

The Challenges of Using a Feminist Pedagogical Approach

Sharon M. Meagher

Abstract

The introduction of a pathbreaking new master's degree in Gender, Culture, and Development required a pedagogy to match its program contents. Since the aim of the program was to cultivate the next generation of leaders with the knowledge, vision, and skills to not only implement the United Nations Millennium Development Goals (UN MDGs) but to set the future goals and agenda, students needed to experience an educational setting that was empowering. As such, we introduced feminist pedagogy into the first seminar, defining feminist pedagogy as the 'extent to which a community of learners is empowered to act responsibly toward one another and the subject matter and to apply that learning to social action' (Shrewsbury, 1997, pp. 166–173). But how do we introduce feminist pedagogy in a large class where many students had previously been subjected to the passive, rote memorisation teaching utilised in most educational systems in which adult students would have participated, especially given the popularity of what Paolo Freire would call the 'banking method of education' in colonial regimes? We responded to that challenge by being as transparent as possible in our teaching, and by modelling feminist pedagogy in all that we did.

I had the privilege of being invited by Professor Shirley Randell to work with a team of talented feminist professors to develop the curriculum for the new master's degree in Gender, Culture, and Development at the Kigali Institute

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of Education (KIE). The introduction of this path-breaking new master's degree required a pedagogy to match its program contents. Since the aim of the program was (and remains) to cultivate the next generation of leaders with the knowledge, vision, and skills to not only implement the UN MDGs but to set the future goals and agenda, students needed to experience an educational setting that was empowering. As such, we introduced feminist pedagogy into the first seminar, defining feminist pedagogy initially as the 'extent to which a community of learners is empowered to act responsibly toward one another and the subject matter and to apply that learning to social action' (Shrewsbury, 1997, p. 166). But how do we introduce feminist pedagogy in a large class where many students had previously been subjected to the passive, rote memorisation teaching utilised in most educational systems in which adult students would have participated, especially given the popularity of what Paolo Freire would call the 'banking method of education' in colonial regimes (1970; 1993, pp. 72-75)? We responded to that challenge by being as transparent as possible in our teaching, and by modelling feminist pedagogy in all that we did.

One important way to both model feminist pedagogy and to develop and strengthen a feminist learning community was to bring students and instructors together to learn from one another. I travelled to Rwanda a few times; during the first visit, I offered an introductory lecture to introduce key concepts in feminist thought and their relevance to global development to Professor Randell's colleagues and some prospective students at the Kigali Institute of Education. I then returned with a group of undergraduate students from the University of Scranton (where I directed the Women's Studies program at the time), who joined the Rwandan student cohort for the first two weeks of the first course in the new master's degree program. Some of the instructors hired to teach the remainder of that course as well as future courses in the new master's degree also sat in on the classes. The University of Scranton undergraduates contributed to the class, in that they were used to the expectations of active participation and student ownership of knowledge that feminist pedagogy demands. They therefore modelled it for the students, particularly in small group discussions. An additional benefit was that Rwandan students who were not native English speakers had the opportunity to practice with fluent English speakers, as English was the official instructional language. Scranton undergraduate students learned side-by-side their Rwandan counterparts. While the Scranton students had a stronger background in feminist theory and had native English proficiency, they lacked 'real world' experience, especially in terms of how gender issues affect people and policies in the developing world. The KIE master's degree students were all working adults with a great deal of real world experience, but some of them needed assistance, either in their introduction to gender theory or (in the case of those trained in francophone systems) with English language proficiency.

The faculty teamed together to employ feminist participatory pedagogies in which students taught and learned from one another as well as from faculty members. Working with an international group of instructors hired to teach in the program ensured that we developed some consistent vocabulary and feminist pedagogical practices that could be carried forward throughout the entire degree program.

So just what vocabulary and practices did we introduce, and how? The first course for the first cohort of the master's degree in Gender, Culture, and Development was called 'GCD 601: Theories of Masculinities and Femininities' and was offered in January 2011. The course description in the syllabus read as follows: 'This foundation course will explore various theories informing social assumptions about masculinities, femininities, sexualities, and transgender identities as they are understood in specific development contexts. Concepts such as sex, gender, sexual orientation, and gender identity will be the groundwork for students' theoretical knowledge that will inform the research component of their graduate studies. Gender Studies as a field aims that both male and female students make strong personal connections between classroom material and their own experience while developing an understanding of and respect for cultural diversity. Students will present individual research on theories of masculinities and femininities using technology and oral communication skills.' One key to feminist pedagogy is the ability to make connections between course material and personal experience. Another is for students to take ownership of their learning.

