

Full Length Research Paper

Exploring Women’s Learning About Gender Diversity in a Religiously Conservative State in America

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The purpose of this study was for two female, doctoral students residing in the State of Utah to explore their experiences of learning in a gender diversity class. The women used self study to explore their learning juxtaposed against their experiences of living and working in a state heavily influenced by the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints, a conservative Christian Church. Common themes emerged for both women but were complicated by positionality: one woman was born and raised in Utah and is a practicing Mormon, the other woman is transplanted to Utah and considers herself spiritual but not at all religious. Dual themes of “pushing against from within” and “pushing against from without” are explored as both women come to a greater understanding of hidden oppression, judgment, and their roles as women in a patriarchal culture.

Key words: gender diversity, religion, women in a patriarchal culture

Introduction

I now realize that my perspectives were simplistic and egocentric, and that people are not as one-dimensional as I wanted to make them. I still believe that many

structures in this state¹ are hegemonic and misogynistic, but I underestimated the rich and complex

¹ The participants in this study are residents of the State of Utah in America. Utah is considered one of the most conservative States in the Union, largely due to the influence of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints, also known as Mormons.

interiors that each person brings to bear in their relationship to this environment. These understandings evolved as a direct result of my participation in the summer gender diversity class. (Journal entry)

Gender Diversity Studies

The study of gender at colleges and universities has historically been addressed in women's studies programs, but may also be embedded in more general education requirements under the term diversity. While the term diversity broadly considers issues of race, class, and culture; gender diversity focuses on sexuality, the historical evolution of gender constructs, gender identity, and the socio-cultural power structures that perpetuate constructed gender views. Barata, Hunjan, and Leggatt's (2005) research of women's experiences in graduate school suggests that the study of gender can provide a safe place for the creation of feminist identity, the negotiation of new gender roles, the valuing and devaluing of all things feminine, and the construction of authentic interfaces with the masculine world. The consideration and possible alteration of personal identify and beliefs may be facilitated in gender study courses which embody critical feminist pedagogy.

Critical feminist pedagogy is a combination of feminist pedagogy, which seeks to validate and understand the roles of women, coupled with critical theory, which foregrounds the power structures that oppress and marginalize women. Through critical analysis and exposure to diverse perspectives, critical feminist pedagogy aims to make students aware of their socially constructed world and to transform their views of power and oppression. To better understand how gender studies can be transformative when delivered via critical

feminist pedagogies, a brief review of the literature on transformational learning and critical feminist pedagogy is presented.

Literature Review Transformational Learning

The ability to openly discuss difficult or new topics and to critically reflect on thinking comprises two fundamental aspects of the transformational learning process (Merriam, 2004). Learning that promotes ambiguity and a plurality of views may be transformative because it affects a change in one's frames of reference. Frames of reference are accumulated understandings and belief structures that are comprised of associations, concepts, values, feelings, and conditioned responses. These frames of reference define our life worlds and selectively "shape and delimit our expectations, perceptions, cognitions and feelings" (Mezirow, 1997, p. 5). A narrow shaping and delimiting of perception and cognition is particularly troublesome in a world that is becoming increasingly diverse, positional, and complex.

Mezirow (1997) established learning processes aimed at transforming frames of reference. The first process is to identify and elaborate a point of view. This can be done in a discussion or through an assignment requiring introspection and identification of points of view. The second process asks students to identify a point of view that is different from their own. While learners are not asked to change their own points of view at this stage, they are asked to move more deeply into the identification of other perspectives. In the third process, students are asked to transform their points of view by challenging the assumptions that underpin their views. The use of narratives and discussions help students consider both context and assumptions. This in turn may alter their own perspectives and open the

aperture for understanding another's perspective. Due to the uncomfortable nature of having one's perspectives and opinions challenged, this is the time in learning that teachers must "do more than accommodate the change, solve the problem, or neutralize the stress. [They] must actively engage with the event, as painful as that might be" (Merriam, 2005, p. 4). If students are encouraged and supported as they wrestle with ideas in opposition to their current thinking, what Mezirow (1997) calls a disorienting dilemma, they have the potential to become more tolerant and accepting of others. If this expression of tolerance and acceptance happens repeatedly, it can enlarge their frames of reference.

Critical Feminist Pedagogy

To understand the evolution of feminist pedagogy into *critical* feminist pedagogy, one must recognize the historical and social contexts that influenced feminist theory in general. Maher (2008) suggests that historically each wave of feminism required a different pedagogical approach that was appropriate for its time and purpose. The first wave of feminism influenced pedagogical models based on developmental theories that considered the private roles of women and their particular "ways of knowing" (Belinky, Clinchy, Goldberger & Tarule, 1986; Maher, 1987). This form of feminist pedagogy is generally aimed at understanding and legitimizing traditional female roles such as mother and homemaker. It also explores the ways in which women construct their views of the world through the consideration of connections, relationships, and responsibility toward others (Gilligan, 1982). Furthermore, feminist pedagogy considers the partiality of knowledge, how knowledge must be contextually understood,

and the emotional components of knowledge.

