

Enabling Change: Transformative and Transgressive Learning in Feminist Ethics and Epistemology

DAVID W. CONCEPCIÓN
JULI THORSON EFLIN
Ball State University

Abstract: Through examples of embodied and learning-centered pedagogy, we discuss transformative learning of transgressive topics. We begin with a taxonomy of types of learning our students undergo as they resolve inconsistencies among their pre-existing beliefs and the material they confront in our course on feminist ethics and epistemology. We then discuss ways to help students maximize their learning while confronting internal inconsistencies. While we focus on feminist topics, our approach is broad enough to be relevant to anyone teaching a transgressive or controversial topic.

Students hold beliefs and values that conflict with many of the ideas expressed in the texts we use in our feminist ethics and epistemology course. The tension caused by this conflict, which we characterize as a type of incoherence, presents students with particular learning challenges.¹ In what follows, our first aim is to report our attempt to better understand these learning challenges so that we could properly evaluate the merits of possible pedagogies relative to student needs. Our attempt resulted in the taxonomy of learning that we present. Specifically, we differentiate additive from evaluative learning. Within evaluative learning we distinguish transformative from confirmative learning. Our second aim is to offer some examples of and reflections on the pedagogies we created to help students learn accurately despite the challenges we identify as associated with transformatively resolving the incoherence they experience among their pre-existing beliefs/values and the transgressive material they confront in our feminist ethics and epistemology class. In the end, we define, recommend, and provide examples of pedagogies that are embodied and learning-centered. We argue that these pedagogies enable and support students as they revise

some of their pre-existing understandings. While we focus on feminist topics, our approach is broad enough to be relevant to any teacher of a course that addresses a transgressive topic, and particularly relevant to teachers of courses that emphasize “controversial” topics (e.g., critical race theory, queer theory, Marxism, etc.).

Additive and Evaluative Learning

Constructivist educational theory reveals that people learn by assimilating new beliefs and/or values into what they already believe and/or value.² We understand this assimilation as taking one of two primary forms. In the first primary form, additive learning, the newly encountered beliefs or values are experienced by the learner as cohering with the learner’s pre-existing beliefs and values.³

The second primary form of learning is evaluative. In evaluative learning the pre-existing understandings of a person are incoherent or felt by the learner to be in conflict with newly encountered beliefs and values. Students experience this incoherence when we discuss compulsory and differential body comportment as one facet of oppression. In “Throwing Like a Girl,” Iris Marion Young argues that under many current patriarchies women tend to be trained not to make full use of their body’s spatial potential; feminine movement is timid, uncertain, and hesitant, and women are taught to underestimate their capacities.⁴ This feminine body comportment is part of what Marilyn Frye calls “sex marking” and “sex announcing.”⁵ When a person comports herself in a feminine manner she announces that she is a woman and is thus more easily marked by others trying to determine the gender of unknown others. Because oppression is easier when those who would be oppressed are easily distinguished from those who would not be oppressed, sex marking and sex announcing facilitate oppression. What Young and Frye agree on is that how people carry themselves is largely socially constructed and that most people move in manly and womanly ways, often without any awareness of the gendered aspects of their comportment.

For many of the students in our feminist ethics and epistemology course the notion that how they carry themselves is partially or largely socially constructed does not generate significant tension. Nearly all of our students, however, do experience incoherence when they attend directly to the ethical response they believe they should deliver in response to the link Young and Frye argue exists between body comportment and oppression. Many women in our class feel uncomfortably exposed or alternatively “bitchy” when they intentionally occupy more space than they typically do. Some of the women in our class cannot own the space they feel they rightfully should. Conversely, many of

the men in our class are uncomfortable giving up space. As one male student put it: "It's authentically me that enjoys being big and there is nothing wrong with me being comfortable in my skin, so why shouldn't I take up as much space as I need to be comfortable? I don't want to be sexist, but how is my taking up lots of space oppressing women?" The view that how one, for example, sits can be an expression and reinscription of sexist norms could not simply be added to most of our students' belief and value sets, which appear to have contained the belief that gendered differences in how people use physical space are value neutral.

We believe there are two ways to resolve tensions between pre-existing understandings and newly encountered beliefs or values and thus two sub-types of evaluative learning. We call the first type of evaluative learning *confirmative*. In confirmative learning after due consideration a person rejects newly encountered beliefs or values without revising any pre-existing understandings. It is important to stress that as an instance of evaluative learning, where a person is evaluating beliefs that cannot fit together in an attempt to establish felt coherence among the beliefs she endorses, confirmative learning is not the non-learning of a person who refuses to consider new information as soon as s/he realizes that it initially appears not to fit with her pre-existing beliefs and/or values. In such a case of non-learning no evaluation occurs. In sincerely confirmative learning the learner's belief and/or value set does not significantly change but careful weighing, with the possibility of abandoning or revising pre-existing beliefs, does occur.

Transformative Learning

In contrast to confirmative learning where a felt incoherence between pre-existing understandings and new information is resolved by not incorporating the new information into one's endorsed (as opposed to unreflectively held) belief and value set, in transformative learning some alteration of one's pre-existing belief and/or value set occurs.⁶ We distinguish between systemic and partial transformative learning. *Partial transformative learning* occurs when a person achieves a felt coherence within her belief/value set by replacing some number of pre-existing understandings with newly encountered beliefs and/or values. Given that many beliefs and/or values are mutually supportive with regard to the coherence of a person's belief/value set, it is likely that most partial transformative learning involves a plurality of beliefs and/or values. Instantaneous or even rapid *systemic transformative learning*, where in a moment or a matter of a few days a person rejects nearly all of her/his pre-existing understandings while replacing them with another set of beliefs and values, probably never occurs. If such a mo-

ment were to occur, it is likely to be thought of more as a psychotic break than as a moment of transformative learning. Nevertheless, over a sometimes relatively short amount of time it is possible for a person to undergo such extensive partial transformative learning that the cumulative effect is properly called systemic. We think of these dramatic changes as paradigm shifts. Unlike its original use by Thomas Kuhn, where one ontology and/or method for gaining knowledge is rejected wholesale and replaced with another by a bulk of working scientists, the “paradigm shift” we have in mind occurs within individuals.⁷ Based on their writings and oral arguments in other courses we believe that at the beginning of the term most of our students would self-identify as non-feminist, politically moderate or left-leaning classical liberals. This majority is joined by a small number of students we believe would identify as what Rosemarie Tong would call liberal feminists.⁸ By semester’s end nearly every student explicitly self-identifies as feminist, many of them as radical feminists. Insofar as these explicit identifications accurately represent changes in the belief and value sets of the students in our feminist ethics and epistemology course, most of them experience significant transformative learning and a few experience what we characterize as a paradigm shift. A student who completed the course over two years ago referred to it as “the course that changed my life.”⁹

