

Instructional Development

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Published as a service for
UMD faculty by the
Instructional Development
Service



University of Minnesota

FALL SEMESTER, 2011
VOL. XXVIII, NO. 1

Women's Studies: Thirty Years of Transforming the Academy

Beth Bartlett, Women's Studies

This year marks the 30th anniversary of Women's Studies at UMD, causing me to reflect on the changes Women's Studies has brought to the academy, and to UMD in particular. Three central concerns and practices of Women's Studies come most immediately to mind as having had significant impacts on the academic enterprise at large and at UMD: 1) feminist pedagogy; 2) cultural and transnational inclusivity; and 3) feminist activism and community engagement.

Feminist Pedagogy

My first move away from the traditional hierarchically structured classroom was to step away from the podium and put the chairs in a circle. This simple yet radical move has the effect of de-centering the authority of the classroom – to affirm the authority of each person, teacher and student alike, to speak from their own centers to the community of learners. Placing chairs in a circle also enables everyone to talk with each other, and, perhaps more importantly, to listen to each other. Of course, the mere placement of chairs in a circle, while significant, is not sufficient, and must be accompanied by the practice of feminist discourse which requires all to take responsibility for their participation, as well as to enable the participation of others, to treat each other with respect, to listen well, and to listen with the intent to understand (Jaggard, 1995). These discourse methods facilitate four key things: First, as Nelle Morton put it, they create the listening which allows us “to hear each other into speech” (Morton, 1985). Knowing one is being listened to attentively facilitates the act of speaking, and many previously silent students are thus enabled to give voice to their perspectives and insights. Second, these methods facilitate the feminist epistemological project of enabling the sharing of as many perspectives as possible (Collins, 1991). Third, these methods facilitate the open and honest sharing of perspectives and truths that enable the key intent to understand (Bartlett, 2004). Finally, the key study in Belenky et al., *Women's Ways of Knowing* (1986) demonstrated the importance for women, and for many men as well, of “relational knowing,” and the honest and respectful conversations facilitated by these methods enable students to develop relationships, and thus more concrete and deep engagement with each other and with the material.

My second move away from the traditional classroom hierarchy was to abandon the linear rigidity of my well-outlined lecture notes. This is not to say that I abandon all structure, but I do methodically invite the focus of any given class period to be deter-

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mined by the students. In many of my classes, students write responses to readings ahead of class, and I often let these lead the way for determining the most salient material on any given topic. On other occasions, the best way to invite this is having students engage with text material in small groups, often with key, focused questions, and then centering the full-group sessions around the questions and insights that emerge from their small groups. Central to feminist pedagogy is the asking of questions. We encourage and invite and honor the asking of questions of the material, of the teacher, of each other, and of ourselves. One of the great demands of feminism and feminist pedagogy is a thoroughgoing self-scrutiny—of our truths, of our self-deceptions, of our privilege and how this impacts our perspective and biases, of the questions we fear to ask—and then must ask. As instructors we ask these questions of ourselves continually, and encourage our students to do the same. I hear often from professors in other disciplines that they wish they had more Women’s Studies students in their classes because they are willing to participate, but even more so because they ask such thought-provoking questions. It is in asking the questions that true learning begins. Meeting students where they are, connecting the material with their lives, asking “honest questions”¹ and responding frankly and fully to every question, being fully present to each and every one—all of these keep students at the center of the learning.

I recently had an illuminating conversation with a colleague in another discipline from St. Scholastica, who thought this moving chairs into a circle and straying away from the finely tuned lecture was the easy way out. I assured him it was in fact quite the opposite—that it took not only far more resourcefulness, creativity, knowledge, and flexibility to be willing to follow students’ interests and questions outside the lecture, but also a good deal of courage. Every class is at least in part an unknown. And yet, it seems to me it is the only real way to teach. I often say that I don’t teach subject material so much as I teach students. Of course, we do cover the essential course material, but in what ways, and with what emphases, varies with every group of students. It is the students that make the material come alive. This is student-centered learning at its best.

The original discussion of UMD’s new core values and goals focused on “student-centered learning.” I am disappointed that that original language did not survive, and was watered down to the vague “learning-centered environment,” because I know from my students that it is the student-centeredness of feminist pedagogy that keeps them so engaged.² It is what makes this teaching enterprise in Women’s Studies such a challenge and a delight every day. Nevertheless, I know that teaching and learning practices have changed considerably from the silent rows of students and professorial monologues that I first encountered when I began teaching here over thirty years ago. It does my heart good as I walk through the halls now to see feminist pedagogy infused in so many classes—with students sitting in circles or small groups, boisterous conversations and laughter, and students and teachers alike engaged in learning together.