Critical feminist pedagogy is a model of teaching influenced by critical theorist Paulo Freire (1970) that emerged after the second wave of feminism in the late 1980's. This form of feminism is informed by critical and social Marxist theories, and explicitly considers issues of power, the disempowered, and the social structures that maintain power imbalances. Critical feminist theory sees women as an oppressed and silenced group among other oppressed and silenced groups. Critical feminist pedagogy strives to give voice to the voiceless, raise awareness of community issues, question socially constructed views of knowledge, and to increase a sense of agency through the validation of experiences.

As critical feminist theory emerged, tensions between feminist pedagogy and its critical counterpart became apparent. Maher (1987) suggests that critical feminist pedagogy ignores individual contexts and lived experiences, while feminist pedagogy tends to minimize the facts and nature of oppression. She advocates for a blending of both approaches that may provide "a contextualized, evolving form of knowledge" (p. 89) that is not possible with either approach alone. This approach would include "helping students unpack complex relations of privilege and oppression, and thus fundamentally reworking the structural as well as representational terms of inclusion that feminist teaching promises" (Maher, 2008, p. 5). Such blending of approaches suggest that educators allow for differences among and between students, to cultivate uncertainty rather than surety, and to question and critique notions of learning that are often taken for granted.

Gender Studies

Copp and Leinman (2008) forward an approach to teaching gender courses that establishes trust and facilitates student ownership of the course. They structure their approach on the assertion that “sexism is common oppression” (p.101), and that sexism operates systematically against women of all races, classes, and sexualities. As students become aware of issues of oppression, they are asked to reflect on their current view of the world through writing and analysis. Students are also asked to juxtapose current and past worldviews with possible future actions that reflect an alternative world view.

Gender diversity classes not only expose students to alternative ways of viewing the world, they affect both cognitive and affective changes in students. In a study conducted by Piland, Hess, & Piland (2000), students attending diversity classes with gender components experienced a wide range of emotions including pride, self-satisfaction, compassion, empathy, guilt, shame, and sadness. Student’s learning included new knowledge about diverse groups of people, the struggles of women in society, the perceptions of gays and lesbians by heterosexuals, and the experience of prejudice and discrimination. Furthermore, students reported that they learned more in classes with diversity content than in classes without diversity content and that this learning was tied to a class atmosphere that was open to discussion (Piland et al., 2000).

The implications of this study require practitioners to be nuanced and reflective about their use of instructional techniques aimed at student empowerment (English, 2006; Maher, 1987). Being responsive to cognitive dissonance and the emotional discord that may result from the use of critical feminist pedagogy in a gender course

is essential in the building of trust and a cornerstone of caring classrooms (Noddings, 1984). The facilitation of gender studies using critical feminist pedagogy requires a teacher to navigate the territory between ideology and empathy. One must use reading materials and classrooms environments to “enhance communication and understanding among individuals from different racial, ethnic, and social backgrounds” (Piland et al., 2000), while at the same time ask students to confront social privilege and oppression.

The research in this literature review indicates that the content of gender studies can be transformative for students, and that the implicit aim of critical feminist pedagogy is to facilitate these transformations. However, little is known about the inner experiences of students who are exposed to critical feminist pedagogy in a gender studies classroom. An analysis of these experiences, and a consideration of transformational learning would better enable teachers of gender diversity classes to understand the impact of their pedagogical practices.

Exploring Women’s Learning About Gender

In the summer of 2009, a cohort of doctoral students convened on a university campus to take a series of courses, one of which was a course on gender diversity. Students enrolled in the gender diversity class had been participants in a distant learning program for one year. Courses were delivered via satellite technology to five locations throughout the state. The cohort contained seven white men and nine white women, ranging in age from their late twenties to their early sixties. All of the doctoral students work in K-12 education, administration, higher education, or religious education. Although students had

face-to-face interactions with the members in their satellite locations, they had not all been together as a cohort until the beginning of the summer diversity class. In other words, they knew each other in the two-dimensional world of satellite broadcast, but not in the three-dimensional world of classroom dynamics.

The gender diversity course was required for doctoral candidacy and provided the students with a foundation in issues regarding gender in education as well as the important historical figures and events associated with the feminist movements. The course met daily for three hours over a three-week period and covered topics such as early feminist struggles and published thought, gender conflict and gender shifting, masculinity and fatherhood, femininity and motherhood, and the intersection of gender with classroom dynamics.

In order to facilitate and support an engaged classroom environment, students participated in daily readings and reflections, class discussions, presentations on influential feminist educators, and a final research project. The following were the guiding questions of the course:

1. How do socio-cultural influences (e.g., the media, the economy, ideologies, public discourse) and institutions (schools, religious organizations, families) shape assumptions surrounding gender?
2. How have western mainstream assumptions about gender changed over time? How have western mainstream assumptions about gender influenced the experiences of particular groups in schools?
3. What role should educators play in shaping and addressing

assumptions about gender and gender-based inequities?

Although we understood the requirements of the course as outlined in the syllabus, we could not have anticipated the impact the gender diversity class would have on each of us.