We find it helpful to envision the types of learning we have thus far described as being on a continuum relative to how much unlearning, or alteration of pre-existing understandings, occurs. Unlearning is coming to disbelieve what you had once been taught was true, either explicitly through formal education or implicitly through socialization. Pure additive learning is on the minimal unlearning pole and systemic transformative learning is on the maximal unlearning pole:

Types of Learning

(1) **Additive**

(2) Evaluative	Evaluative	Evaluative
<u>Confirmative</u>	<u>Transformative (Partial)</u>	<u>Transformative (Systemic)</u>

Minimal Unlearning \longleftrightarrow Maximal Unlearning

We recognize that lived experience can rarely be portrayed in a simple chart and this is no exception. Many instances of unlearning are simultaneously partially additive, confirmative, and transformative.

An alternative chart might stress the amount of learning or quantitative increase to a person’s belief/value set that occurs, with minimal learning on the left. In such a schema confirmative learning would be to the far left insofar as it produces no new members to a would-be

learner's belief/value set beyond the new belief that one has confirmed some number of pre-existing beliefs. Further, inasmuch as some instances of additive learning increase the number of new members of a learner's belief/value set more than some instances of partial transformative learning, some instances of additive learning would need to be further to the right than some instances of transformative learning. Unlike such an alternative "learning" schema, our chart stresses the amount of "unlearning," or revising and abandoning of pre-existing understandings, that occurs, with the maximum amount of unlearning to the right. To learn transformatively is simultaneously to unlearn.

Highly Transformative Learning

Given the course content we present and their backgrounds, most of the students in our Midwestern university experience some transformative learning in our feminist ethics and epistemology course. Some of them change so significantly that we characterize their experience as a paradigm shift. To further clarify, these experiences of transformative learning are matters of degree both quantitatively and qualitatively.

Quantitatively, sometimes a person needs to revise or abandon only a small number of pre-existing beliefs or values to (re)achieve a comfortable felt level of coherence among pre-existing understandings and newly discovered ideas; other times s/he may need to revise a large number of beliefs. Sometimes transformative learning involves considerable unlearning while other times only minimal unlearning is necessary.

Qualitatively, sometimes the beliefs or values a person needs to revise are relatively unimportant to her or him; other times a person must revise dearly held beliefs. Sometimes the pre-existing understandings that are problematized by new experiences are peripheral to a student's understanding of self and the world. Other times the pre-existing understandings are central to a person's understanding and self-valuing. It can be emotionally very difficult to sacrifice central pre-existing understandings. Put another way, there is great variety among students relative to what they have at stake in unlearning certain beliefs and values. It can hurt to accept what one has long denied. For example, some women in our class for the first time begin to believe the social world they live in disadvantages them. Righteous indignation and sadness are frequent reactions to this loss of innocence. As McGonigal has put it:

Transformative learning theory also recognizes that changing one's perspective is not simply a rational process. Being forced to consider, evaluate, and revise underlying assumptions can be an emotionally charged experience. Students have successfully used their current paradigms to excel in school

and understand the world. They may reasonably be reluctant to abandon what they believe is the right way to think, create, and solve problems. Resistance to perspective transformation is common, even among students who are motivated to learn.¹⁰

When evaluative learning places something as intimate as a student's self-conception in the balance, teachers can anticipate some retrenchment.

Students learning evaluatively may "shut down" or stop evaluating and retreat into pre-existing understandings. For some students the cognitive dissonance generated in our course is difficult to handle cognitively and emotionally. Sometimes it is too much to handle because it happens too quickly. Other times the unlearning required to reach coherence would be too disruptive to a student's life and no amount of time is enough. Of course, some amount of retreat can be healthy.¹¹ Most of us need periods of peace when experiencing turmoil. Indeed, we are careful to not push too hard on certain students, especially when they (sometimes unintentionally) reveal to us the dangers they face at home. Yet long-standing retrenchment is the absence of learning. (Again, retrenchment must be distinguished from confirmative learning. Long standing commitment to a position reaffirmed through confirmative learning is not retrenchment.) We push for learning and thus tend to allow only temporary retrenchment.

Beyond retrenchment, misinterpretation of new ideas can be common when a nuanced and accurate understanding of a newly experienced idea would generate a need for substantial transformative unlearning of dearly held pre-existing understandings but a rough understanding would not generate much felt incoherence. Without much cognitive dissonance, many of the women in our class accept that many relationships in which women participate are sexist. When pressed to examine whether the features of the sexist relationships they have studied are found in their own relationships some of these same students balk. Such students cannot transfer or apply what they have learned. While such students understand aspects of sexist relationships in the abstract they have not understood them fully. Another absence of full understanding occurs when students gloss nuance. When idea A1 fits well within one's current conceptual scheme and idea A2 does not, a learner may mistakenly take idea A2 to be A1. The subtler the distinction between A2 and A1 and the more disquieting A2 but comfortable A1 is for a student, the more likely it is that a student will mistake idea A2 for A1.

Our understanding of transformative unlearning of dearly held pre-existing understandings inspires us to interact compassionately with students to empower them to meet our demand for on-going, appropriately nuanced learning. We often choose to view student glossing

of nuance not as a lack of effort, laziness, or willful inattention but as an understandable part of the process of transformative unlearning. Rather than thinking of them as combative, we try to coax “shut down” or disgruntled students out of temporary moments of understandable retrenchment. For example, outside of class we talk privately with students about their emotional responses to the concepts found in the texts (ready to make referrals if our expertise is exhausted). We assign homework that allows them to prepare what they will say in class. We help students develop ideas and arguments that are at odds with the texts. A full account of our coaxing pedagogies are explained in the “Embodied, Learning-Centered Pedagogy and Narrative” section below, but before moving to that discussion we must complete our attempt to understand student experience by reflecting on transgression.