We aimed to accomplish both by being transparent with the students about these key goals, first by noting them in the syllabus itself and second by structuring assignments in ways that required active learning, independent and collaborative thinking, and connection making between course content and the lives of the men and women enrolled in the class. Making such connections entailed taking seriously the feminist claim that the 'personal is political' (and explaining what that phrase means), but it also encouraged reflection on how theory can and is translated in social and political practices that can make a difference in both socio-economic policy and our everyday lives. One learning objective noted in the syllabus was that students would learn 'to understand connections between specific gender theories and diverse forms of social action in women's and men's movements, both in Africa and internationally'. The initial readings also focused on feminist pedagogy itself so that students could reflect on how and why the course and its assignments were structured as they were.

While these are pedagogical strategies that I employ in all of my teaching, they took on particular relevance in the context of the launch of the new master's degree program, given the challenges presented. First, most of the Rwandan students had no knowledge or experience of any type of active learning teaching methodologies, including feminist pedagogy. While most

school systems around the globe employed what Paulo Freire called ‘the banking method,’ that was acutely true in the colonial school systems where most of the students had studied prior to enrolment in this new master’s degree program. ‘The banking method’ refers to any teaching methodology that holds that the teacher is the owner of all knowledge and that the students are empty vessels. Lecturing is the primary mode of teaching, as the teacher pours his or her knowledge into the empty vessels. Rote memorisation is emphasised over critical thinking and reflection (Freire, 1970; 1993, pp. 72–75).

I began the first class by assigning Carolyn Shrewsbury’s article ‘What is Feminist Pedagogy?’ and bell hooks’ ‘Toward a Revolutionary Feminist Pedagogy’ (1989, pp. 49–54). I noted that Shrewsbury argues that feminist pedagogy ‘begins with a vision of what education might be like’ (1997, p. 166). I take seriously bell hooks’ admonition that ‘In the feminist classroom, it is important to define the terms of engagement, to identify what we mean when we say that a course will be taught from a feminist perspective. Often the initial explanations about pedagogy will have a serious impact on the way that students experience a course’ (1989, p. 48). And so I defied student expectations that I would just lecture at them, asking the students to join me in developing that vision for the master’s program, asking them, ‘What are your hopes and goals for this course and for your overall master’s program?’ Based on their contributions, we then discussed three key concepts: power, community, and leadership.

If, following Freire as well as bell hooks, we define power in terms of energy rather than domination, what does it mean to be empowered (in the classroom and outside of it)? bell hooks argues that ‘... to teach in a way that liberates, that expands consciousness, that awakens, is to challenge domination at its very core. It is this pedagogy that Paulo Freire calls “education as the practice of freedom”’ (1989, p. 50). Shrewsbury argues that the feminist commitment to the empowerment of students commits us to a set of classroom strategies and pedagogies that: 1) encourage students to develop individual and collective goals; 2) ‘develop the students’ independence’; 3) make everyone ‘stakeholders’; 4) develop skills; 5) ‘reinforce and enhance self-esteem’; and 6) ‘expand knowledge of the subject matter’ (Shrewsbury, 1997, pp. 168–9). The initial question began the process of asking students to develop their own goals and to make them all stakeholders.

Following Shrewsbury, we discussed community, and what it meant to create a learning community within the cohort, arguing that we had to balance community and individual rights (1997, p. 170). These claims provided an opening for us to discuss rules of engagement in the classroom that were noted in the syllabus (but also open to discussion and revision): ‘Creating a positive learning environment is the responsibility of all students. Students should: freely share their ideas during discussion; listen respectfully to all students in order to understand their points of view; allow others time to express themselves

without disruption; feel free to debate issues and disagree respectfully; value the worth of each individual student, acknowledging that others' worldviews and beliefs may be different from yours but no less valuable'. Students also were asked to use gender-inclusive language. One way that we summarised the aim of feminist pedagogy was to talk about the ways the feminist pedagogy encourages and promotes leadership. 'Leadership is the embodiment of our ability and our willingness to act on our beliefs' (Shrewsbury, 1997, p. 171).