Each day for the first two weeks of class, students conducted a presentation on a female educator who had made either historical or contemporary contributions to the field of education. After the presentations, class discussions ensued that either focused on the information presented or our reactions to the assigned readings. Many of these discussions were heartfelt and personally revealing, eliciting tears from both the storytellers and audience as men and women shared their experiences of gender-based oppression.

An aura of openness and intimacy was developing in the classroom, and on several occasions the discussions followed students beyond the allotted course time and into lunchtime conversations after class. These conversations often revolved around course content, and the rigorous discussions and questioning seemed to indicate that the content was not always comfortable. Yet, despite personal discomfort and confusion, students appeared fully engaged with the course content and indicated that the course was meaningful. Evidence of this was given on the last day of class when every student stood to give the instructor a standing ovation. Even after the class ended, conversations about the class did not. Students continued to discuss their feelings about the class and the things they had learned. We felt something special had happened in the gender diversity class that summer, but we were not sure what aspects of the class contributed to these feelings.

Sue Ellen Jones and Judy Smith are two participants from the gender diversity course that had strong reactions to the course. Judy is an instructor in higher education and Sue Ellen serves as a high school assistant principal. Based on the insights gained through participation in the gender diversity course, both Judy and Sue Ellen wished to better understand the dynamics of the course and to further explore the learning that occurred. Therefore, the purpose of this study is for Judy and Sue Ellen to explore the transformational learning they experienced in the doctorate level gender diversity class and is guided by the question: What were the content and pedagogical practices that influenced our transformational learning?

Methodology

Collaborative Self -study

The purpose of self-study methodology is to provoke, challenge, and illuminate voice (Bullough & Pinnegar, 2001). A self-study is most often used by educators to improve their practice and advance knowledge of effective pedagogy (Louise, Drevdahl, Purdy & Stackman, 2003). As educators reach beyond their routine knowledge and seek answers to new questions, self-study becomes a method that can help educators understand what makes the learning of specific topics easy or difficult. Our research considers the experiences we had as participants in a graduate level gender diversity class through an exploration of our thoughts, feelings, and experiences of the course. As with other self-study research, we anticipate that the data generated in this self-study will be specific, clear, and valid, as well as provide knowledge that is of benefit to colleagues and other educators (Louise, Drevdahl, Purdy & Stackman, 2003). Furthermore, we hope our efforts will inform the research related to critical feminist pedagogy and transformational

learning by furthering the dialogue on pedagogical practices and content in gender diversity classrooms.

Data Collection

This study is situated in the theories of transformational learning and critical feminist pedagogy. Concerning transformational learning, we considered themes that reflected changing points of view and frames of reference. Critical feminist pedagogy was considered for the ways in which it exposed social constructions of power and the oppressive nature of these constructions.

Several commonly recognized data collection methods were employed to increase validation and triangulation of our data. We used reading reflections and final projects from the gender diversity course (Vavrus & Archibald, 1998), conducted personal interviews with each other (Loughran & Northfield, 1998), and wrote reflective journals (Wilcox, 1998). Journal reflections were guided by the following questions:

1. What were your thoughts, feelings, and preconceived notions about gender before participating in the course?
2. What were your thoughts, feelings, and experiences about gender during the course? Did you sense that they were changing?
3. What was it about the class that influenced you?
4. Describe a turning point, article, or discussion that seemed influential.
5. What are your thoughts, feelings, and reflections about gender since completing the course?

Additionally, a group interview with the course instructor was conducted to discuss

her experiences of the class and to further understand her pedagogical philosophy and practice.

This data was gathered and coded for emergent themes based upon transformational learning theory, critical feminist pedagogy, and gender diversity content. These key themes are the focus of this paper.

Findings

Studies in gender diversity require students to acknowledge the power imbalances that exist between men and women, and the oppressive nature of gender categories in general. Through the process of participating in the gender diversity class and exploring their experiences in this self study, both Sue Ellen and Judy recognized ways in which they had felt oppressed, but had not recognize this oppression as such. Perhaps this denial of oppression stemmed from a larger denial within common culture or perhaps both women, identifying themselves as strong and capable, had grown accustomed to struggling for authentic expression.

For Sue Ellen this struggle stemmed from a rejection of the clear-cut concepts of male and female roles that were supported by both her family and culture. Although Judy is not from the same culture as Sue Ellen, she struggled against the same forms of patriarchy and role assignment that challenged Sue Ellen. Born in Utah and raised in the Mormon culture, Sue Ellen might be conceived as reacting to this oppression by pushing against from within. Judy, who is a transplant from other regions in America, might be conceived as reacting to this oppression by pushing against from without.

Both women responded to this hidden oppression through deep seated and bitter

judgments. For Sue Ellen, pushing against from within, manifested as judgments against women in her culture that she perceived as “cheerleaders,” or women of little substance who focused solely on their exterior attributes. Through the consideration of socially constructed gender roles, and the difference between an assumed image of power as beauty and a concept of power as authentic expression, Sue Ellen recognized the subtle forms of oppression that she had faced for most of her life. For Judy, pushing against from without took the form of judgments against the critical thinking capacities of her fellow doctoral cohort members who represented the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints (LDS) faith.