Transgression and Learning

Paradigmatically, to transgress is to flout a valued norm in such a way as to threaten the viability of the norm. As such, whether an experience, act, practice, institution, piece of course content, or person is transgressive is context dependent; there are many types of norms and many ways to flout them. As is evaluative learning, transgression is a matter of degree both quantitatively and qualitatively. Quantitatively, a teacher, student, text, idea, or pedagogy may flout many or few norms. Qualitatively, a teacher, student, text, idea, or pedagogy may flout a norm that is unimportant relative to various cultural, institutional, and personal norms. Alternatively, the transgression may be centrally important to a person, institution, or culture. Our concern is with those transgressions that are individually phenomenologically (especially emotionally, cognitively, and socially) significant. Cartesian skepticism is transgressive in the sense that it flouts cultural norms about the nature of knowledge. Yet many students experience Cartesian skepticism as a temporary annoyance in philosophy class, merely a philosopher’s game, but not as something important that requires any changes in how to live or conceive of one’s life. Most of the students in our feminist ethics and epistemology course tend to experience the texts they read as highly important; most of our students’ core understandings of themselves and their social worlds are troubled by the ideas they encounter in our course.¹²

When ideas found in texts are transgressive of cultural norms, we find that they exacerbate the retrenchment and misinterpretation associated with the flouting of personal norms constitutive of highly transformative learning. The learning challenges of personal transgression are heightened when the learning also constitutes a cultural transgression. Our experience confirms a more general version of a

quip in Sinclair's *I, Candidate for Governor: And How I Got Licked*: "It is difficult to get a man to understand something when his salary depends on him not understanding it."¹³ It is hard to get a student to understand something when her/his social and material world will be disrupted if s/he understands it. Student retrenchment and misinterpretation should not surprise teachers when there are social (e.g., losing old friends) and/or material (e.g., parents refusing to pay for college) penalties for understanding, speaking of, and/or living consistently with newly unlearned and culturally transgressive understandings (e.g., that many heterosexual norms are exploitative). As Marilyn Frye has put it: "people cannot be persuaded of things they are not ready to be persuaded of; there are certain complexes of will and prior experience which will inevitably block persuasion, no matter the merits of the case presented."¹⁴

Further, we believe a failure to understand is not always the product of understandable machinations of the will or mere inattention. Ignorance of norms can be actively produced and maintained.¹⁵ Sometimes a norm is difficult to examine because it is highly complex and widely dispersed (e.g., women performing more labor in the home than men). Other times a norm is difficult to examine because part of its nature is to be enigmatic (e.g., various norms regarding the erotic). Focusing attention on norms that function as if they were designed to be inscrutable represents a unique form of transgression. One reason for thinking that a norm is a member of the set "norms that a culture *really* does not want analyzed" is that it is difficult to identify. A second reason to think that a norm is very important in and to a culture is that the emotional, social, and material penalties for analyzing it are severe. To consider various understandings of our social world, we strive to have our students analyze enigmatic norms or marginalized and/or popularly vilified beliefs and values even though doing so can incur social and material penalties. For example, the students in our feminist ethics and epistemology course study the social production of ignorance regarding female sexual gratification as example and reinscription of sexual inequality. Judging by the reaction of some of our colleagues, the role ignorance of female orgasm plays in sustaining sexist relationships and larger sexist institutions, and how we ought to behave in light of this norm, is a serious transgression or focusing of attention where our culture really does not want attention focused.¹⁶ By embodying transgression in a discussion of something many people in our culture would not want discussed, we allow students to learn about the epistemology and ethics of transgression, which is part of the subject matter of the course.

To bring together what has been said so far: We are not surprised that many of the students in our feminist ethics and epistemology

course retrench and miss nuance since they are engaged in analysis of hegemonic norms (this act of analysis often itself a transgression) and many are undergoing highly transformative unlearning. However, we believe that teachers are obligated not to allow most students (e.g., those who will not be significantly harmed by unlearning) to permanently retrench or attain merely rough understandings; teachers have a professional responsibility to insist that most students learn (i.e., do not retrench) and learn accurately (i.e., appreciate nuance) even when learning is transgressing and highly transformative. We do not intend to make the students in our feminist ethics and epistemology class uncomfortable. Our aim for students is common enough. We hope for them to be able to accurately articulate the views found in the texts we assign and then analyze the merits of those views with no more propensity toward a conservation of pre-existing understandings than they would have if the material were not transgressive and inspiring of transformative unlearning. But we are not surprised that many of our students are uncomfortable and behave in ways that others may interpret as combativeness or laziness. Our students are not actively trying to avoid learning (by being disruptive) nor are they disposed to not put in appropriate effort. They are experiencing unusually high amounts of incoherence between their pre-existing understandings and the new ideas they encounter in our class. Our practical question is: How can we make it as likely as possible that students will accurately learn and evaluate, knowing full well that many of them will misinterpret central transgressive ideas, retrench because of the costs of transformative learning, or both?

*Unjustified Resistance: Problematic Advocating
versus Insisting On Evaluative Learning*

Before answering the question posed at the end of the last section with a description and analysis of some of our pedagogical choices, let us rebut a potential objection. One student and a small number of colleagues have worried that we problematically advocate an illiberal feminist worldview, that we are indoctrinators as opposed to teachers. The fact that this objection still arises with regard to feminist ideas and not the ideas of, say, Socrates, supports our claim that feminist philosophy remains transgressive in a way that quite a bit of other philosophy does not. Our response is three-fold.

First, the free exchange of minority views plays a crucial role in a free society. We believe that there are widespread racist, sexist, classist, etc. norms in current U.S. culture and that these norms are endorsed and reinscribed with ubiquitous regularity. We believe that not only is it unproblematic to attend directly to critical analyses of these disad-

vantaging norms, but also that it is ethically and politically meritorious to engage in such scrutiny. As Harry Brod has put it: “Given prevalent racism and sexism . . . given the students’ existing prejudices, the teacher’s neutrality is not an alternative to their prejudices on social issues, it rather allows their perpetuation.”¹⁷ Our course is part of a remedy to, not an exacerbation of, an illiberal lack of parity in the consideration of reasonable views.