Although many students were not used to working in small groups or taking leadership in the classroom, most of the students held leadership positions in their work in Rwanda. With the help of facilitators, groups developed their own goals for the course and for the master's degree program, which were then shared with the whole class. The class agreed on the following goals for the course: 1) understand gender theory and its relation to practice; 2) understand feminism; 3) strengthen capacity in gender and women's issues; and 4) share diverse experiences with the class. The class agreed on the following goals for the master's degree program: 1) understand gender theory and its relation to practice; 2) become qualified as a gender expert; 3) get certified as a gender expert; 4) become role models for gender justice in community to make positive change; 5) understand feminism; 6) strengthen capacity in gender and women's issues; 6) and empower ourselves through acquisition of skills and knowledge so that we can affect others.

Although the students wanted to become certified as gender experts through their completion of the master's degree program, few students had had any prior knowledge of feminist theory and practice. Building a learning community therefore entailed a great deal of initial focus on the introduction of key concepts on gender and feminism generally, as well as their link to global development issues. We began with several readings that introduced the concepts of 'gender', 'gender inequality', 'gender roles', and 'feminism'.

Many students resisted the idea that any aspect of gender might be socially constructed rather than 'God given'. I was not surprised by this reaction, as I had encountered it in the initial program lecture I had made at KIE the year before, and in classrooms in the United States too. At that lecture at KIE, there were students from several sub-Saharan nations. When they challenged the claim that at least some aspects of gender were socially constructed, I invited them to think about gender roles, and to tell me things that were 'naturally' women's work and things that were 'naturally' men's work. One woman immediately replied, 'well, construction is definitely men's work!' But others were perplexed by that claim, saying, 'in my country, the building of the thatched roofs on our homes is definitely women's work, as it is akin to weaving, and THAT is women's work!' I shared this story with the class, and there were knowing nods. They then volunteered other examples where gender roles vary culturally. These counterclaims helped to make my point, that the ascription of gender roles

varies from culture to culture, but that we take engrained cultural practices as givens and therefore assume them to be natural.

Feminist pedagogy demands active listening on the part of the instructors as well as the students. Such listening requires attentiveness and respect for other cultures and for students' own knowledge. By encouraging examples from their own knowledge and experience, students were able to themselves see the social constructions that had previously been invisible to them. I then asked the students to reflect on what difference gender roles make. Students were then able to make sense of an assigned reading that linked gender and development. If gender rather than talent and ability determines type of work and workload, then gendered roles create a hierarchy of valued and non-valued work: 'in every country the jobs done predominantly by women are the least well paid and have the lowest status' (Momsen, 2010, p. 3) and women are more likely to do unpaid work than are men. The gendered division of labour affects economic development policies and practices such that men and women often are affected differently by development.

While I wanted to place points made in a global context, I also used and encouraged students' use of examples from Rwanda. While mainstream development theories and practices often have resulted in gender inequities that cause greater negative impact on women, the empowering aspect of feminist analysis is that it provides not only a critique but also points us towards solutions. For example, if we are attentive to the questions: Whose knowledge? Whose development? Then development planning and processes can ensure that appropriate knowledge and expertise informs policy and practice. While gender roles often lead to inequalities, role differentiation also creates differential knowledge and expertise that can be tapped rather than ignored. I found a great positive example in Rwanda. Gender differences in knowledge of plants is an example of the gender division of labour. In Rwanda, 'researchers used the knowledge of women farmers to develop new varieties of beans' which produced a consistently higher yield 'than those of male farmers' partly because of the women's knowledge of the local farming ecosystem' (USAID, 2001, quoted in Momsen, 2010, p. 148).

We studied the UN MDGs and their alignment with Rwanda 2020, the national economic and political development plan. Students were justly proud of the fact that they were part of a country that had embraced goals that could reverse gender inequities and promote development by embracing the knowledge and abilities of both men and women. Yet I also raised a critical question for their consideration. In Rwanda Vision 2020, there are both goals to move away from subsistence agriculture and to eliminate gender inequality. I asked whether these goals might potentially conflict, given that the majority of subsistence farmers in Rwanda were women. Certainly, having the goal of gender equality would help place a focus on the possible displacement of women as a consequence of the goal to eliminate subsistence farming, but how could such be assured? Burn argues that there is social science evidence that

shows that men's status has usually risen as economies move from subsistence agricultural systems to 'settled', market-based systems (2005, p. 21). Could Rwanda buck that trend?

