

Capstone Project
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Background

One of the concerns of both active learning and feminist pedagogy is to shift learning to an endeavor that is claimed by the student and actively pursued versus solely under the guidance and direction of the teacher/instructor/professor. During my spring section of Introduction to Women's Studies, I became concerned that students' participation in their own learning was waning. One of the first topics I discuss in class is the concept of "feminist pedagogy". According to Shrewsbury's article (1987) "What is Feminist Pedagogy?" this approach involves "a participatory, democratic process in which at least some power is shared." Feminist pedagogy, Shrewsbury writes, must give students agency, involving them in their own learning rather than merely transmitting knowledge to them. To accomplish feminist goals of leadership, empowerment, and community, she urges teachers to use a mixture of pedagogical methods, such as:

- Encouraging students' self-reflection to emphasize the relationship between course content and their lives;
- Facilitating collaboration to enhance students' knowledge;
- Breaking down prejudicial barriers; and
- Engaging classes to their communities to effect social change.

(<http://www.uwsa.edu/ttt/articles/klebesadel.htm>)

While I had discussed with students the concepts and ideology of feminist pedagogy and praxis, through readings from theorists like bell hooks and Adrienne Rich that encouraged students to not only "claim an education" and use their voice in class, I found that I was falling into a pattern of lecturing and explaining course materials. I also felt that they were tacitly accepting this approach. In other words, I was concerned that students were not reading course material and were relying on me to teach them about it. In order to address this situation, I realized that I needed to encourage students to teach themselves and each other course material. By doing this, I would be able to act as a facilitator of knowledge.

Activity

At the beginning of one class period in February, I handed out a sign up sheet that I had designed which included the authors of the readings for the particular unit we were examining (gender) and six blank spaces for students to choose the reading and group they wanted to participate with. The sheet introduced the activity, the required elements of the assignment, and the medium in which students would be completing the assignment.

In essence, the activity asked students to summarize the main points of a particular article. These main points would be arrived at through group discussion and consensus. Next, the group would choose the process by which roles for completing the activity would be assigned. For example, each group require a reporter to inform me about the process that took place in the groups, someone who would summarize the group's main points and post it on D2L on the designated group discussion area. Another student would compose questions to ask the class about the reading (this assumed and required that the entire class had read the article and was prepared to discuss it), and the rest of the group members were assigned the task of fielding questions about the reading and its content by the class. In addition, each group had to compose one question for each of the other groups about their reading via D2L.

I gave the students' time in class to discuss their article as a group and assign roles. I then informed students that besides presenting the main points on D2L, they would discuss their reading as a group before the class. Basically, each group would act as class facilitator for their article.

Results

Students responded to this activity with enthusiasm and interest. Group discussion was lively and students relegated the labor of the assignment efficiently. During the group presentation, students were very knowledgeable about their article and seemed excited to present. Each group divided up the speaker/summarizer, questions, and responses to the class in different ways, but each more than adequately completed the assignment. In addition, presentations went longer than the slotted time, which shifted the activity from a one-day discussion to a three-day class activity. In part, this was my fault for asking a lot of questions to each group about their readings. I also asked them to explain and elaborate their main points in more detail. This was the only potential problem with the assignment for me. While it exceeded the time I had set aside for the group, it fostered a sense of confidence within the students about their abilities as learners and leaders, fostered a spirit of community within the classroom, and embodied the elements of feminist pedagogy that were at the heart of the class.

The next week, I attempted to simulate this same activity, but conducted entirely through D2L. Unfortunately, this medium failed to inspire the same amount of interaction, discussion, and investment as the other. I will be utilizing this second approach in my fall 2005 large lecture class. I intend on assigning group work on D2L as a graded requirement, with the hope that introducing this aspect of the course early will make it more familiar, acceptable, and challenging. Perhaps some of the questions raised by the class can be incorporated into the weekly quizzes I plan to implement.

Rich, A. Rich, Adrienne. "Claiming an Education." In *On Lies, Secrets, and Silence: Selected Prose, 1966-1978*. New York: W.W. Norton, 1979. 231-235.

Shrewsbury, C. 1993. "What is Feminist Pedagogy?" *Women's Studies Quarterly*. 3 & 4: 8-15.