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Inclusivity

Women's Studies, I would venture, is the most radical and extensive inclusivity project in academia today, as has also been the case of Women's Studies at UMD. The original purpose of Women's Studies was to infuse the academy with knowledge and scholarship of the half of the human population which had been excluded from the academy—women. Like people of color, women literally were not allowed entrance, nor were their lives, perspectives, and concerns included in scholarship and the canon. Women's Studies arose to address this injustice and this deep gap in knowledge. To the questions, “What about women?” and “Why (not) women?” Women's Studies quickly added, “Which women?” We simply could not talk about gender oppression and liberation and not consider the interlocking nature of oppressions of race, class, and sexual orientation. This has over time expanded to include nationality, ability, religion, and others. The discipline of Women's Studies has struggled, and I mean this in the most loving of ways – struggle as commitment to work consistently and conscientiously— to expand our knowledge and scholarship surrounding privilege and interlocking oppressions. The refusal to oppress, which is at the very core of the feminist commitment to solidarity, requires a thorough-going self-honesty regarding our own capacity to oppress, and undergirds our commitment to reduce our participation in all systems of domination (Bartlett, 2004 and Hooks, 1984).



For us at UMD, this mandated that we walk our talk, and commit to hiring diverse faculty and to creating a diverse curriculum. Because of this commitment, we dedicated our two full-time faculty positions to hiring faculty with expertise in international and cultural diversity issues and perspectives. Our curriculum reflects our commitment as well, with the vast majority of our courses devoted to international and cultural diversity perspectives: spirituality, ecofeminism, peace/war, law, transnational perspectives, and globalization and food, to name a few. However, we have also heeded the wisdom of Peggy McIntosh (whose writing on privilege is part of the core curriculum of our introductory course) and recognize that “adding and stirring” is not a sufficient way to address issues of inclusion (McIntosh, 1988). Rather these must be infused throughout every course, ideally in every topic and every text. Because the discipline as a whole is committed to thoroughgoing inclusivity, we are fortunate that the scholarship from which our coursework is drawn consistently addresses multiple issues. Also, recognition of multiple standpoints and partial perspectives, and the necessity to include as many perspectives and voices as possible is central to the feminist epistemology which we teach in our courses and model in our classrooms. We challenge our students to become aware of and to be able to articulate their own standpoints,³ and that of others, as well as to recognize which standpoints might not be included. We actively address this

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in class discussions, and consistently call on our students to reflect on issues of inclusivity/exclusivity in their written assignments as well. We also seek to expand our students' perspectives through guest speakers, engagement in Multicultural Center activities, study abroad opportunities such as the Women's Studies/Witness for Peace trips to Mexico, and service-learning opportunities that engage students in diverse communities.

In Women's Studies, inclusivity is our daily practice. It has been our goal that it become central to the academic enterprise at UMD, and we are delighted that UMD has now, in its Strategic Plan, adopted inclusivity as one of its central goals and projects.

Feminist Activism and Community Engagement

Like African-American Studies, American Indian Studies, Chicano Studies, Labor Studies, and the like, Women's Studies had its origins in feminist movement and activism. Basically, we are the academic arm of feminist activism and community organizing. Feminists both inside and outside the academy worked to establish Women's Studies programs and Women's Centers in universities around the country to address the social injustice of the near total exclusion of knowledge about the scholarship of women from the academy, and the failure of the academy to address other pressing needs of women faculty, staff, and students. The early days of the founding of Women's Studies at UMD were exciting times in the community as a whole, with most of the other now well-established community organizations and agencies beginning at about the same time. Women's Studies began in partnership with members of the larger community, and continues to be in partnership on many fronts.

On campus, Women's Studies works hand-in-hand with the Women's Resource and Action Center (WRAC) to bring programming and bi-weekly lectures to campus. Many of the interns are Women's Studies students, and the Director is also a member of our faculty. Many of our students first learn feminist activism and organizing by working as volunteers and interns with WRAC. The Department also maintains ongoing communication and collaboration with community organizations through semi-annual community meetings, tri-annual newsletters, keeping a community calendar, co-sponsoring events with community organizations, and having members of the community on our Board. But primarily our emphasis on activism and community engagement is through our students and in our classrooms. Our coursework raises awareness of multiple issues of social injustice, which in itself motivates students to work for social transformation, but we also seek to inspire students with opportunities for action locally and globally, providing examples and resources for action. We invite local, national, and international activists and community organizers to our classes to inform our students of their effective work in the world, and to work with them in visioning creative solutions to concrete problems. We create and facilitate opportunities to work with local agencies through both required and optional course assignments, and a thriving internship program in which students spend a semester or a year working in such organizations as Program for Aid to Victims of Sexual Assault, Center Against Sexual and Domestic Assault, WRAC, and the Family Justice Center in a variety of capacities. We encourage our students to attend local events, as well as to volunteer their time, and most of our majors spend at least part of their time at UMD volunteering in local