It may be further objected that the feminist views found in the texts we teach are not among the set of reasonable beliefs. Obviously, we disagree. However, the objection that the content we teach should not be taught is distinct from the objection that we teach in an indoctrinating manner, and we will not here address the objection that the content we teach should not be given hearing in colleges and universities.

Second, all teachers advocate. At a minimum, the texts a teacher assigns reveal that teacher’s belief that some ideas are more worthy of study than others. We assume that the advocacy of certain ideas as more worthy of study than others implicit in faculty selection of texts is not only unproblematic but also a professional responsibility. Further, we believe even the most scrupulously bland pedagogue teaches from a specific point of view that dialectically evolves from and fosters a particular worldview. It is thus true of us, as it is for all teachers, that we advocate in a way. Fortunately, given its impossibility, non-advocacy need not be a teacher’s goal. What is necessary is openness to dissent, a robust openness that carefully attends to subtle differences in power that can shut down dissent even when a teacher has a subjective commitment to openness. Critics must show not merely that teachers targeting evaluative learning of transgressive topics advocate, but that they advocate in a problematically intolerant manner.¹⁸

Third, and most importantly, our insistence on accurate evaluative learning of transgressive topics is not problematically intolerant. Because (i) most of the students in our feminist ethics and epistemology course dearly hold beliefs that cannot cohere with many of the ideas found in the texts we assign and (ii) the “ways of being” recommended in the texts we assign transgress many of the norms most of our students enter the course living and believing, evaluative learning is unavoidable for most of them. What is crucial here is that students do the evaluating. Each student determines whether, and to what degree, the product of her/his evaluative learning is confirmative (where s/he rejects the accurately understood new ideas) or transformative (where s/he abandons or revises pre-existing beliefs). We do not coerce them to agree with us. We do not always agree with each other. Far from being intolerant of it, we encourage students to disagree with us.¹⁹

Nevertheless it is true that very few of our students experience confirmation, most of them experience transformation, and a few ex-

perience a paradigm shift toward an acceptance of feminist ideas by term's end. But this result speaks not to advocacy on our part, as if we were that persuasive. Rather, it reflects our insistence on accurate interpretations of the texts and unwillingness to allow permanent retrenchment in most students, students' earnest evaluative learning in light of their pre-existing understandings, and the power of the ideas found in the texts we assign.

It may be objected that the response in the previous paragraphs is inadequate, for we do not allow most of the students in our feminist ethics and epistemology course to do something many of them would like to do (i.e., retrench) and many of them end up self-identifying as feminists like us. A critic may argue that if this is not problematic advocacy then nothing is.

Yet such a critic underplays the possibility of confirmation and the crucial student agency in the learning process. Each student decides for her/himself how s/he will (re)achieve a comfortable level of felt coherence within her/his belief and value set. We frequently make sure that students notice and evaluate when there is incoherence between their pre-existing understandings and an accurate version of the ideas we present. We *do* insist on accuracy and allow only temporary retrenchment in most students. We do push students to articulate their pre-existing understandings and evaluate them. We *do not* require any particular resolution of that incoherence. The product of some students' evaluation may be a confirmation that rejects the ideas we present or a transformation away from the ideas covered in the texts we use. The result of a student's evaluative learning depends on which pre-existing understandings that student has and which arguments are most compelling to that student.

Embodied, Learning-Centered Pedagogy and Narrative

Let us now return to the practical question: Given that (i) teachers have a professional responsibility to insist that students learn accurately, (ii) the great majority of students in our feminist ethics and epistemology course will learn transformatively, and (iii) misinterpretation and non-learning (i.e., retrenchment) are likely in transformative learning, especially transformative learning that is transgressive, which pedagogies, assessment tools, and content should we employ? When course content makes predominantly additive learning impossible for the students at hand, since the ideas conveyed in texts do not cohere with the dearly held beliefs and values of most of one's students, we recommend that teachers employ pedagogy that makes the students' revision of their pre-existing understandings as emotionally and socially bearable as possible while simultaneously ensuring that the students understand

the new material as accurately as possible. We recommend embodied, learning-centered pedagogy and the use of narrative.

We understand pedagogy to be learning-centered when its primary attention is to the experience students have; learning-centered pedagogues think most about how they will get students to do things that are valuable for the students to do.²⁰ How students grow from doing is fundamental. A learning-centered pedagogue understands lecturing to be a behavior of a teacher. The student learning behavior during a lecture is listening.²¹ As will become clearer below in our discussion of examples, our pedagogy is embodied in that students participate in exercises wherein they live, and do not merely get told about or discuss, the relevant ideas. We have found that performing ideas found in texts gives students a grounding that reduces retrenchment and misunderstanding. We also encourage students to reflect upon and speak from their life experiences since most of them have lived enough to learn deeply, if only they would rely on their lives as data to be analyzed by the theories we discuss.

Content

Since content influences pedagogy we should begin by noting that the textual backbone of our course is Marilyn Frye's *The Politics of Reality: Essays in Feminist Theory*.²² We assign articles addressing similar themes to be read in concert with each chapter in Frye's book. To greatly oversimplify, the final chapter of *The Politics of Reality* contains a stage allegory where patriarchal loyalists (re)enact a reality for the "king" who symbolizes all those who largely accept the dominant patriarchal worldview and whose vision defines the limits of "the real." What the king does not see is not part of patriarchal reality, even if it is real in some other sense. Insofar as the work of stagehands is made invisible, stagehands cease to exist in the king's constructed reality. Of course the king's vision is incomplete, his conceptual scheme "gappy." But those who can see into and/or from (some of) these cognitive gaps or negative metaphysical-cum-semantic spaces, exist as maverick perceivers. There are also people who are not in the theater, who exist completely separately from the king's reality. Each social position represented in this allegory (e.g., king, performing loyalist, partially erased but essential devotee, maverick perceiver, and person altogether excluded from that which is deemed meaningful) has ethical and epistemological opportunities and responsibilities concerning relationships to each other and the king's construction, perhaps especially with regard to the ignorance the king requires of us concerning what is beyond his reality. In short, Frye's analysis of a central allegory does not disentangle metaphysics (What is real or made real?), epistemology (What can be known from where?), and ethics (How ought we behave,

given where and what we are?). As such, to accurately represent the text we needed to keep intermingled the metaphysical, epistemological, and ethical aspects of the phenomena Frye examines. We needed to help our students (1) simultaneously grapple with metaphysical, epistemological, and ethical concerns and (2) break through predictable conceptual and emotional barriers to accurately identifying and evaluating the relevant ideas.