Both Sue Ellen and Judy recognized their struggles with the dominant culture and realized that they felt “othered.” However, the learning they achieved in the gender diversity class helped them recognize this “othering” as a form of oppression and further enabled them to recognize their reactions to this oppression. This awareness is explained in greater detail in the sections that follow.

Sue Ellen: Pushing Against from Within

Sue Ellen’s ideas of gender diversity when she entered the class were simple, “Men do some things well; women do other things well. These ‘things’ are not defined as men versus women things, but many men are good at some things and many women are good at another.” In some respects, Sue Ellen saw these as gender roles, but also recognized that the roles did not always apply. As an example, she explains that her skills as an effective host are developing, although a male coworker is naturally talented in this role. Early in the term, however, Dr. Whitelock questioned Sue Ellen’s stance on these roles. In a reading

reflection, Sue Ellen wrote, “Why can't we just get along in our respected roles?” Dr. Whitelock responded, “Who defines those roles?” This statement challenged Sue Ellen to question her assumptions about the nature of gender roles. As she states, “it started making me think... Who has the right to define what my role is just because of the way I was physically made?” This reflection caused her to further question her cultural upbringing. Throughout Sue Ellen’s life, she has made choices that differed from the roles of women surrounding her. As she expresses,

I am kind of stubborn and ... I have done things in my own world, and in my growing up times, and have been very independent. I haven’t done what my culture around me has said that I should be doing.

Sue Ellen’s struggle against preconceived gender roles was endemic to her life and career choices. However, she had never realized that these roles were fabricated until participating in the gender diversity class.

The recognition that gender roles are social constructs was revealed to Sue Ellen through several required readings that dated back to the early 1900’s. An article by Brown (1990) entitled “The fear of feminization: Los Angeles high schools in the progressive era” introduced the “boy problem” which was addressed in national conferences and educational journals. The boy problem as represented in the article, discussed strategies to involve boys in education, often at the expense of girl students. Sue Ellen’s reflection on this article indicates an opening awareness of gender as a social construct as she observes, “the boy problem of the early 1900s [explained the] separation of gender for me. The social world defined what was appropriate for women and men and separated their educational pursuits at that time.”

Recognizing this as an imposition of socially constructed roles was a new insight for Sue Ellen. In her own life, she has chosen to buck traditional roles and is currently one of only a handful of female high school administrators in Salt Lake City, Utah. Sue Ellen recognizes how difficult the struggle has been to succeed in a non-traditional female role, but was unaware of the historical precedents, which socialized and normalized gender roles and expectations. She later reflects on the impact this article made when she states,

I think what I’m saying is that it began my understanding of the division that women have had historically. I hated it when the girls had to stop [their athletics] ... and [become] cheerleaders [for the boys] ... So when they have to entice the boys to come back [to school], by having the girls stop their athletics or their activities and their classes and tone it more towards... the boys - that was annoying to me.

The history of girl’s education and the social burdens denying equal education to girl students, gave Sue Ellen an understanding of women’s struggle for equal rights. The Brown (1990) article explained that boys were encouraged to enroll in academics and participate in athletics while girls were encouraged to study domestic science and drop athletic competition to become cheerleaders for the boys’ teams. Sue Ellen’s judgments of women who are “cheerleaders” became more fueled as she recognized the historical structures that pushed women into these roles.

Sue Ellen feels that her struggle for authentic power is undermined by women who rely on their looks to achieve their own brand of power. This frustration is manifested in judgments against these

women and is articulated when she says, “It’s about substance and depth and shallowness.... and their biggest piece on life is their hair color, their nails, their makeup...ah...just their physical and not their depth.” Sue Ellen recognized parallels in the shift from women’s authentic power to a power based in beauty and the historical push to move girls from their own athletics to the role of cheerleaders for the boys. She explained her frustration in a reflective statement:

Why is it that women, or anyone that is not a white male, have to fight so hard to be given equal opportunities as those men? Why, then, are white males the measuring stick? Who wants to be them anyway???

The struggle for women to become recognized as persons with equal rights stems from years of oppression by its male members. Although when asked if it would have been easier to be born a man, Sue Ellen responded, “No, I wouldn’t want that, I don’t want to be a man. No.”

Sue Ellen’s understanding of other women’s struggle for power and recognition, gave her insights into her own feelings of oppression and struggle. The content of the class’s readings also gave her greater historical information about these struggles and the incredible strength shown by women in the Suffrage Movement. In particular, Sue Ellen was moved by the reading of *The Declaration of Sentiments* at Seneca Falls by Elizabeth Cady Stanton (1848).

Oh my goodness! That is so interesting and what a powerful way to explain what was going on with women in language that the men could understand, because that is a very powerful document....and to relate it to a group of people that had felt oppressed...I thought was beautiful!

Sue Ellen also felt that the readings and course discussions gave her an awareness of a vocabulary that helped her articulate her feelings and experiences. As she states, “the class helped me define ...what [my] thought[s] [are], because I think I have felt [oppression] and known it in my educational world, but... I think it really helped me to articulate it better and define it.”

