

BOOK REVIEWS

FEMINISM AND HIGHER EDUCATION: TEACHING WOMEN, WOMEN TEACHING

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Frances A. Maher and Mary Kay Thompson Tetreault, *The Feminist Classroom: An Inside Look at How Professors and Students Are Transforming Higher Education for a Diverse Society* (Basic Books, 1994)

Jean Fox O'Barr, *Feminism in Action: Building Institutions and Community Through Women's Studies* (The University of North Carolina Press, 1994)

Gail B. Griffin, *Calling: Essays on Teaching in the Mother Tongue* (Trilogy Books, 1992)

Academic disciplines have always aimed to produce competent research scholars by impressing on graduate students the basic scholarship and modern trends of their particular field. Yet these institutions do little to prepare their apprentices for the teaching role that most hope one day to assume. The apparent assumption of academe is that a competent scholar and receptive students are all that is necessary for teaching and learning to occur. However, feminist studies challenges this assumption on two counts. First, it insists that the knowledge constructed in traditional university classrooms is incomplete. Women, minorities, and other marginalized groups protest that the educational system has for so long privileged the contributions and concerns of middle- to upper-class white males that course materials do not reflect the experiences of diverse communities. Scholarship by and concerning women and minorities must be incorporated into the traditional disciplines and existing theories must be revised in light of more complete data. Second, aside from challenging the content of university curricula, feminist scholars are also rethinking the processes of teaching and learning and the implications of these processes for pedagogy.

Although research on feminist pedagogy is still in its infancy, the burgeoning literature on this topic suggests that its approaches are as diverse as the society that it intends to better represent. Clearly there is no one opinion on the transformation required to bring marginalized groups to the center of inquiry or

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how this should effect what goes on in the classroom itself. Recent works by Frances A. Maher and Mary Kay Thompson Tetreault, Jean Fox O'Barr, and Gail B. Griffin illustrate three attempts to address these issues.

Maher and Tetreault's *The Feminist Classroom: An Inside Look at How Professors and Students Are Transforming Higher Education for a Diverse Society* is an ethnographic study conducted at six colleges and universities. The study sought out professors who attempted to integrate feminist and multicultural content into their curricula and then evaluated their goals and impact using classroom observations and interviews with students and faculty. Because the institutions considered were selected to represent a wide range of sizes, public and private orientations, and levels of diversity among the faculty and student body, the study was sensitive to the relationship between the institutional climate and the success of feminist pedagogy. The comparison suggests that the efforts of feminist professors are most successful in institutions that value innovative, student-centered teaching and provide a more comfortable climate for female students and faculty.

As Maher and Tetreault developed their study in conversation with the faculty and students they were observing, they defined four analytic themes central to feminist pedagogy: mastery, voice, authority, and positionality. A separate chapter explores each theme as it is understood in both traditional classroom dynamics and feminist pedagogy. Traditional models of education reinforce the student-teacher hierarchy by positing their relationship as one of apprentice to expert. To gain mastery, the student-apprentice must learn to replicate the ideas and accomplishments of the teacher-expert. Feminist pedagogy redefines mastery as the ability to make connections that cross traditional disciplinary boundaries and even incorporate the students' lived experience. To make such connections the feminist classroom must facilitate students' efforts to fashion individual voices, rather than urge them to imitate the voice of the professor. This is especially imperative for members of marginalized groups who often find that the professor's voice does not reflect their experiences. Unlike traditional models of education that envision the teacher as an authority figure who dispenses knowledge to passive students, feminist models recognize the need for a student to assume an active role in his or her own education. Such collaborative learning is possible only when classroom authority is shared between faculty and students. Each student and teacher brings a unique perspective to the learning process based partly upon individual experience, race, gender, socioeconomic class, and sexual orientation. Since each person views the subject matter from his or her own socially constructed position, no one holds a monopoly on knowledge or can claim an objective viewpoint. According to *The Feminist Classroom*, what is required by our diverse society is a pedagogy of positionality—a model of education that recognizes a multiplicity of situated knowers instead of imposing a single viewpoint as the norm against which others will be measured.

