

REVIEW ESSAY

Lessons Learned in Feminist Classrooms in the United States

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- Fisher B.M. (2001). *No angel in the classroom: Teaching through feminist discourse*. New York: Rowman & Littlefield, softcover, 315 pages.
- Maher, F.A. & Thompson Tetreault, M.K. (2001). *The Feminist Classroom: Dynamics of gender, race, and privilege*. New York: Rowman & Littlefield, softcover.

Two recent publications provide opportunity to discuss an emergent area of research: the feminist academic. Quite extensive research has now been conducted in many disciplines about the education of women. As a result, there is a substantive body of knowledge about how personal identity is formed, about access to education issues, about career equity limitations, about gender biases in society, and about the need to formulate effective activist networks. However, women academics have been strangely silent about their own challenges regarding these issues. Perhaps it has taken time for the recent, larger talent pool of academic women to become a fast moving current in the torrent of change that is transforming universities. Perhaps yet another generation of women needed to experience enough discrimination and stress before turning to feminist standpoints that provide relevant interpretations of their contexts. Whatever the multitude of reasons, some good scholarship is now available about women who are academics. This discussion is, first, a summary of two such publications, both authored by American scholars, and, second, an attempt to identify some themes that apply to women academics elsewhere.

Berenice Malka Fisher shares the narrative of her life history and the development of profound wisdom with respect to post-secondary pedagogy. As she excavates strengths and weaknesses consequent to being born Jewish, becoming a lesbian, and maintaining academic integrity, her struggles to be true to herself have resulted in a theory of feminist pedagogy. "Feminist pedagogy, as I conceive and try to practice it, is *teaching that engages students in political discussion of gender*

injustice" (p. 44). Through consciousness raising and social activism, she has evolved an articulate and cohesive approach to teaching students that permits personal and professional priorities to be integrated in ways that appear to facilitate similar growth in her students. Dr. Fisher is professor of educational philosophy at New York University. She co-founded the Women's Studies Commission in the School of Education and she directs the university's faculty development seminar on Teaching Social Justice. In addition she is highly visible in community political issues. Clearly her successes have been greater than the challenges she encountered during her maturation.

The book has a lengthy introduction and postscript with substantive endnotes, bibliography, and index. All are proof of scholarly competencies. Seven chapters begin with a personal narrative, which is a composite profile of students and faculty who exemplify the theme. Although the table of contents does not indicate it, chapters have sub-headings that address each thematic focus. Topics include: women's experiences as different ways of knowing; feminist empowerment through questioning authority; an examination of the ethic of care; safety, and self-disclosure; the ideal of women in community, not competition; and hopes for feminist teaching.

The chapter that explores hopes for feminist teaching has two sub-headings: feminist discourse and the problem of progress; feminist teaching across the generation gap. Hope is a complex concept and Fisher's spectrum extends from the great hope of progressive social justice to the cautionary hope that some efforts for change might have a chance of being permanent. Some types of hope must be deferred and others more grounded but "present hope" motivates activism (p. 194). When referencing academic women, she correctly notes that the fear when risk-taking is not loss of employment but of "diminished status," a devaluing of intellectual contributions because of political activism. She also identifies the tension many women academics feel between their research, which is a long-term investment in change, and the immediate desire to get out and protest against obvious inequities.

Many feminists are concerned about the wave dynamic of the woman's movement. Much that has been gained from hard and persistent struggling during the Third Wave seems to be lost as a new generation of women enjoy the fruits of the political struggles without appreciating the labor. Fisher describes her discouragement after watching feminist scholars attack each other's perspective at a symposium and after listening to the complaint of a talented doctoral-level student who does not find a mixed-level graduate class sufficiently stimulating. "From the standpoint of feminist discourse, the tendency to split intellectual and political activity undermines both feminism as a social movement and the thinking that can critically illuminate that

movement" (p. 200). She concludes that "timeliness" is a more relevant concept than "progress;" it is necessary to develop a sense that some victories are small and immediate while others take much longer to achieve. A second concern derives from understanding that generational differences are not necessarily age based but "we as feminists have not developed a discourse about generational relationships" (p. 208). Perhaps "generation" could be better defined as the generating of ideas that might be passed on rather than chronological sequences of change. Many feminists have anxiety about a "successor generation" and how much will be passed on. They doubt that women have been "inserted into history" and worry about whether recent lessons will be taught to incoming students (pp. 207, 210). The hope is that some parts of the "voice and story" will transcend the constraints. Fisher obviously cares deeply about the craft of her teaching and is an engaging writer. Although she offers practical advice and sound strategies to other academics, one is left with the sense that observing her in action might be the most effective pedagogy.