Pedagogical Examples

We enact a version of the stage allegory as our first act on the first day of class because we want it to inform many of the discussions we build throughout the semester. We walk in and divide the students into three groups. Dave takes one group into the hall, telling them only that there is something going on inside the room. Juli guides one group (with accommodation for students with reduced mobility) onto tables, turns off the classroom lights, and directs the light of two overhead projectors at them, telling them only that they are on stage. Juli has the third group stand in the dark corners of the room behind the light of the projectors. We ask three questions and students are told to record their answers: From your position, What can you perceive? What do you know? How are you expected to behave? After giving students some time to record their thoughts, we have the groups change positions so that each group experiences being on stage (i.e., seeing the world as a performing loyalist), in the shadows (i.e., seeing the world as a partially erased but essential devotee), and outside (i.e., seeing the world as a person altogether excluded from that which is deemed meaningful by the king). We limit to three the positions we would have students experience on the first day so that the power relations stand out clearly. This is an embodied exercise because the students bodily experience all three standpoints.

One important result of this embodied exercise is that in exploring standpoints students spontaneously generate many of the ideas that we return to and refine throughout the semester. Their narratives describe how they feel. When on the tables, they feel they need to perform and that there are rules about how their performances should unfold. They feel bad because they do not know how to perform well in this setting. They clearly see the fellow students on the tables, but they cannot see anyone else clearly. The students in the corners are just vague human shapes. The students outside of the room, “Well, they didn’t matter at all” one stage-bound student said. From the shadowy corner, students clearly see the others in the light and though less clearly they also see the students standing with them in the dark corners. They report that they feel that they are expected to passively but attentively watch the performers. Without being instructed to do so they look for op-

portunities to offer assistance, such as helping the performers get up and down from the tables safely. They are curious about the students outside even though all they can see is an occasional face in the window of the door. The students in the hall are mad. They want to know what is going on in the room. Especially for the first group, they want to know why they were selected for negative, exclusionary treatment when clearly they had done nothing to deserve it, particularly because it is clear to them that what is happening in the room is important. One or two brave souls usually peek through the small window in the door, but their fellow outsiders tell them that they should not do that. Some consider rebellion, suggesting that they just walk in and disrupt what is happening in the room.

Among the ideas nascent in these responses that we return to throughout the term are: (1) inclusiveness and standpoint are important when attempting to discern what is known and knowable, (2) responsibilities and obligations appear to be context dependent, (3) outsiders know that doing right relative to their role as it is currently defined by the privileged means keeping their place and missing out on something valuable, and (4) outsiders and shadow people know things that people in the light do not know. In short, students discover that different social positioning provides unique epistemological and ethical advantages and disadvantages. Further, some students who identify themselves as people of privilege notice some limitations of their perspective and some students who identify as non-privileged find that their experience of marginalization will be acknowledged and treated as worthy of study in this class. We count it as a significant success of this exercise that students engage these ideas on the first day without having done any reading.

This “standpoint” exercise also produces a valuable tension. Many students come to our class believing in absolute moral rules. On the first day they discover that often rightness and wrongness appear to be contextualized. They want to relieve this tension. They want to re-establish coherence lost between their beliefs and their standpoint learning experience. Since they now recognize that some of their pre-existing beliefs and values might not be acceptable on their own standards, our students have something very personal at stake in this class. Put alternatively, we put them into a concrete, albeit contrived, situation that instills a desire to engage discomforting material since the engagement promises to alleviate some now felt tension.

A second, “separatism,” pedagogy we employ in this course also connects content to a lived in-class learning experience to overcome predictable barriers to engagement. On the days we discuss sexual assault, separatism, and ignorance regarding female orgasm we have only men in one room and only women in another.²³ The first and third

separations are, given the topics of sexual assault and orgasm, primarily to open lines of inquiry that are difficult in a multi-sex environment. During the sexual assault separation the women have discussed difficulties regarding what society expects and allows of their bodies and sexual behavior. One year, they told the least heterosexually experienced woman in the class that she was the lucky one among them. The discussion is always frank, intimate, and fun. The men have wondered if some of their past behavior constitutes sexual assault. During the “ignorance of women’s orgasm” separation one of the men observed that this is another situation where “guys don’t ask for directions.” The men have tended to discuss whom their ignorance tends to advantage. The women have tended to talk about how extensive the knowledge of male, and limited the knowledge of female, gratification is in current U.S. culture. They observe how difficult it would be to discuss or change their relationship to sexual pleasure with their current partners.

The topic of female orgasm represents a special transgression. Once the notion of transgression itself becomes a topic of explicit discussion we want students to experience an obvious transgression. If it is a norm that certain ideas *not* be discussed in a classroom setting, beyond a denuded discussion in a health course, then assigning and discussing texts containing these ideas is an instance of transgressive teaching. We assume it is uncontroversial to assert that a presentation of ideas regarding the social construction of ignorance regarding female orgasm is widely held not to be an appropriate topic in a university philosophy course. By living a transgression we embody the course topic of transgression.

The second separation exercise, where we explicitly discuss separatism, is aimed directly at embodying the course material. When separated to discuss separatism the women have not talked about the men beyond noting that it is a relief to have them out of the room so that the women can really talk. The men initially discuss other male-only circumstances they had experienced. The conversation moves from descriptions of group viewing of pornography to moments when other men in authority had shamed them for their lack of masculinity and finally to naïve musing about what the women must be talking about.