Part of this evolution was to put into words the struggle she has experienced in the pursuit of her career goals. Despite the fact that educational leadership “is monopolized by men,” Sue Ellen is committed and passionate about her career. Leadership opportunities have peppered her career and she has risen up the ranks through hard work and a willingness to learn new things. As she explains, “I’ve been placed in the roles of leadership and so then you gain some skills.” The acquisition of new skills and the struggle to move ahead was endemic to her childhood as she reflects, “You know it was like survival, it was independency and not feeling sorry for myself and so I think a lot of strength came from those types of experiences as a kid.” She also recognizes that her independence began in her early years: “I just had to do things on my own, it’s been very independent.”

It took Sue Ellen a while to recognize that the reliance on strength and independence was actually a coping mechanism for feeling “othered” by her family, Utah’s culture, and her colleagues. Originally, she was unwilling to claim any degree of oppression, but eventually concedes, “I had not put myself there, even in the class, but it actually makes sense.” She reflects on being a woman in her cultural upbringing, “It is ...true that Utah has its own perspective of women-hood, whereas, other states I have lived in Arizona, Wyoming, Texas, Hawaii,

even in my own religious culture, view women more wholly than Utah.”

Sue Ellen has lived outside of Utah for school and career choices but has come back to her home state several times. Each time opportunity knocked and called her away, she was happy to leave once again. Sue Ellen reflects on this complicated relationship to the state of Utah when she writes,

It actually has taken me years to find peace in my heart to be Sue Ellen for who Sue Ellen is and not what "whomever" I have thought had anything to say about Sue Ellen's value. I have kept out of this State for a number of years because of othering! So there you go: an analysis of life as Sue Ellen in Utah. I am stronger, wiser, and a much better Sue Ellen now, than had I not lived away from the others of Utah! Interestingly though, my strength comes from deep spiritual experiences and understandings of this "Mormon" thing.

Sue Ellen continues to learn who she is within her chosen place in the Utah culture, but her experience in the gender diversity course has helped her understand and deconstruct her previously taken-for-granted roles. She now recognizes that gender roles are socially constructed, and that many of the social structures surrounding her are oppressive to women and other marginalized people. However, she continues to ponder her original question,

Why can't we just get along? I have left out the 'respected roles' part I had at the beginning of the class. Definition of roles is very personal, and who is anyone to say what that is, but the person inside that role?

Sue Ellen's experiences of the content in the gender diversity class propelled her into a personal journey of herself and the culture in which she was raised. Pushing against from within, Sue Ellen was able to question preconceived notions and to experience a transformation of her understandings through exposure to different points of view. These points of view enabled her to expand her frame of reference regarding the social constructions of gender and to permanently alter her relationship to gender roles and her awareness of power in gender dynamics.

Judy – Pushing Against from Without

Judy had no concerns with the content of the gender diversity course prior to starting the course. As she stated in her reflective journal, "I have always felt equal in my relationships with men. If I am to be completely honest, I have at times felt superior to men." While she recognizes these feelings as "completely arrogant," she believed they grew from several transformative life experiences. As she writes,

After giving birth to two children at home, surrounded and supported by strong and competent women (my husband as well), I felt that I could do anything. I have managed my own art business and been very successful at it – often traveling to and navigating strange cities by myself. I spent thirteen months renovating my house (by myself) – doing work that many men would have whined about. My husband is physically stronger than me, so I left some of the heavy lifting to him, otherwise, I did it all – I am women hear me roar!

Concerning the larger questions of gender and gender identity, Judy holds liberal beliefs. She has had many gay and lesbian

friends over the years and has no negative judgments regarding their lifestyles. As she writes in her journal,

Life and let live – my concerns are about the character of a person, not their sexual preferences. If anything, I have seen how hateful the judgments of others are and I tend to react against these judgments and place myself in support of those who are being judged.

Feeling judged was something that Judy herself had felt since moving to Utah six years previously. She recognizes that Utah is socially conservative, but was surprised to see how insular the state is.

It is as if many people in Utah have no concept of how people think outside of this state. If there is a consideration of how “other” people think, it seems to be smothered under a blanket of smug superiority based largely on church doctrine and the belief that Mormonism is the only true path to God.

Judy admits that most religions claim to be the only path to salvation, but she was surprised to find that most Mormons know nothing of other religious faiths. In her mind, this “smacks of closed-mindedness and an inability to think critically.” She further laments:

Not being from this culture, I have often found myself struggling with the male-dominated ideologies that permeate the LDS church and Utah society. The idea that women cannot serve in the priesthood is offensive to me. The idea that women are in any way seen as spiritually inferior or subservient to men is offensive to me. Often this subservient positions is couched in eloquent terms of “calling” or “right place”, but in my mind this is just code for “bare-foot and pregnant”. I know many

extremely strong and capable Mormon women and it seems to me that they have heavier loads to haul than I do.