As an instructor who is a US native and white, I had to examine my own privilege daily, working to be as attentive to my students and their needs as possible. It also was important for students to understand privilege and how it works in social systems. Like students in the United States, many Rwandan students shared the misconception that feminism was about male bashing, as they failed to understand that feminism is a critique of systems of oppression rather than individual persons. I assigned Stephen Johnson's essay on the systemic nature of patriarchy to help us think through the complex relationship between the roles that individuals can and do play in perpetuating oppressive systems and ways that they can disrupt them as well. Johnson uses the metaphor of playing the board game *Monopoly* to explain how oppressive systems such as patriarchy provide the rules of the game, and that so long as we play the game and fail to question the rules, we will perpetuate the game. Just as well-meaning people can become greedy players when playing the game *Monopoly* because they are 'just following the rules,' so we are often complicit in systems of oppression when we fail to question the rules of the system that oppresses (Johnson, 2014, pp. 26–47). Although not all of the Rwandan students were familiar with the board game, they quickly found other metaphors (including another game, but I can't remember its name) that helped them understand the concept.

My challenge as a feminist instructor is to help students move beyond popular misunderstandings of feminism to a more nuanced view that is not focused on the solipsistic individual. Feminist pedagogy aids in this challenge, as it calls on instructors to engage students in ways that counter individualist as well as authoritarian teaching methodologies; it demands that students be co-learners and take responsibility for their learning.

There was a high degree of mutual learning, as we worked from the premise that 'We can say that all feminists agree that women suffer social and/or material inequities simply because of their biological identity and are committed to challenging this, but the means by which such challenges might be made are many and various' (Pilcher & Whelehan, 2004, p. 49). The cross-cultural class composed of international faculty, Rwandan students (many of whom had lived abroad), and US students created opportunity for meaningful dialogue to explore this claim. How are gender inequities play out differently in different cultures? And yet what are the points of commonality that bound us in that class to one another across national and cultural differences? How could we learn from one another and create community?

We examined the Gender Equity Index. In 2007 two countries of the Global South, Barbados and Rwanda, were in the top ten on the Gender Equity Index demonstrating that national wealth is not necessary to achieve gender equity (Momsen, 2010, p. 230). National wealth is not a predictor of a nation's ranking.

In fact, Rwanda ranked 3rd after Sweden and Finland, while the United States ranked 25th (Social Watch, 2009, p. 1). The students from the US and those from Rwanda were invited to reflect on what factors they thought accounted for the differences in ranking between the two countries.

Rwanda is often rated in the top three in terms of various global gender equity indices because of its constitutional commitment to women's participation in governance and gender equitable public policies. Indeed, Rwanda's formal commitment to gender equity far outpaces that of the US. Yet on informal measures of women's empowerment in the workplace and the household, the US measures significantly higher. These differences created much material for fruitful dialogue between the American and Rwandan students. The combination of readings, class discussion, and educational field experiences encouraged students to examine how various factors impact both the perception and experience of gender equality and the quality of women's lives. We asked questions such as: To what extent do formal declarations and goals of gender equality positively affect women's lives? What are the causes of women's relatively low status and power? What are the solutions?

Of course, we could not answer all of those questions in one course, but the entry course set an agenda for the master's degree program, and as you will learn from other reports and interviews in this volume, shaped both the research and post-degree work of many program graduates. Neither I nor any of the other instructors claimed to have all the answers. The task of the students was to find their own answers, and to use the lens of feminism to help them see what may have been hidden to them before. Formal goals such as the UN MDGs demand local interpretation and implementation if they are to have transformative power in the actual lives of local girls and women.

In this sense, I think that we can say that feminist pedagogy travels well because it entails a commitment to mutual learning and respect. The juxtaposition of the examples of the US and Rwanda both illustrated what we needed to learn from one another about how to best achieve gender equality but also the global challenges in doing so. Cultural differences as well as differences in age and experience were bridged through dialogue. Although many of the Rwandan students were initially motivated to enrol in the program to get credentialed so that they could obtain a new position and were sceptical about both feminism and feminist pedagogy, the course goals that they developed in the first two weeks of the course demonstrated the fact that they were opening up to new possibilities, new ways of understanding and seeing the world—ways that connected their own experiences to social, political, and economic policy in a way that empowers them to lead to transform Rwanda.

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Contributor Biography

Sharon M. Meagher, PhD is Professor of Philosophy and former Vice President for Academic Affairs and Dean of the Faculty at Marymount Manhattan College in New York City. Her prior appointments include Dean of the College of Arts & Sciences at Widener University in Chester, PA (USA) and Chair of the Department of Latin American Studies and Women's Studies at The University of Scranton (PA, USA). She served as a Visiting Professor in the Centre for Gender, Culture, and Development, Kigali Institute of Education, Kigali, Rwanda, 2010–2011.