By contrast the Maher and Tetreault monograph is an expanded second edition of a longitudinal research project first reported in 1994. Chapters 1 and 9 were rewritten for this edition to include follow-up contacts with faculty women participants during the millennial year. The authors wanted to identify the types of "interactive pedagogies" that emerged in response to greater diversity of demographics among post-secondary students and struggles for more egalitarian and inclusive learning environments during the last two decades of the 20th century. Maher is professor of education at Wheaton College and Tetreault is provost and vice president for academic affairs at Portland State University. They attribute their successful project to institutional and familial support (both are married with children) and their collaborative process. "We are certain that if it had not been for the other, the project would never have reached fruition. When one of us flagged, the other pushed on. At times it felt like a relay race, with the baton shifting back and forth as each stage was met and each turning point reached" (p. ix). Nine chapters are introduced with quotations from the 17 feminist academics who participated in the project, their students or eminent women, all of whom were identified by pseudonyms or real names. Endnotes are substantive, as is the bibliography, and index. The table of contents does not indicate chapter sub-headings and given that both books were published by the same company, this limited overview might be an editorial policy not an author's, or reader's, preference.

According to the authors, feminist pedagogy is unique because of the "attention to the particular needs of women students and its grounding in feminist theory as the basis for its multidimensional and positional view of the construction of classroom knowledge" (p. 3). Institutional

criteria for inclusion in the project included: colleges and universities that had received sizable grants to integrate gender into undergraduate courses; three small liberal arts colleges, a research university, and a state university; later, another state university known for its diversity was added although the institution did not have the grant. At each institution, three faculty members were recommended as participants because of their well-known commitments to women and teaching. The research collaborators visited each setting for three weeks, observing the campus and classroom teaching, as well as conducting in-depth interviews with selected students and the professors. In-depth case study portraits were constructed and reviewed by the professor participant. During that time period, the collaborators each developed an "educational autobiography" of themselves and consequently became particularly interested in White/Black and knowledge: pedagogy dichotomies, themes which are threaded throughout the discussion (p. 5). Outcome themes include mastery of curriculum, acquisition of personal voice, formal authority, and "positionality" within various networks; these themes comprise the core chapters. Other chapters include portraits of the six institutions, a discussion of pedagogical practices that acknowledge and build upon diversity, issues associated with being American white and black; and follow-up summaries.

The chapter on positional pedagogies provides a mode with which to centre the results because it incorporates faculty member perspectives about teaching, student diversities, and institutional cultures. Positional pedagogy returns learning to the acquisition of basic literacy and numeracy by examining the meta-implications of selecting words and facts to discuss thought, particularly thoughts about gender, class, and race. Disciplined thinking, refined through the challenge of studying a body of knowledge, requires tools. Positional pedagogy examines the implications of using the tools of words and facts: what are the social and cultural implications of selecting a particular phrase or interpreting statistics. The instructors in this study were clearly experimenting with the application of theories to teaching practices although their courses represented quite different disciplines of knowledge. Therefore, their classrooms were not safe places where clearly defined repositories of information were transmitted and tested. Neither were they unstructured. They were sites of struggle for everyone involved, including the professor. In many instances institutional culture proved to be a restraint and the constrained resources of the 1990's provided another vise. Perhaps it is not surprising to read of the high mobility of the professors. In Year 2000 follow-up interviews, at least one person at each institution had moved from it, sometimes promoted, occasionally retired or withdrawn from the academy (33% of the total). All participants remained steadfast in their feminist standpoints, but

concern about a successor generation and increased social fragmentation was obvious. Differences between the institutions themselves seemed greater than differences within the various disciplines at an institution. Between the more endowed and prestigious universities and state sponsored small campuses, differences increased and obvious reductions in the quality of education were observed. Thus, the authors wondered if their research had captured a "specific moment in the academy that is now lost" (p. 267).

These two books provide a fascinating glimpse of a first generation of feminist academics at work. While ideals provided a great hope for change that was not attained, real change and achievements were evident. Women, many women, not just a few token examples of genius, can do good scholarship. Moreover, many are good reflective practitioners in the art of teaching. Some have learned how to be woman-centered and true to that internal vision regardless of external pressures upon them, the institution, and society. They have influenced a future generation in ways that undoubtedly will result in a more egalitarian society, which is part of the greater American ideal.

Continental readers from Canada and Mexico will identify with many issues, especially those of access to formal education and equity demands of minority groups. International readers will learn about how open and exploratory post-secondary instructors and institutions can be. It is difficult to not be envious when learning about a campus-wide faculty development program that addresses social justice issues or a scholar-in-residence (Arts and Sciences) graduate program, in which the recipient receives \$25,000 to work on her or his dissertation and to teach one course. On the other hand, the privileging of black perspectives is a particularly American stance; in other countries, other ethnic groups would get more attention. One unexpected outcome for both sets of authors is a raised consciousness of the importance of relationships to the formation of identity; in cultures less individualistic than the United States, the interplay between community and individual is an established value with the collective having precedence.

Many feminist academics will recognize and identify with the struggles of these women. Both books identify two important generational problems that all of us face. Regret is expressed for the lack of a female mentor. "What would it have been like to have had a feminist mentor" (Fisher, p. 205); "We discovered some of the roots of our own passion, such as our longings for the women-centred education we did not have" (Maher & Tetreault, p. 5). In addition, concern is expressed about how invaluable insights and strategies might be sustained. Who will comprise the successor generation? How will the feminist torch be passed on?

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