These criticisms of the church influenced her feelings going into the gender diversity course and undermined her confidence in Dr. Whitelock’s ability to facilitate a course on gender diversity in the state of Utah. In an email to Dr. Whitelock before the course, she writes:

How does an honest conversation about gender roles happen in a state that gives its moral authority to thirteen white men? If a woman is willing to give the power of her spiritual salvation to her husband, father or brother, how is she to recognize the oppression of this act? If she feels herself spiritually powerless, how is she to claim power in other areas of her life? I don’t envy you Dr. Whitelock, but I can’t wait to see how you handle these issues.

This backdrop of thoughts and beliefs heavily influenced Judy’s feelings going into the diversity class. As she writes,

I had grave concerns about the ability of fellow doctoral students to think deeply about gender issues. I questioned whether the doctoral students would have the critical thinking skills or the cultural awareness necessary to truly discuss and understand the power issues underneath gender studies.

However, as the course progressed, Judy found herself rethinking many of her judgments of her colleagues and their culture. In time, she realized her “own arrogance and limited perspectives of both [her] doctoral cohort and the capacity for growth in doctoral studies.” Her perspectives of her cohort were challenged

as fellow students shared their own stories of oppression and marginalization. In particular, two events shook the foundations upon which Judy had built her judgments of the Mormon culture. The first event was an emotional story from one of the doctoral students about her two twin sons, one of which she suspected was gay. This student, a young Mormon mother and educator, tearfully discussed the treatment her eight year old son was receiving on the playground because of his effeminate characteristics. Judy's journal reflection highlights the strength of this experience.

I am crying now as I remember and reflect on the discussion of her two twin boys, and the indication that the younger twin showed feminine tendencies. Her clear concern and the stories she shared about her son's marginalized position on the playground shattered many concepts I had about how a woman with her cultural background would handle the situation. I spoke with her on several occasions about her son, my own son, the love of a mother, and how much we wanted to protect them from society's harmful gaze. I realized from my conversations with her that these issues were much more complicated than I had originally thought, and that a mother's response (even a Mormon mother's response) was much more nuanced and personal than I had originally assumed.

Judy's reaction to her fellow student's story and a dawning awareness that she had judged others harshly based on superficial understandings was reinforced by a second major event in the gender diversity class.

Dr. Whitelock invited a Mormon couple to speak about the experience of their son's coming out. The mother spoke first and

emotionally recounted the family's devastation nine years ago when their youngest son told them he was gay. She went on to discuss her son at length, the loving partnership he was in, the daughter they had adopted, and the pain she felt at the rejection of the church she had loved and supported her entire life. The son's father is a retired professor of biology from Brigham Young University and spoke eloquently about the research he conducted into the genetics of homosexuality and his resulting belief that homosexuality was not a lifestyle choice, but a biological predisposition. This couple clearly stated that they had chosen to love and support their son, and by doing so had suffered condemnation by their church and community. During the break, Judy spoke with the mother "who confided she had stopped going to church because the judgments and comments of others had become too painful." Judy was impressed "by the articulation of their thoughts and beliefs amidst such great personal loss" and was again struck by the complexity of gender issues and the recognition that she had simplified other's reactions to them.

The recognition of her judgments coupled with the exhausting pace of the summer term had a powerful impact on Judy. As she recounts in her journal:

I could not break down the outer certainty of my own ego's judgments until I had become physically and emotionally exhausted. For no real apparent reason, I woke up one morning, started crying and couldn't quit. I cried off and on all morning and finally left campus to go home for some R & R. I still don't completely understand this dynamic, only that it left my open, vulnerable, and somewhat at peace.

Later, after many weeks of reflection, Judy adds to this understanding in

an interview when she states, “I think I felt humbled, at how much was in that room, how much emotion, how much complexity was in that room. So I felt humbled by that and so humiliated that I had doubted it coming in.”

Judy later comes to understand that the doubts and judgments of her colleagues were reactions to feeling oppressed herself. In her journal, she states, “I realize (to a degree that I had not been privy to before) that a disproportionate amount of my thoughts and experiences seem to revolve around my experience of a being a religious minority in the State of Utah”. As a result of the gender diversity class, she became aware of feeling oppressed by the dominant culture and its effect. As she writes, “I am now keenly aware of this dynamic and recognize that it clouds my perceptions of my interactions in this State like I have never experienced elsewhere in my entire life.” She further elaborates this reaction when she writes:

I think that when you are in the minority, and I am a minority in this State, I think it is very easy to shift into judgments. I think you do one of two things, you either accept the oppression, and accept that you are a sinner, or a loser, or whatever, or you push against that and somehow demonstrate against them so you don't feel so oppressed.

As a strong and capable woman who had always experienced opportunity and support from male family members and colleagues, Judy was surprised to realize that she felt oppressed by the Utah culture and was reacting to that oppression by judging those who represented this culture. As she became aware of this coping mechanism, she realized that by fully accepting her perceptions of Utah culture as oppressive, she no longer held judgments

against individuals. As she writes about several of the religious teachers in her cohort that she had previously dismissed,

I came to care for and respect each of them for their unique personalities, their keen intelligence, their strong work ethic, and their firm moral standing. Although I know we would differ on multiple religious and doctrinal interpretations, I found that this mattered less or not at all as I came to know them as rich and interesting fellow students.