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organizations, as well as participating in marches and rallies, petition campaigns, and lobbying activities at the state capitol and city hall. We also lead by example, and the research, service, and activism of the faculty and staff is interwoven with the community. I am quite often moved when I witness the collective engagement of Women's Studies staff, faculty, and students alike with the community, such as the number of Women's Studies faculty, staff, students, and alumni who showed up and spoke against an anti-immigration resolution at City Hall a year ago, or the annual Take Back the Night marches.

Most recently, through an Engaged Department Grant, we have been able to develop a course on feminist activism and community organizing, to be taught for the first time this spring, which will go even farther to enable our students to develop knowledge and skills to be effective participants in the community. Women's Studies began as civic engagement and has continued to infuse our academic practices with engagement in the community. We are heartened to see UMD adopt civic engagement in its Strategic Plan. Certainly one of the main messages we try to convey in our courses is that feminism is not just a perspective or standpoint through which to analyze scholarship, or a vision of social transformation, but rather is a commitment to act to help to bring about social transformation, recognizing that such actions may take many paths. As our graduates often respond to the question, "What can you do with a Women's Studies major?" – "Change the world."

¹I am indebted to my former colleague in Philosophy, Bob Evans, for that term. During a talk I was giving on truthfulness and honesty, he once asked me if there were such things as "honest questions," not just answers. I have since reflected considerably on this, and, yes, it seems to me that an "honest question" is one that is genuinely open to the response, rather than having a predetermined "right answer."

²As one of my students recently wrote in a response to reading, "I find myself in most of my classes where it could be more of an open discussion like I have found in all my WS classes. In my WS classes, I have felt more engaged and focused."

³Feminist standpoint theory was first articulated by Nancy Hartsock (1983).

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Jill D. Jenson, head of UMD's Department of Writing Studies, was recently published in the premier issue of the *International Journal of ePortfolio*. Her article, "Promoting Self-regulation and Critical Reflection Through Writing Students' Use of Electronic Portfolio," was inspired by her work in the 2004-08 Bush Foundation group which was funded to improve teaching and learning. Over eight semesters, she studied the "potential of using innovative teaching methods to prompt first-year writing students to self-regulate learning behaviors and write more critical reflection statements when using electronic portfolios." To access the richer article in its entirety, go to <http://www.theijep.com/pdf/IJEP19.pdf>

Message to Students: Control What You Can

Being able to reflect is not instinctive. Initially, in a first year writing course when students were asked to comment thoughtfully in ePortfolio on their final project, a research paper, the level of reflection was low, more a label than a reflection: for example, "Final RP [research paper]." Urged to expand on their observations, students moved into listing what was covered in class and what they had done—but not actively reflecting on any learning that had occurred. Fortunately, results of efforts to elicit greater reflectivity showed a marked increase in both length and depth of students' statements and "demonstrate the effectiveness of using intentional instructional strategies for helping students develop self-regulation and critical reflection skills."

Collaborating in the grant with ten faculty members representing all collegiate units, Jenson observed that students were "largely unaware of the fact that they could exercise a great deal of control over their learning by simply understanding how they best learn and relying on those strategies to guide them." If they do not understand that they have control over what they can do, they are less likely to be able to pinpoint what worked for them and what didn't and to make necessary changes to achieve their goals.

The question was how to get students to take a "deep approach" to learning and create an awareness of the conditions and the ways in which they learn best. To solve the problem, Jenson chose three methods: surveys to explicitly reveal to students what they were and were not doing to reach their writing goals; questions and discussions during nearly every class period to help students "recognize the meaning and purpose of each course activity that was undertaken"; and increased frequency each semester of written reflections, guided by explicit prompts.

The questions below are a sampling from the entire survey which is appended to the online article.

In preparing to write this paper, how much of the assigned reading did you do?

None Some All

How did you approach completing the draft you brought for peer review? Put an X in front of the **one** response that best describes your approach.

- I started as soon as I got the assignment and worked on it steadily until it was due.
- I waited until the night before the draft was due to begin drafting the paper.
- I didn't start right away, but I **didn't** wait until the night before to begin writing.