One year, when Dave knocked on the door to see if the women were ready to reconvene the class as a whole, he was sent packing with a jovial chorus of “get out!” Once we do reconvene each group reports some of what they discussed. The women have sometimes chosen not to report some of what they discuss. The men find this reduction in access frustrating. The women’s choice to reduce the men’s access and the men’s reaction to this reduction are among the topics we hope to discuss when evaluating separatism. Nevertheless, the women always tell the men in no uncertain terms how nice it is to have a chance to

talk, for the men suck all the conversational oxygen from the room. The men, some for the first time, become aware of the fact that they tend to take more than their fair share of class time and that doing so has a silencing effect on women, even in a class on feminist ethics and epistemology. Two related matters are especially important here. First, there is never a single remark about man-hating, anti-liberal, or exclusivist women made by anyone in the class during the discussion of radical feminist separatism. Second, the women find their separation empowering. They have fun, are more open, and return to the full class meeting with an agenda—to tell the men something about class dynamics that likely they would not have said had they not had time to discuss it without men around. To paraphrase Zora Neale Hurston, the women loved themselves when they were laughing and then again when they were looking mean and impressive.²⁴ Albeit from many different angles, each student lives the value of a room of one's own, the value of empowering separatism as opposed to the destructive power of segregation.²⁵

The ability to have faculty guided single-sex discussions is a special merit of our class, since it is team-taught by one woman and one man. Nevertheless, if one has a helpful colleague or graduate student, discussion groups separated along any diversity/identity-axis could be employed even if one teaches a class on her/his own. It is also unusual for a class on a feminist topic to have a male professor. We were able to upend both the expectation of some women that a male professor could not know anything about feminism and the expectation of some men that a female professor would be biased. More importantly, since we aim for the students in our feminist ethics and epistemology class to experience course content from the inside rather than as observers, we professionally immerse ourselves as well. For example, when discussing the relationship between body comportment and power Juli, the department chair, demonstrates how she “stands like a lady” (tightly compacted) in certain settings and how she stands aggressively (feet firmly planted, hands on hips, elbows out) when talking with other university officials.

Our relationship as co-teachers also exposes power dynamics. Students wonder why the junior male professor often talks more than the senior female professor: “Shouldn't the female professor be talking more in a feminism class?” We are pleased that the students in our feminist ethics and epistemology course challenged us with this question for two reasons. First, we were able to explicitly address an assumption many of our students have about who can know what. Certainly Juli has some experiential knowledge that Dave cannot have (as Dave has some that Juli cannot). But as it turns out, Dave has a stronger background in feminist philosophy than did Juli. And Juli had other

leadership responsibilities that meant Dave had a greater share of some course responsibilities. Second, that our students ask such a question demonstrates that we succeed in subverting a typical student-teacher power dynamic where the teacher constantly critiques the student but the student is not allowed to critique the teacher.

Opening ourselves to students' critiques of our pedagogy generates another connection between lived experience and course content. This sort of "leading by example," where *we* are out of *our* comfort zone, appears to have helped students understand some of the difficulties they were having. An example of the sort of activity we used to undermine the typical classroom power dynamic that probably contributes to the students in our feminist ethics and epistemology course becoming comfortable enough to openly criticize our pedagogical practice is found in our giving up the chalk.

Borrowing a practice of Claudia Card, some class discussions are managed by "passing the chalk." To speak a person must be holding a piece of chalk, a symbol of power in the classroom. No one other than the person holding the chalk may speak, including Juli and Dave. If a person wishes to speak, including Juli and Dave, s/he must raise her hand and hope that the chalk holder gives her/him the chalk. Dave finds the moments when we use this pedagogy especially difficult.

In addition to "passing the chalk" we use other inclusive pedagogical maneuvers to embody content as we aim for evaluative learning. One year we threw a football to each other and observed students' body comportment in the student union before discussing Iris Marion Young's "Throwing Like A Girl."²⁶ We use our own lives as examples when lecturing on such topics as anger and integrity, inviting students to tell their own stories. We read Charlotte Perkins Gilman's feminist utopian novel *Herland* in an attempt to think ourselves out of the dominant conceptual scheme.²⁷ Reflection upon these innovations, the two learning-centered pedagogies described in detail above, and our other attempts to teach creatively, we derive the following observations that should be relevant to anyone aiming for evaluative and often transformative learning of transgressive topics.

First, when new ideas that create cognitive dissonance in students are also transgressive, there are special difficulties and opportunities. The emotional and social disquiet can lead to attempts at permanent retrenchment and misunderstanding of details. Yet the desire to resolve the dissonance provides an intrinsic motivation for students to engage material that is emotionally difficult if it is promised that the material has something to say about the disquiet they are experiencing.

Second, when separating metaphysical, epistemological, and ethical issues is tantamount to misrepresenting a text, in courses where the material is covered iteratively folding back on and building up from

earlier lessons, it is useful to allow students to live the idea. Using in-class activities and ourselves as examples can make accessible material that is at once ethics and epistemology without artificially separating the issues. Learning-centered experiences that are carefully selected to inspire students to ask questions, as opposed to pedagogy that lists answers, prepares students to engage deeply.

Third, embodied experiences makes evaluative learning nearly unavoidable. Rather than merely talking at them or having them talk with each other, we immerse students in learning activities that allowed them to feel, many for the first time, the depth of the ideas and questions about responsibility, understanding, and social construction that they only discuss at a distance or as observers in other classes. The depth of their learning reveals itself in various ways. For example, usually several of our students' primary romantic relationships are profoundly changed. Having become maverick perceivers to some degree they simply can no longer live as they once had.

Fourth, it is important to stress that course content determines the best embodied learning experience. Our separatism and standpoint activities would not be appropriate in many courses, although analogous experiences should be highly beneficial to students.

Fifth, metacognitive engagement, or engagement in an awareness of one's engagement, increases retention and depth of understanding.²⁸ Thinking about what one is learning by thinking about how course material is related to an experience a person is currently having tends to increase learning that stays with students. A further merit of embodied pedagogies is that it is very easy to be metacognitive about them.