In her final reflection on the gender diversity class, Judy recognizes it as “the most transformative class I have ever taken, in that it forced me to see myself and others in new and complicated ways.” In determining the elements in the course that helped shape these transformations, she believes that “the course content acted as a catalyst to reflect on my own thinking” and “the masterful facilitation of Dr. Whitelock...broke down my reserve and forced me to face myself as I am”.

The Basis for Transformation

Learning for both women can be seen as transformational as each sought to understand the oppressive nature of gender categories within society and within their own lives. They further sought to recognize their coping strategies and to deconstruct their own conversations around gender and oppression. For Sue Ellen, the content of the course and the course readings were instrumental in facilitating awareness and growth. However, Judy was more affected by the pedagogical practices and class dynamics than the course content. Regardless, the women realize that both pedagogical practices and relevant course content were necessary to facilitate the type of transformational learning they experienced.

Because both women believe that the growth and awareness they experienced in the gender diversity classroom could not have happened outside of the classroom in the same fundamental way it happened inside the classroom, they hope to understand the course dynamics that influenced their learning. While, the previous section illuminated the personal changes each woman experienced related to content and pedagogy, the following section looks to explicate the structural underpinnings of the gender diversity course which contributed to these transformations. It has already been observed that both pedagogical practices and relevant course content played a fundamental role in the learning dynamics. Therefore, we now turn our attention to understanding the relevance of these roles through the eyes of the course facilitator, Dr. Monica Whitelock, and related literature.

Analysis

What we do in the classroom is our politics. No matter what we may say about Third World this or feminist that, our actions and our interactions with our students week in week out prove what we are for and what we are against in the long run. There is no substitute for practice (Tompkins, 1990, p. 660).

Pedagogy in Gender Diversity Classrooms

Teaching diversity, particularly gender diversity, is a journey into the fragile awareness of self and other. Navigating this journey successfully requires skillful facilitation and the willingness for students to be reflective and open to questioning existing forms of knowledge (Copp & Kleinman, 2008, Tisdell, 1995). The motivation for deconstructing knowledge and questioning the power structures that create and perpetuate taken-for-granted knowledge is at the heart of feminist

pedagogy and “reflects in some way the changing needs of an increasingly diverse society” (Tisdell, 1995, p.14). Recurring themes underlying feminist teaching strategies involve knowledge construction, voice, authority, and positionality (Mayer & Tetreault, 1994). In our analysis of the summer doctoral diversity course taught by Dr. Monica Whitelock, these issues of voice, authority and positionality were foregrounded in Dr. Whitelock’s efforts to create inclusive classrooms while remaining true to her own humanistic orientations. As she states, “I choose readings based on...theories that I think [students] will benefit from ...and that [students] will also develop a vocabulary of, by being familiar with those theoretical perspectives.”

This notion of student benefit is embedded in gender diversity curriculum as it seeks to make the personal political, and is represented in the following quote by Tisdell (1995):

It is clear that the knowledge production and dissemination process is a political process. What counts as knowledge in a particular learning context – and decisions about what gets included in the curriculum for a given learning activity – are decisions made with attention to the politics of this particular educational context and to what is seen as “real” knowledge relevant to this educational context (p. 21).

Contextual awareness is particularly important and sensitive in the State of Utah, which is politically conservative and socially influenced by the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints, a conservative Christian church. Although Dr. Whitelock never directly confronted the religious or social context of the Utah culture in the gender diversity class, she illuminates her

own political position when she explains, “the content I teach is through a social justice lens... I’m passionate about... everyone having their fair shake and opportunity.” She goes on to state that this philosophy motivates her pedagogy by indicating that “in classrooms I also want the same thing - that’s why I put the human relationship experience first”.

Placing a prominence on human relationships was evident in Dr. Whitelock’s class as she strove to establish trust and to facilitate student-centered learning. This orientation to trust, inclusiveness, and student-centered learning is widely recognized as a fundamental pedagogical practice in the teaching of gender diversity (Copp & Klienman, 2008; Crawley, Lewis & Mayberry, 2008; Maher & Tetrault, 1994; Malley, Hoyt & Slattery, 2009; Musil, 1992). As Maher (2008) states, “to remain, or become, a radical feminist teacher today is to be centrally concerned with unpacking complex relations of privilege and oppression, and thus fundamentally reworking the structural as well as representational terms of inclusion that feminist teaching promises” (p. 5). This unpacking of privilege and oppression involves an epistemological stance, which gives attention to power differences that create inequalities.

Feminist pedagogical practice centers and validates student’s experiences through reflection and dialogue. Copp & Klienman (2008) see this practice as instrumental to course success as they assert, “if we give up on student-centered teaching methods – failing to practice what we teach – then students are less likely to actively engage with feminist ideas” (p. 102). Dr. Whitelock considers her own belief in this methodology by reflecting on the evolution of her own teaching. She realizes that what

has evolved in her teaching is “an increasingly serious commitment to the idea that it’s students first, student centered, student’s ideas. You make that class happen, I show up with some stuff.”

