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Witnessing Engaged Voices: A Feminist Pedagogy of Inclusion

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Cover Page Footnote

Author Note This paper reflects the opinions of the authors and not the Department of Defense, United States Marine Corps, or Federal Government. Portions of this work were presented on a panel discussion at the Organization for the Study of Communication, Language, and Gender 44th Annual Conference, Norfolk, VA. Correspondence concerning this paper should be addressed to Alana Nicastro. Email: Alana.Nicastro@sdsu.edu

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“You taught me some of the most important things that I will carry with me the rest of my life. First, you taught me the power words can have on people. You demonstrated how sharing your story and your truth is so important in this world. Second, you showed me how vulnerability is a beautiful thing. Third, you demonstrated to me how people can take their pain and create something beautiful.”

-- Daisy, Undergraduate Student

Just as Daisy so eloquently states, feminist pedagogy necessitates holding space for faculty and students to participate in and witness engaged voices with a clear intention of why we teach, how students learn, and what methods involve all students in the learning process.¹ For decades, our students, most of them female, have shared stories about the oppressive structuring of discursive experiences that discourage the exercise of their voice, leaving them to second-guess and doubt the value of what they have to contribute in the classroom. They describe experiences of intimidation, slighting, and insufficient support systems within higher education—imposing a condition of voicelessness—all of which leave them feeling unwelcomed or not smart enough. Instead, a Feminist Pedagogy of Inclusion (FPoI) lifts the veil of close-mindedness that constrains voices in the classroom, and as hooks (1991) would applaud, directs our feminist practice.

In this paper, we offer an original, four-week teaching activity we call *Broadmindedness and Bare-bone Honesty* as one example of how to put our FPoI into practice. The activity’s main objective is for students to discover their range of influence when being open to collective witnessing and testimonial reading. We begin by offering our rationale for promoting the exercise of voice, followed by a description of the four exercises with embedded debriefing, and an assessment that involves the essential elements of witnessing.

A Rationale for a Feminist Pedagogy of Inclusion

Educators have long been concerned about including the diverse experiences of student learners. The goal is to liberate rather than indoctrinate their minds. It is to promote a critical consciousness that responsibly questions the hegemonic and patriarchal discourse dominating education. Feminist scholars recognize that disenchantment in academe for students often results from the ebbs and flows between feeling empowered and muted, validated and denied, included and marginalized, or visible and invisible (Geist, 1999; Nicastro, 2004). Feeling silenced or excluded in a classroom are examples of intangible, inexpressible, and subtle forms of oppression that are difficult to identify, and often impossible to locate and name (Faulkner et al., 2021; hooks, 1991).

“Inattentional blindness” describes a practice operating beneath conscious awareness when professors fail to perceive oppressive interactions happening in plain sight (Tenure & Gender, 2005) relegating students to the position of outsiders-within (Allen et al., 1999; Anzaldúa, 1999, Hill Collins, 1986). Consequently, students report feelings of hostility, isolation, loneliness, and disconnectedness (Dallimore, 2003; Fisher, 2001; Koch & Irby, 2002;

¹ A teaching role can include formal and informal spaces, both inside and outside the classroom. A feminist practitioner is continually learning more about the nature of oppression and doing more in the classroom to educate self and others.

Kuhlemeier et al., 2020; Richardson, 1997). When student perspectives, needs, and wants are left out of the academic discourse, the discursive structures necessary to encourage, organize, and evaluate their voice are absent. Students then *become* ambivalent instead of exercising their voice and decisively assessing the value of their contribution.

Feminist pedagogy can respond to these problems, repairing discourse and ideologies through the dialogic space. According to Bakhtin (1984), understanding is given and created through open-ended dialogue, as it is "the single adequate form for verbally expressing authentic human life" (p. 293). Creating a dialogic classroom where ongoing discussions thread together differences, intersecting identities, and entanglements—uncovering those that might be hidden, obscured, or withheld (Hill Collins, 2019; hooks, 1991)—requires an intentional practice to bring it out of hiding by investigating the problematic and the possibility of voice. It entails assessing voice resilience (Nicastro & Valdez, in press) to help us determine if we are more likely to speak out or remain silent in certain situations. Therefore, students need teachers who can hold a space where possibility and restoration meet—a place where voice and resilience are works in progress: *to be written, unwritten, and rewritten*.

Introducing the Broadmindedness and Bare-bone Honesty Activity

Inspired by hooks' (1991) "location for healing," we offer a practical application of witnessing in the classroom that supports our FPoI, encouraging engaged voices and being unafraid of "what might be revealed." To this end, we introduce the Broadmindedness and Bare-bone Honesty activity—with one exercise each of the four weeks—where students discover their range of influence when being open to collective witnessing and testimonial reading. Students learn that language is not just the expression of unique individuality, but a source where the sense of self is constructed and socially produced through communication in relationships.

Broadmindedness is developed over time, allowing students to depart from conventional behavior to discover what is most basic or essential, to be honest with the self. Broadminded individuals are comfortable with self-evaluation and examine how their perspectives are limited while simultaneously being open to others' mutual critiques of self. Within the *Broadmindedness and Bare-bone Honesty* activity, a weekly written exercise prepares students for the work of collective witnessing and testimonial reading. The written exercises are called: (a) writing reparations; (b) writing against silence; (c) writing broadmindedly; and (d) writing bare-bone honesty. Students are given a short writing prompt for each exercise and have one week to develop a one-to-three-page story that they will then read to the class. Assessment of students' participation occurs each week through a series of questions related to the specific exercise and the dialogue that emanates from these conversations.