In the end, to varying degrees, and in diverse ways, most of the students in our feminist ethics and epistemology course spent some time as "maverick perceivers," those who can see into and/or from aspects of reality not countenanced by the dominant conceptual scheme. Upon appreciating the injustice of the king's construction of reality, many of our students would no longer see as the king wants them to see. They learned, again with quite a bit of individual variation and success, to lovingly travel to and from some of the cognitive gaps that prior to class they did not know existed.²⁹ And they learned a bit of humility in their recognition that there are likely many more worlds they cannot yet imagine that are occupied by real others. Our students' ability to empathically imagine standpoints other than their own grows. The students in our feminist ethics and epistemology course find that their increased sensitivity brings with it new ethical obligations that are difficult to fulfill. Indeed, we had to "go off syllabus" one day to begin to show our students how to handle the new moral emotions (e.g., anger and guilt) they were experiencing. We believe the students in our feminist ethics and epistemology course would not have been

so moved had we not designed learning activities that immersed them in the content. Our experience suggests that learning about something from within can be more powerful than learning about it as an observer. Especially when material is emotionally challenging and the learning is highly transformative, carefully constructed lived learning experiences that embody content can overcome emotional, social, and conceptual barriers.

Conclusion

Our experience shows us the merits of a learning-centered approach to identifying powerful embodied experiences that foster accurate identification of nuanced ideas and deeply evaluative learning. We find that embodied learning experiences motivate students to push beyond the disquiet associated with the examination of transgressive topics. Our students confront who they are, what they can know given their position in an arrogating power structure, and what society expects them to be. The students in our feminist ethics and epistemology course, again to various degrees and in different ways, *feel* the course content. We end with one caution: It takes courage to teach the way we do, to expose what we do to our students (about themselves, ourselves, and our shared reality) in this class.³⁰ We were lucky to have each other's support through the process. Nevertheless, we find the risk worth it, for we receive the reward of having students tell us that we have changed their lives for the better.³¹

Notes

1. For more on coherence, see Laurence Bonjour, *The Structure of Empirical Knowledge* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2005). Our argument does not require a commitment to a coherence theory of justification regarding empirical beliefs; we do not take ourselves to be engaging in a debate about theories of truth or justification, much less making a comment about the merits of foundationalism or coherentism as epistemologists sometimes discuss them. The commonsense experiential notion that is our focus is that sometimes people encounter ideas that make them question the plausibility of a belief or value they already hold. In such cases a person is likely to feel a tension that we characterize as incoherence.

2. The literature on constructivist learning is vast. *Loci classici* include John Dewey, *Democracy and Education* (New York: Free Press, 1966); Jean Piaget, *To Understand Is to Invent* (New York: Grossman, 1973); and Lev Vygotsky, *Mind in Society: The Development of Higher Psychological Processes* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1978). A highly accessible contemporary and empirically validated treatment of constructivist learning theory is John D. Bransford, Ann L. Brown, and Rodney R. Cocking, eds., *How People Learn: Brain, Mind, Experience, and School* (expanded ed.) (Washington, D. C.: National Academy Press, 2000). A practical text is George W. Gagnon Jr., *Designing for*

Learning: Six Elements in Constructivist Classrooms (Thousand Oaks, Calif.: Corwin Press, Inc., 2001).

3. While not our primary focus, for completeness we suggest that there are two types of additive learning. An additive learner could, in what we call subsumptive additive learning, add a new discrete fact under a previously known principle, as when the students in our feminist ethics and epistemology course who accept that some people are oppressed learn that Iris Marion Young believes that oppression is visited upon individuals insofar as they are members of oppressed groups. In what we call complementary additive learning a person adds to her belief and value set a previously unknown generality that is congruent with pre-existing understandings of other generalities. Our students who recognize that some people are exploited can learn additively that some people are marginalized, where exploitation and marginalization are different modes of oppression.

4. Iris Marion Young, "Throwing Like a Girl: A Phenomenology of Feminine Body Comportment, Motility, and Spatiality," in *Throwing Like a Girl and Other Essays in Feminist Philosophy and Social Thought* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990), 141–59.

5. Marilyn Frye, "Sexism," in *The Politics of Reality: Essays in Feminist Theory* (Freedom, Calif.: The Crossing Press, 1983), 17–40.

6. One might further distinguish between integrative and pure transformative learning. In pure transformative learning a person achieves felt coherence within her belief and/or value set by revising some of her pre-existing understandings so that they cohere with newly adopted beliefs and values that were initially at odds with the now discarded pre-existing understanding. Perhaps the male student described above could remove the incoherence he felt after reading Young's article by accepting Young's view and giving up his pre-existing belief that his body comportment is value-neutral. Alternatively, in integrative transformative learning a person evaluating newly encountered beliefs and/or values that cannot be learned purely additively achieves felt coherence by revising some of her pre-existing understandings while accepting only some portion of the new belief(s) or value(s).

7. Thomas Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1962).

8. Rosemarie Tong, *Feminist Thought: A More Comprehensive Introduction*, 3rd ed. (Boulder, Colo.: Westview Press, 2008).

9. Gina Schouten, personal conversation, August 5, 2008.

10. Kelly McGonigal, "Teaching for Transformation: From Learning Theory to Teaching Strategies," *Speaking of Teaching: The Center For Teaching and Learning—Stanford University Newsletter* 14:2 (Spring 2005): 2.

11. For more on the role of retreat in learning, see William G. Perry, *Forms of Ethical and Intellectual Development in the College Years: A Scheme* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1998).