Content in Gender Diversity Classes

The “stuff” that Dr. Whitelock shows up with is the course content, which forms the catalyst for potential student transformations in gender diversity classes. As stated earlier in this paper, transformational learning takes place when students are exposed to points of view, which alter their existing frames of references (Merriam, 2004; Mezirow, 1997). Exposure to new points of view is often accomplished through the selection of readings and course materials, which comprise the curriculum. Maher (2008) uses a strikingly similar approach in her gender diversity classes as that utilized by Dr. Whitelock, Maher explains that her “pedagogy centers on student-initiated discussions, based on analyses of the texts and their meanings, in relation to issues in feminist theory. Students bring their own narratives into play after we explicate the text” (p. 5). Dr. Whitelock also relies on her content to facilitate awareness and transformation. Choosing the material is an important curricular step as she contemplates “a continuum from a more conservative perspective to a more radical perspective.” She further explains that central to these considerations are readings and material that “question the categories so the categories are never real.” Part of her strategy is to create an awareness regarding gender categories that recognizes “that these are not categories that actually exist without having anyone create them - they are socially constructed.”

Dr. Whitelock’s consideration of content is not only influenced by the need to consider gender as a social construct, but also to

introduce a variety of theoretical perspectives. As she states, “particular content and particular theoretical perspectives seem important to me when I think of gender” and she seeks to expose students to a wide variety of theories. Despite her desire to expose students to a range of theoretical perspectives, Dr. Whitelock is not ignorant to the fact that her choices might cause angst and confusion for her students. Strong student reaction to content is very typical in gender diversity classrooms as Love and Helbrecht (2008) affirm, “Contradiction. Conflict. This is the stuff of feminist pedagogy. Any person who attempts to live and/or teach according to feminist theories and principles has experienced it. Ignoring contradiction and conflict in our classrooms would mean overlooking important teaching moments” (p. 49). Dr. Whitelock also recognizes the value of these types of interactions when she says, “if I have new readings and if I have conversations in a class that open a new idea for me...I am excited...That is what constitutes authentic learning.” This type of authentic learning represents the awareness and openings that Sue Ellen and Judy experienced in their gender diversity classroom.

Conclusion

Dr. Whitelock refers to the type of learning that occurs in her class as “authentic” learning, whereas Jack Mezirow (1997) refers to the alteration of perceptions and beliefs as transformational learning. Whatever you choose to call it, both Judy and Sue Ellen experienced a degree of learning that challenged preconceived notions, exposed personal biases and reactions, and permanently altered their frames of reference. The frame of reference most altered for both women was an increased recognition and naming of the cultural oppression they experienced, and a

realization of coping mechanisms that manifested in judgments. Earlier in this text, stages of transformational learning were outlined and the third stage was explained as the point at which students transform their points of view through critical reflection and exposure to alternative perspectives (Mezirow, 1997). By becoming critically aware and questioning their points of view, both Judy and Sue Ellen became more tolerant and accepting of others. This tolerance and acceptance stemmed from the recognition of oppressive social structures that left them feeling “othered”, and the recognition that this “othering” is a shared experience. By seeking to understand the marginalized voices of women and gendered others, they recognized their own struggles for authentic expression less as a personal journey, but a social and political reality.

This awareness was facilitated through a feminist pedagogy that was student centered and strove to make apparent the gender biases and power structures inherent in our society. As Barata, Hunjan, and Leggatt (2005) suggest, the study of gender provided a safe place for Sue Ellen and Judy to create new feminist identities, and to consider and deconstruct their interface with the masculine world. However, it is clear that Dr. Whitelock’s facilitation skills were instrumental in creating this safe place. Without the establishment of trust and the facilitation of student ownership, both the cognitive and affective landscapes of her students would have been compromised (Copp and Leinman, 2008). Students benefit from caring classrooms (Noddings, 1994), but student centered environments are not enough to affect the cognitive shifts experienced by both Judy and Sue Ellen. These types of shifts are facilitated through content that asks students to confront social privilege and oppression (Piland et al.,

2000). Dr. Whitelock's careful selection of content enabled Sue Ellen and Judy to see gender issues from different perspectives. For Sue Ellen, this was best facilitated through course readings and for Judy this was achieved through powerful class presentations and discussions. Regardless of the form the content took, the substance of the content and delivery mechanisms enabled both women to view gender, gender oppression, and the social dynamics around gender in new and illuminating ways.

As professional educators, Sue Ellen and Judy have taken a unique stance in determining the effects of the summer gender diversity class. Both women knew that the experience was transformative, but it was not enough to accept transformations in their beliefs and awareness without understanding the mechanisms that influenced them. Therefore, this self-study has sought to illuminate some of the elements in the gender diversity course that affected transformations in their understanding of gender, their society, and ultimately themselves. This study indicates that the successful facilitation of gender diversity courses is a symbiotic relationship between meaningful content and masterful facilitation. In a cautionary note, the authors suggest that one without the other would not enable students to embrace an understanding of gender diversity and would leave them ill prepared to navigate an increasingly complex and diverse world.

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