Week One, Writing Reparations. In the first writing exercise, *writing reparations*, students describe a time when they were hurting, confused, destructive, or did something that hurt someone else. They bring their written assignment to class and read their story aloud. The class listens for themes, patterns, anomalies, or mysteries in their collective story. Due to the newness of the activity and sensitivity of the writing exercise, there is often a lot of silence after the students have read their papers, so we ask: "How are you using the silence?" This question generates a lot of insightful dialogue.

Week Two, Writing Against Silencing. In the second writing exercise, students are asked to write honestly about what they were holding back in the first written exercise, knowing that most of us are willing to be honest to a certain point. They have an opportunity to reflect on their

readings and consider the nuances in the group's collective story. As students read their second written story aloud, the rest of the class is tasked with listening. Students determine, on their own, what it is about their story that was silenced in the first exercise, and often discover how their story needed to be shared to get at that honesty. They also see more clearly the collective patterns and puzzles within the stories. At this point, the class realizes there is more room for even more openness, so we ask: "What do you see now that you did not see before?" Again, this question tends to produce a great deal of introspection and productive, sincere dialogue.

Week Three, Writing Broadmindedly. In the third writing exercise, students describe the process of becoming open and honest over time in a classroom setting. Students are more aware they are sensemaking in real-time and in a public setting—all to determine how their contributions impact the class. We ask a series of questions like: "How did you get from your first writing exercise to your third writing exercise? What work was accomplished to be honest with self and others? What did you have to consider? What were some of the reasons you felt you had to hold back, gloss over, or leave out certain details?" We remind students that broadmindedness is a process and a goal—it *does not happen overnight*. We encourage them to explore the work of being broadminded and bare-bone honest as well as learn how others react to their voice.

Week Four, Writing Bare-bone Honesty. In the fourth and final exercise, students write a reflective paper summarizing their first three papers and what they have witnessed as the patterns and puzzles to their collective stories. Students describe what it means to discover their voice and name at least one significant contribution they made inside the classroom. As students read this fourth writing assignment aloud, we ask them to witness this dialogic moment, considering what they believe has happened through this exercise that could not have happened if we only completed part one. We ask: "Can understanding only happen through dialogue? What roles do love and compassion play?" Students assess what it meant to be inclusive as they learn how classmates react to open and sincere voices. They also assess what was revealed throughout the assignments that might not otherwise be revealed (i.e., themes, patterns, anomalies, or mysteries of healing and reconciliation) if testimonial reading were not part of their assigned work.

In addition to the weekly, dialogic, real-time assessment, a deeper level of assessment occurs by situating our FPoI in the art of witnessing. The purpose of witnessing engaged voices is to direct our pedagogical practice to encourage broadmindedness and student voice in the classroom through collective witnessing and testimonial readings.

FPoI can be implemented in any classroom that holds engagement as instrumental in students' critical reflection on the subject matter. FPoI works especially well in classes that prioritize the integration of ideas and promote student responsible action. We have utilized FPoI in a wide variety of undergraduate and graduate courses, including ethnographic research methods, relational communication, and organizational leadership.

Engaged Voices Witnessed and Assessed

Collective witnessing and testimonial reading can provide students the opportunity to direct the discursive structures necessary to encourage, organize, and evaluate their own and others' voices. The *Broadmindedness and Bare-bone Honesty* activity showcases the process of witnessing as a five-element approach:

- (1) students witness a situation that can be communicated individually and in front of others;

- (2) students witness their practice of testifying—witnessing themselves in action while listening to the testimonial readings of others;
- (3) students witness participation in a novel and generative discursive learning experience;
- (4) students witness the work it takes to comprehend their own and the collective story; and
- (5) students witness the newly gained knowledge put to good use in their relationships with others.

Students and professors collaborate in the use of these five elements to assess the overall impact the assignment had on the class and how they will sustain what they learned moving forward.

It is important to note that *The Broadmindedness and Bare-bone Honesty* assignment has its fair share of challenges. While the exercise cultivates a lot of dialogue, it may cultivate silence, too. And when some students speak more than others, as uncomfortable as it may be, we must reflect that dynamic back to the students. For example, if we see one student communicating with vulnerability while another appears to be minimizing the experience disclosed, then what has occurred is brought to light so that the experience itself becomes part of the learning. Students should learn how they fill up the space, with and without voice. Students choose to share or not, reflecting on this choice without consequences to their grades. This activity is intended to encourage dialogue in ways that students and professors learn what it takes to be engaged and to accurately assess the impact of that engagement.

Lastly, as practitioners of feminist pedagogy, we must carefully examine our ideals in the classroom: How do we want to direct our feminist practice? How do we hold a space of inclusion and critically evaluate how we ‘show up’ to witness engaged voices? Will we be strong, suspend judgment, and listen as activators of care and love? It is up to us to notice how conditions of voicelessness are unconsciously discursively constructed and narrow the spaces for students to do their best thinking through witnessing. This original teaching activity targets the problematics that constrain voices in the classroom and invites readers and listeners to consider their positionality and action as a commitment to an FPoI. In this way, students and professors can deliberately hold a space where the act of witnessing is more than simply observing each other’s voices. The intended result is a comprehensive way of engaging inclusively.

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