12. Our texts include Frye, *The Politics of Reality*; Charlotte Perkins Gilman, *Herland* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1979); Claudia Card, "Gender and Moral Luck," in *Identity, Character, and Morality: Essays in Moral Psychology*, ed. Owen Flanagan and Amélie Oksenberg Rorty (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1993), 199–218; Claudia Card, "Pluralist Lesbian Separatism," in *Lesbian Philosophies and Cultures*, ed. Jeffner Allen (Albany: SUNY Press, 1990), 125–41; Kenneth Clatterbaugh, "A New Legacy?" in *Contemporary Perspectives on Masculinity: Men, Women, and Politics in Modern Society* (Boulder, Colo.: Westview Press, 1990), 151–60; Lorraine Code, "Is the Sex of the Knower Epistemo-

logically Significant?" in *What Can She Know: Feminist Theory and the Construction of Knowledge* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1991), 1–26; Victoria M. Davion, "Integrity and Radical Change," in *Feminist Ethics*, ed. Claudia Card (Lawrence: Kansas University Press, 1991), 180–92; Marilyn Frye, "White Woman Feminist," in *Willful Virgin* (Freedom, Calif.: Crossing Press, 1992); Barbara Houston, "In Praise of Blame," *Hypatia* 7:4 (Fall 1992): 128–47; Alison M. Jaggar, "Love and Knowledge: Emotion in Feminist Epistemology," in *Women, Knowledge, and Reality: Exploration in Feminist Philosophy*, 2nd ed., ed. Ann Garry and Marilyn Pearsall (London: Routledge, 1996), 166–190; Maria Lugones, "Playfulness, 'World'-Travelling, and Loving Perception," reprinted in *Lesbian Philosophies and Cultures*, ed. Jeffner Allen, 159–80; Catherine A. MacKinnon, "Sexuality, Pornography, and Method: Pleasure under Patriarchy," *Ethics* 99:2 (January 1989): 314–46; John Stoltenberg, *Refusing to Be a Man: Essays on Sex and Justice* (New York: Meridian, 1990), 187–98; Lisa Tessman, "Critical Virtue Ethics: Understanding Oppression as Morally Damaging," in *Feminists Doing Ethics*, ed. Peggy DesAutels and Joanne Waugh (Ilanham, Md.: Rowman & Littlefield, 2001), 79–99; Nancy Tuana, "Coming to Understand: Orgasm and the Epistemology of Ignorance," *Hypatia* 19:1 (2004): 194–232; Karen J. Warren, "The Power and the Promise of Ecological Feminism," *Environmental Ethics* 12:2 (Summer 1990): 125–46; Iris Marion Young, "The Five Faces of Oppression," in *Justice and the Politics of Difference* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1990), 39–65; and Young, "Throwing Like A Girl."

13. Upton Sinclair, *I, Candidate for Governor: And How I Got Licked* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994), 109.

14. Frye, *The Politics of Reality*, 17.

15. For more on ignorance as more than an absence of knowledge, see the special issue of *Hypatia* devoted to the topic, especially Nancy Tuana, "The Speculum of Ignorance: The Women's Health Movement and Epistemologies of Ignorance," *Hypatia* 21:3 (Summer 2006): 1–19.

16. As if we were giving "how to" instruction rather than discussing epistemological and ethical matters regarding sexual pleasure under patriarchy, an early negative review of this paper included the comment: "It seems to me that the least thing that students need to learn in college is how to attain a decent orgasm."

17. Harry Brod, "Philosophy Teaching as Intellectual Affirmative Action," *Teaching Philosophy* 9:1 (March 1986): 5. See also Harry Brod, "Critical Thinking and Advocative Pedagogy: When Neutrality Isn't Neutral," *APA Newsletter On Teaching* 90:3 (Fall 1991): 68–71; and Michael Goldman, "On Moral Relativism, Advocacy, and Teaching Normative Ethics," *Teaching Philosophy* 4:1 (March 1981): 1–11.

18. There is much more to be said concerning this response. A helpful framework for evaluating the appropriateness of advocacy that draws many useful distinctions may be found in Mike W. Martin, "Advocating Values: Professionalism in Teaching Ethics," *Teaching Philosophy* 20:1 (March 1997): 19–34, which also contains excellent notes listing sources for further study. The June 2007 issue of *Teaching Philosophy* (30:2) also contains a number of relevant articles.

19. Of course, there will be some people who will not believe our characterization of our practice. We welcome this suspiciousness, for there may be faculty who problematically indoctrinate their students, and we advocate vigilance against problematic indoctrination. We welcome visitors to our classroom. But at this point we move on because the argument hinges not upon generalizable worries about transgressive topics and transformative learning but upon empirical evidence that is unique to our teaching practice.

20. An excellent overview of key principles in learning-centered pedagogy is Maryellen Weimer, *Learner-Centered Teaching: Five Key Changes to Practice* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2002).

21. This should not suggest that teachers should altogether avoid lecturing. Far from it, initial exposure to an idea where a student gets a rough enough understanding of the new idea to begin learning evaluatively may be efficiently achieved through lecture. Listening is among but not the only valuable learning activity a student may perform.

22. Frye, *The Politics of Reality*. See note 12 for a more complete list.

23. With the students in our feminist ethics and epistemology course, there was no need for a third (e.g., transgender) room. The readings for these days were MacKinnon, "Sexuality, Pornography, and Method"; Card, "Pluralist Lesbian Separatism"; and Tuana, "Coming to Understand."

24. Zora Neale Hurston, in a letter to Carl Van Vechten, December 10, 1934, referring to a series of photographs he had taken of her. Also this is the title of a collection of Hurston's writing edited by Alice Walker: *I Love Myself when I Am Laughing . . . and then again when I Am Looking Mean and Impressive: A Zora Neale Hurston Reader* (New York: The Feminist Press at the City University of New York, 1979).

25. For more on the distinction between separatism and segregation, see Card, "Pluralist Lesbian Separatism."

26. Young, "Throwing Like A Girl."

27. Gilman, *Herland*.

28. For more on the importance of metacognition, see Bransford, Brown, and Cocking, *How People Learn*; and David W. Concepción, "Reading Philosophy With Background Knowledge and Metacognition," *Teaching Philosophy* 27:4 (December 2004): 351–68.

29. For more on loving travel, see Lugones, "Playfulness, "World"-Traveling, and Loving Perception."

30. For a celebration of courageous teaching, see Parker Palmer, *The Courage to Teach: Exploring the Inner Landscape of a Teacher's Life* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2007).

31. We are grateful to Stephen Schulman, Tziporah Kasachkoff, and Andrew Carpenter for detailed comments on earlier drafts that caused us to strengthen this article.

David W. Concepción, Dept. of Philosophy & Religious Studies, NQ 211, Ball State University, Muncie IN 04706; dwconcepcion@bsu.edu. Juli Thorson Eflin, Dept. of Philosophy & Religious Studies, NQ 211, Ball State University, Muncie IN 04706; jeflin2@bsu.edu.