While Maher and Tetreault observe classroom dynamics in a variety of institutional settings where they located themselves as observers, Jean O'Barr's insights derive from her hands-on experience as a feminist professor and administrator at one particular institution, Duke University. *Feminism in Action: Building Institutions and Community Through Women's Studies* explores the role of

feminist institutions as agents of social change in academe. Using the concept of physical, intellectual, and psychological space as a common thread, the book weaves together the themes of listening, explaining, teaching, and organizing as necessary components of educational transformation. O'Barr begins by listening to female students express their own educational needs, although she notes that they are often hampered in this effort by the lack of an explanatory framework from which to draw their vocabulary and formulate a vision. Thus, women's studies must create spaces that enable students to gain a critical perspective from which to view the classroom and campus so that they might become more effective agents of change.

O'Barr also views the women's studies program as a space in which to think about the processes of teaching and learning. She critiques hierarchical teaching styles that assume a dichotomy between teachers (us) and students (them) as though the latter were a homogeneous group. Instead she proposes a student-centered model of pedagogy that recognizes students are more than blank slates on which teachers may write. Students enter the educational process with a good deal of knowledge and experience. O'Barr believes that teaching must begin with this knowledge and deliberately foster connections between course material and experiences outside of the classroom. She also argues that teachers, rather than assume full responsibility for course content and classroom dynamics, should encourage collaboration among students. Finally, teachers must deal directly with power issues in the classroom by doing themselves what they ask their students to do. They must model the process of making connections between living and learning by contextualizing their own thoughts. O'Barr urges feminist scholars to document their stories for the benefit of future generations, and demonstrates this principle throughout the book by using personal anecdotes to describe her own development as a feminist practitioner.

In *Calling: Essays on Teaching in the Mother Tongue*, Gail Griffin describes and reflects upon her daily life as a feminist professor in an academic institution, Kalamazoo College. She claims that academe teaches its students values by making political decisions about what knowledge is "worthy" of inclusion in the curricula. To be a feminist scholar is to resist full belonging and choose marginality rather than adopting these values. The book realistically describes the individual and institutional pressures Griffin encountered because of her feminist stance and her efforts to transform the curriculum.

Griffin's role model as a teacher was Kalamazoo's forgotten foremother, Lucinda Stone.¹ The rediscovery of Stone's history connected Griffin with other women, past and present, struggling to find a place in the academic world. It also provided her with a new model of pedagogy based on a maternal ideal. In order to fit into traditional models of pedagogy, female professors have to divorce themselves from traits that our society constructs as feminine—emotional, relational, nurturing, and subjective behaviors. Yet under the tutelage of Stone's

1. Lucinda Stone was the wife of Kalamazoo College's first president, James Stone, and the head of the college's Female Department. Together, Lucinda and James Stone ran the school for twenty years until its Baptist trustees forced their joint resignation. Three-quarters of the student body withdrew from the college in protest following the Stones' departure. Among other travesties, Mrs. Stone was accused of "polluting the curriculum with French novels and promoting feminism." GAIL B. GRIFFIN, *CALLING: ESSAYS ON TEACHING IN THE MOTHER TONGUE* 29 (1992).

papers, Griffin incorporated these traits into her image of herself as a teacher. In doing so, she also modeled for her students the value of these traits by bringing them into the classroom along with feminist and multicultural curricula.

Tetreault and Maher, Griffin, and O'Barr all use feminist analysis to critique the current educational system and to formulate new pedagogical methods. Their differing approaches to documenting and interpreting common subjects yield complementary results. All of these works recognize similar inadequacies in traditional academe and seek new models for understanding the processes of teaching and learning in order to foster more receptive academic environments for marginalized groups.