at all, but rather that it was my fulfillment of it that mattered most. In other words, their initial trust in me—which was invoked by the statement—was honored by the way in which I conducted my teaching.

These sentiments, of course, speak to something broader than feminist pedagogy itself: feminist ethics. Although I had not quite thought of feminist pedagogy as a form of feminist ethics before, these students’ responses brought me to this understanding. In other words, perhaps it is not just openness about the practical initiation of the feminist classroom, but the combination of that openness with a following-through on the principles thereof that makes for radical teaching/learning. And, in fact, it seems—at least from my students’ point of view—that this initial openness may compel us to follow through on our principles in a way that we might not otherwise. Of course, explicitly setting up feminist stakes in the classroom may result, publicly, in “failure.” But two important points need to be made. First, if ours are to be realistic and progressive feminist pedagogies, we cannot be afraid of the possibility of failure. As bell hooks wrote in Feminist Theory from Margin to Center in 1984, “there has been no other movement for social justice in our society that has been as self-critical as the feminist movement. Feminist willingness to change direction when needed has been a major source of strength . . . in
feminist struggle. That internal critique is essential to any politics of transformation” (xiii). Secondly, refusing to openly set feminist stakes in our teaching means we may lose valuable opportunities to model for our students concepts such as passionate commitment to principle; the process of academic and professional goal-setting; and what it means to attempt to fulfill our responsibilities—not just to our students, but to ourselves, to our colleagues, and to our communities.

**Final Conclusions**

When I first conceived of this project, I thought my main question would be, “What happens when a teacher explicitly launches a so-called feminist classroom?”—keeping in mind such secondary questions as “What do we/they mean by a ‘feminist classroom’?” Over the course of executing it, however, I found that the question shifted to an even earlier stage in the life of the feminist classroom, mainly because of a fundamental gap in both theory and practice. It seems that instructors are either not explicitly initiating such classrooms at all, or that they are unwilling to discuss that stage in the process, whether or not it takes place. Such an unwillingness can stem from many sources. At one end of the spectrum, we might trace it to instructors’ inability to face the fact that their very real action of initialization flies in the face of cherished feminist pedagogical notions about collaboration, democracy, and consensus; on the other, we might trace it to the feeling that it does not matter who sets the initial agenda—or if that agenda is openly discussed—as long as classroom work and interactions proceed along the lines of collaboration, democracy, and consensus.

With progressive politics and educational practices under continued siege in our current climate, it is perhaps not surprising that “the feminist classroom” may still raise anxiety in instructors and administrators alike. But it is clear that many students believe that the question of its initial founding is not one that we should stop asking—which means that instructors and theorists must be more forthcoming about this particular question, even (and perhaps especially) when they cannot answer it. My inclusion of an explanatory pedagogical statement on my syllabus is certainly only one way of initiating a feminist classroom, and it is a very minor one at that. Moreover, my approach to course and assignment design, as well as my solicitation of feedback from former students, constitutes only one version of being open with students about pedagogical desires. However, if the small amount of student feedback I received is any indication, such attempts may go further than we realize in allowing us to practically live out our feminist ideals.

**Notes**

1. My survey is certainly not exhaustive, but I attempted to select a range of relevant recent texts from academic publishers. All of the texts I look at address the issue of the feminist classroom in one way or another, and all incorporate both self-criticism and criticism of other work in the field.

2. All of the materials cited in this article are the work of theorists who are also classroom instructors, or who were at one time. I have made this fact explicit here, though any subsequent references to “theorists” should be understood as interchangeable with the term “instructors.”

3. It is interesting to note that student orientation is often defined in negative terms—e.g., students’ lack of commitment to feminist or feminist classroom goals, or students’ resistance to the same. In fact, it seems as if student
commitment to creating a feminist classroom is an inconceivable notion.

4. This is not to say that students do not also have an investment in the feminist classroom or its outcomes (see above). However, this seems to be a common, though not necessarily articulated, feeling among many theorists. (It is difficult to say whether or not that feeling has a basis in reality—as the second section of this article will show.)

5. Another difficulty with understanding the initiation (verbal, syllabus-wise, etc.) of a feminist classroom is that many scholars and theorists do not specifically discuss whether or not they identify themselves, much less their aims, as feminist. Some speak of how students respond to the teacher-as-woman or teacher-as-minority, though few articulate how exactly they feel these formulations are related to their project of the feminist classroom. (For example, when Coffey and Delamont provide a vignette about a male history student who, upon being disciplined, complained “all you women stick together” [13], they do not reflect on how this comment might relate to an understanding of the teacher-as-feminist. Nor do they clarify if the teacher in question responded to the student based on feminist pedagogical principles.)

6. Although feminist pedagogy has long entertained the notion of students choosing course material, perhaps additional strategies that take student needs, desires, and demographic information into account might further mobilize effective feminist classrooms and bring that mobilization closer to a truly collaborative effort. For example, collecting student “getting-to-know you” questionnaires before the first class takes place could ensure that the scope of classroom material is not wholly anchored in the instructor’s desires and sociocultural position.

7. Interviewees with asterisks by their names (see References) have been given pseudonyms to protect their privacy. As I state in this article, the individuals cited in this section are involved with my university’s Women’s and Gender Studies Program in some capacity; the two students I have taught myself are not. I believed that WGS students and instructors would be more informed about the concept of the feminist classroom to begin with, regardless of what their opinion of it might be. However, in order to critically reflect upon my own practices, feedback from my non-Women’s and Gender Studies students seemed appropriate.

8. I suspect that such recognition of just how high the decks are stacked against feminist pedagogy also demonstrates that the banking system of education is so pervasive as to often suggest itself to be natural and normative.

9. See Freire’s Pedagogy of the Oppressed (1970). Some instructors seem to believe that there can be a classroom completely untainted by hierarchy or patriarchy. One of my interviewees stated, “there’s a hierarchy there because I’m the one grading the class . . . although I’d love to teach an experimental class where there were no grades” (Lee). In other words, this instructor seems to believe that grades—rather than other issues such as the literal position of the teacher in the classroom or the teacher’s higher level of education—are primary in creating classroom hierarchy.

10. Though many of the theorists I looked at do a fine job of discussing negative student reactions and where they stem from, they often seem incapable of admitting that their views are being imposed on the students—regardless of the possibility that, as many clearly feel, this imposition is “for the best.”

11. For example, the Feminist Majority Foundation explains its name by citing the 1995 National Women’s Equality Poll. The poll found that 51 percent of women self-identify as feminists, but that “when respondents . . . were told that the definition of feminism is ‘someone who supports political, economic, and social equality for women,’ the number of women and men who identify as feminist soars [to] 69%.” See http://www.feminist.org/welcome/whynname.html.

12. Graduate students in the English department at my university bear full responsibility for designing and teaching the courses to which they are assigned. (Those courses must, of course, meet the basic Arts & Science guidelines for undergraduate learning—for example, students must write at least twenty pages over the course of the semester, and the instructor must conduct workshops to help students develop their writing skills.)
13. As previously mentioned, some instructors (including one of my interviewees, and theorists such as Bonnell) feel that lack of clarity or discussion about their feminist agenda and their goal of a feminist classroom often has particularly positive ramifications, especially when taking student resistance or prejudice against feminism into account. However, these same theorists do not consider that this lack of clarity may also have very negative ramifications, such as (continued) alienation of feminist students or the effacement of opportunities to educate students about feminism and feminist pedagogy.

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