I revised my paper (circle one) **thoroughly** somewhat not at all.

I have read (circle one) **none** some most all of the comments my instructor has written on my past papers.

Once students understand their own processes, they are better able to take ownership of their actions and control their outcomes. Until they understand their role in the learning process, they are less likely to reflect on it in a meaningful way.

Dragon Dictation

**Dana Lindaman,
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Technology in the language classroom used to consist of cassette recorders with headsets in the language labs that allowed students to listen to native speakers and to record themselves imitating the vocabulary, grammar and, pronunciation. Budgetary cutbacks across the country have meant that most of them were retired or repurposed long ago leaving us with a media console in each classroom. Through an iPad initiative sponsored by the CLA, some of the faculty in the Department of Foreign Languages and Literatures at UMD are bringing a new and improved language lab back into the classroom.



Through a host of different applications available on the iPad, students are able to practice grammar, vocabulary, and, yes, even their accent. Dragon Dictation is speech recognition software that allows the speaker to dictate a message which the software translates into written form. I have my students use Voice Board in Moodle to record themselves speaking a preselected text. I then underline their mistakes and show them the text using the International Phonetic Alphabet. Next I bring a cart of iPads into the classroom and give one to each student. The students are asked to open the Dragon Dictation application and to speak paragraph into the microphone, line by line, to see if the application can recognize their speech. I ask them to use the feedback from the machine to practice the words the software does not recognize and then to repeat the whole sentence again. In this way I am permitted to walk around the classroom helping students who are stuck on a particular word. If I see patterns emerging, difficult phonemes, for example, I can write a different word or sentence on the board that drills that particular phoneme. Students work independently at perfecting their pronunciation. The feedback is instant and the environment stress-free, since they are not performing in front of their classmates.

The very first time I did this exercise, students were thrilled. Some turned it into a competition with their neighbor, challenging them to see who could be the first to pronounce it accurately. They didn't even have to listen to one another; the proof was in the dictation. Others, more self-conscious about their accent, retreated to a corner and spent their time drilling words that the machine could not recognize and compiling a list of completed phrases. Students asked me if the application were available for their iPhone. It is. I can safely say that I have never had a groups of students so excited about practicing their pronunciation. I have since suggested the software to group of music students that I tutor in French prosody and pronunciation. It is an ideal application for them because of the many language options. Singers can work on their Italian, German, Spanish, and French arias.

With an Eye Toward Internationalizing On-Campus Teaching and Learning 2012

The University of Minnesota System's educational mission includes the goal to "graduate lifelong learners, leaders, and global citizens." UMD's Strategic Plan identifies the need to "Develop and begin to implement a plan, including benchmarks, to create an integrated globally engaged campus" by May, 2012.

In order to support academic units in their efforts to meet the university's mission to internationalize the campus and curricula, the Instructional Development Service (UMD), the Global Programs and Strategy Alliance, the Center for Teaching and Learning, and the Office of Information Technology (UMTC) are offering two, three-day intensive programs on Internationalizing Teaching and Learning on **January 4-6, 2012, or June 6-8, 2012**. A system-wide call for proposals went out in October, and four UMD faculty members were chosen to participate: David Beard, Writing Studies; Insoon Han, Education; Deborah Petersen Perlman, Communication; and Cecilia Ramone from Fine Arts.

The program will engage a multidisciplinary cohort of faculty in significant course design or redesign in order to integrate both international content and transformational learning processes into their courses. Program goals focus on:

- Developing a greater awareness of what it means to have an internationalized "academic self" (Sanderson, 2008) by identifying their current teaching perspectives and assumptions about learning, exploring new ways of thinking about how they teach an internationalized course, and increasing intercultural communication competence, strategies and skills that enhance their teaching and promote student learning
- Identifying global learning goals and outcomes for their courses by distinguishing and integrating into their course disciplinarily appropriate global competencies and learning outcomes
- Expanding teaching strategies for creating an open-minded, respectful, and safe learning environment for all students; presenting course content that increases the inclusion of international, global, and intercultural perspectives, and that assists students in integrating new international, intercultural and global knowledge
- Developing materials, activities, and assessments by diversifying course resources to incorporate global, international, and intercultural perspectives; incorporating activities, assignments and assessments that increase global, international, and cultural knowledge, attitudes, and skills; and identifying appropriate technology to use in an internationalized course.

Sanderson, G. (2008). A foundation for the internationalization of the academic self. *Journal of Studies in International Education*, 12(3), 276-307.

