



Feminist Pedagogy in Higher Education: Critical Theory and Practice

Light, Tracy Penny; Nicholas, Jane; and Bondy, Renée, eds.
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Book Review

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Reviewed by: Jessica Tinklenberg, *Morningside College*

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The articles in this anthology seek to establish both theoretical boundaries and practical guidelines for feminist practice in the classroom. The essays are, on the whole, very successful in regard to the first goal; however, this reviewer wishes there was more in the way of concrete advice, assignment structure, or assessment design throughout.

Every essay in this collection clearly shares a passion for feminist pedagogy. Throughout, the authors share a clear understanding of feminist methodology and praxis and make clear their desires to transform and invigorate classroom experience through this knowledge and experience. In one of the more powerful examples of theory influencing the classroom, Jennifer Browdy de Herndandez discusses the ways in which Gloria Anzaldua's concept of *conocimiento* ("awareness" or "knowledge") is foundational to her course "African Women Writing Resistance." While this work stands out in its clear discussion of feminist principles as foundational for teaching, each essay in the volume displays clear grounding in both feminist theory and pedagogical research. The editors are to be lauded for finding such a diverse group of authors with such uniformly strong methodological knowledge.

However, the volume faltered in two ways. First, the discussion of method and theory, while a strength in many ways, became repetitive over the course of fifteen chapters and an introduction. It might have served the anthology better to have a methodological section toward the beginning of the volume that set the tone for the work as a whole. Application, course design, and even assessment sections that drew on the work of the previous scholars could have followed the preliminary discussion. Instead, the various contributors repeat many of the same methodological and theoretical preoccupations throughout: decentering,

contextualizing, intersectionality, gender performance, and so forth. For those who read the volume beginning to end, this recitation of method and theory becomes unnecessarily repetitive.

Second, this reviewer found the volume lacking in practical approaches to the classroom, particularly regarding assignment design and discussion processes. Several chapters mention the classroom, but few authors share their actual day-to-day work, assignments, or assessment data. For example, in the initially fascinating essay on a non-credit outreach humanities course (“Rethinking ‘Students These Days’: Feminist Pedagogy and the Construction of Students”) the authors spend the majority of the discussion on the social location and needs of the participants. This is crucial information, to be sure, and welcomed by the reader. However, when it came to the class itself the authors offer no observations about discussion practices, relevant assignments, or course assessment. The reader was left to wonder: how do they achieve such positive results? And how could I, with similar students, replicate their achievements? Many of the other essays similarly offer no discussion of the course or courses as they were practiced; instead, authors employ vague language about discussions, stakeholders, or their experiences of the course as a whole. From the perspective of a reader, and fellow feminist teacher, I was left at a loss as to how to change my courses now to enact in the classroom the strong methodological framework displayed throughout this volume in any practical way.

The clear exception, in regard to practical advice for transforming assignment design and assessment, was the chapter by Linda Briskin, “Activist Feminist Pedagogies: Privileging Agency in Troubled Times.” This essay emphasizes the importance of moving from a “caring for” or charity model of service learning to a community-based model. The theoretical framework here is spot-on, emphasizing context and avoiding the patriarchal and colonialist subtext of charity-focused work. However, Briskin also includes three sets of inserts for extra information concerning writing assignments and questions from the course and follows these with a potential model for analysis of these assignments to show student learning. As a teacher, I learned more from this chapter – and certainly more that I can put into immediate practice – than from any other work in the volume.

The discipline of feminist pedagogy, in both its theoretical and practical forms, is a promising horizon for transforming and liberating higher education classrooms. While this volume did not offer as many practical tools as it might have, the reviewer was heartened to read of the broad support and sophisticated theoretical grounding in feminist pedagogy from among its authorship.

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