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Teaching and feminist thought: can feminist perspectives contribute to gender equality in learning and teaching within higher education?

Louise Warwick-Booth

Introduction

The UK's higher education landscape has changed significantly, over the last three decades, with gender no longer seen as a barrier to education. Feminist theory has also contributed, ensuring that women's activities and social relations have become visible within the traditions of intellectual discourse (Harding and O'Barr 1987). Feminist studies insist that knowledge constructed in traditional university classrooms is incomplete and that the processes of learning and teaching have implications for pedagogy. Thus, feminist theory and its application have implications within the realm of education for teaching practice and strategies for more inclusive education. This paper will examine the feminist arguments in relation to education and then discuss how teaching can be adapted to fit with feminist pedagogy.

Feminism and Education

Feminism has made a number of contributions within education. Historically feminist theories examined and explained sexual inequalities within education (Saunders and Woodfield 1998). Contemporary work has now shifted its focus and explores the implications of postmodern and poststructural theories within education (Weiner 1994).

Feminists have recognised that teaching is embedded in a belief system and some argue that in the traditional classroom, women and girls have been silenced not just through the subject matter taught but also via the pedagogical style. This has led to arguments for pedagogical restructuring and the alteration of teaching and learning contexts in order to produce more relevant and positive experiences (Green 1992).

McCormick (1994) discusses a number of strategies for teachers to adopt to assure the delivery of non-sexist, culturally inclusive instruction. These include having an awareness of yourself and your personal characteristics, as this helps in accepting others and being actively engaged in discovering that sex-bias exists in textbooks and in classroom interactions. Finally, practitioners should also examine 'teacher talk' to gain insights into verbal interactions with students and the hidden curriculum, which is important in terms of unwritten rules, teachers' non-verbal messages and messages delivered through courses. Arguably teachers in any subject area can adopt such strategies.

Feminist Pedagogy

Balancing gender inequality in both learning and teaching can be achieved in a number of ways. Maker and Tetreault (1994) talk about four analytical themes central to feminist pedagogy; that is the principles, patterns and practice of teaching in a feminist style. The themes are mastery, voice, authority and positionality.

Firstly, mastery is the ability to make connections crossing traditional disciplinary boundaries and incorporating students' own experience. So, here we need to see changes

in how we teach to incorporate more collaborative and active educational approaches (Penn 1997). Secondly, student efforts to fashion individual voices need to be incorporated into sessions. Seminars can achieve this because they encourage students to assume an active and collaborative role in their own learning through discussion, group work and the application of knowledge from wider contexts, including other disciplines. Thirdly, feminist theorists question the authority of the teacher, arguing that traditional lectures can be experienced as constraining (Neilson and Boyson 1992). Hence, teaching should be about role sharing and facilitation rather than lecturing. Finally, seminars can weave together the themes of listening, explaining, teaching and organisation in an attempt to get students to develop a critical and reflexive view of the subject that they are learning as well as their positionality within it. Positionality means recognising how individual viewpoints are socially constructed and understanding that knowledge is not a monopoly (Smith 1987).

Many feminists argue that social reality is a historical process created by those involved for themselves and each other (Smith 1987). Encouraging students to explore knowledge is part of reflexive learning. This is further encouraged in the critical analysis required of students under-taking degrees – students are encouraged to question all information that they read and the data upon which it is based, to develop an analytically critical approach to knowing. Furthermore, research can, depending upon the standpoint adopted, recognise a multiplicity of situated knowers instead of imposing a single viewpoint against which all others are measured. This fits with the approach of some feminist theorists who argue for alternative perspectives, which revolve around power, the position of the researcher and the representation of multiple realities (Wolf 1996).

Moreover, feminist theorists have discussed curriculum and its gendered bias in several areas (see Weiner 1994). There is now much diversity within the curricula in higher education, consequently a number of areas where feminist theory has played a part can be conveyed to students. Indeed, evidence suggests that the curriculum has changed over time with feminism as a theory having a positive influence (Weiner 1994).

Feminists have also directed attention towards power within teaching and the classroom. Some feminist theorists argue that teachers must deal directly with power issues in the classroom by doing themselves what they ask students to do, namely discussing, questioning and participating in tasks (O' Barr 1994). Flexibility can also be brought into the classroom on some levels especially when students are recognised as more than blank slates upon which teachers may write (O' Barr 1994). Teachers are not powerless in terms of introducing feminist perspectives into the curriculum where they are missing. There is an array of empirical examples from feminist research useful in illustrating points, which can be drawn upon and related to a wide range of material across several subject areas.

Lessons for Practice

- Recognising the hidden curriculum and how it operates in order to tackle it.
- Curriculum change to reflect the experience of marginalised groups.
- Changing how material is delivered with the lecturer acting as a facilitator fostering student involvement.
- Encouraging students to critically engage with and reflect upon material as knowledge is constructed.

Issues

However, consideration needs to be paid to the teacher, the target group and the external limiting conditions, which all impact upon the learning environment. Thus, some lecturers' own beliefs may not fit comfortably with feminist pedagogical approaches. Lecturers may also encounter difficulties at an institutional level. The reality of delivering lectures in a non-

sexist fashion is also a practical difficulty – as a practitioner, how can you include women more without discriminating against other students and can you always ensure that the curriculum content is egalitarian? Furthermore, students themselves influence the classroom dynamics and learning environment, thus their motivation, attitude and expectations will still play a role within the classroom. Finally, external conditions such as financial considerations, living arrangements and the personal circumstances of students influence participation. The increasing number of students involved in higher education also has implications for expanding feminist pedagogy and for hearing students' voices. Indeed, passive students, non-negotiable curriculum content and the authority structure of mass provision lectures are all considered highly undesirable from a feminist perspective.

Wider Educational Linkages

Despite these issues, much of the feminist discussion around pedagogical practices is similarly argued within the constructivist paradigm. Constructivist arguments maintain that individuals create or construct new understandings and knowledge through the interaction of what they already know and believe and the ideas, events and activities with which they come into contact (Richardson 1997). Learning activities within constructivist settings are characterised by active engagement, inquiry, problem solving and collaboration with others – all of which feature within the repertoire of feminist pedagogy. Consequently, the teacher is a guide, a facilitator and a co-explorer who encourages the active engagement of students through questions, challenges and the formulation of ideas and conclusions, leading to deeper understanding, again mirroring feminist descriptions of the role of the teacher, which depict the teacher as a less conservative, questioning, interactive and collaborative worker listening to student perspectives (Penn 1997).

Clearly then, feminist arguments do not exist in isolation within the literature in terms of approaches that argue for socially situated, shared and active learning philosophies. Yet both feminist and constructivist models of learning require further development in order to be more useful on a practical level. For example, lectures are often used within higher education yet their didactic format limits active learning and so feminists and constructivists alike often critique this method of delivering curricula. However, lectures are sometimes the only viable format for delivering curricula to large groups within university settings and so they are continually used.

Conclusion

Even without a currently strong agenda for action, feminist theory remains noisy and ever present in education revealing the part played by social processes in the creation of knowledge. Yet higher education has not fully embraced feminist pedagogy and there are practical challenges remaining for the lecturer who wishes to work to emancipate and address equality. The challenge also remains for educators to not regard both constructivist and feminist arguments as the only viable theoretical frameworks for teaching and learning. Consequently, all teachers need to understand a variety of perspectives and develop their discretion to implement their choices. This task in itself opens up a further debate about what constitutes successful and effective teaching.

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