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"Sometimes I Have to Announce My Feminism and I Don't Mind Doing That": Instructor Self-Disclosure of Feminism in the Classroom

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An instructor should consider how self-disclosure in a classroom can influence students and learning. We examined self-disclosure of feminist identity at a Midwestern university to examine self-disclosing a belief not widely held in the region. Student and faculty interviews indicated effective communication strategies of self-disclosing feminism in a classroom, which could apply to self-disclosing other belief systems. As a result, we recommend some effective communication strategies of self-disclosing feminism in a classroom.

Feminist Framework

We subscribe to the definition of feminism as working to "include the effort to eliminate relations of domination not just for women but for all people" (Foss, 2004, p. 153). Accordingly, feminism encourages self-naming as a transformative process (hooks, 1989). People not exposed to feminist ideology may hear cultural myths about the meaning and beliefs of feminism, so learning about and from "real" feminists could help dispel negative myths and personalize feminism (Zucker, 2004).

Feminist pedagogy engages with students to "get beyond our sexism and racism and classism and homophobia and other destructive hatreds and to work together to enhance our knowledge; engage with the community, with traditional organizations, and with movements for social change" (Shrewsbury, 1987, p. 6). Feminist pedagogy works when "students are partners in the process of knowledge construction" (Philip, 2009, p. 2) to create a space where student voices are engaged, validated, and hierarchy is broken down (Seymour, 2007). This study examines how instructors self-disclose their feminism and use feminist pedagogy, and how it is perceived by students in an area where feminist beliefs are not widely held.

Data Collection and Analysis

We obtained Internal Review Board (IRB) approval and used qualitative interviewing to allow participants to share personal experiences and worldviews. Study participants included six female instructors (five liberal arts instructors, one education instructor) and 13 liberal arts students (seven female, six male).

Interview audio files were fully transcribed and transcripts were analyzed using the constant comparative method (Glaser & Strauss, 1967), focusing on emerging, repetitive themes. To code the creation of categories, we listened to the interviews while reading the transcripts, which allowed us to annotate notable findings. The annotations highlighted emerging themes and materials, which were then grouped into categories.

Findings

Interview data analysis revealed instructors employed explicit and implicit communication strategies to self-disclose feminist beliefs.

Explicit Strategies

All 19 participants noted explicit self-disclosure of feminism by instructors making verbal statements in the classroom. Cady (instructor) stated, "I say 'as a feminist' all the time. Sometimes I have to announce my feminism, and I don't mind doing that."

All participants also discussed the disclosure of feminism in direct relation to course content, demonstrating intentional disclosures in the classroom. Kyle (student) noted that "It arose as a topic of conversation because of the course content. Feminism came up as a subject, and [the instructor] would describe her wave of feminism and trace the history for those of us who weren't familiar with the concepts."

Some participants reported instructors revealed feminist beliefs because of a course. Liz (instructor) stated, "In the classroom, the activism class in particular, I go from the angle that it's an understood that we're going to explore and talk about [feminism]."

Implicit Strategies

Implicit strategies included nonverbal communication and course materials. Goldie (instructor) stated, "I might ask 'how many of you would call yourself feminists?' And the hands go up, and I raise mine too." Other participants discussed artifactual communication. Cady (instructor) noted, "At [institution], I drove my car with the post-patriarchy bumper sticker. I wear t-shirts that say, 'This is what a feminist looks like.'" Another implicit message linking an instructor to feminism is class literature. Alice (student) reported, "We read bell hooks. So of course, that would be a definite discussion of feminism."

Feminist Pedagogy

A majority of participants indicated teaching strategies used to remove a hierarchical classroom structure. Rachel (student) discussed an instructor who encouraged open dialogue and did not convey "the atmosphere of 'I'm the teacher. I'm going to tell you these things [about feminism].'"

Participants continually mentioned collaboration and group work. Ranee (student) stated, "The class dynamic was more of a group, inclusive kind of

collaborative class, more than a lecture class. I think her feminism changes her teaching style."

Participants also discussed the importance of lived experience. Catherine (student) described one instructor: "I know she believes that everyone has their own personal experiences to bring to the table, and that is a very feminist thing, and she incorporates that in her teaching." Additionally, participants noted the importance of respect. Liz (instructor) teaches with "the expectation of respecting each other, valuing each other's ideas, and supporting each other." This finding highlights feminist belief as more than self-disclosure, and instead as embedded in the practical use of tools and language utilized by instructors. Participant responses support feminist pedagogical literature emphasizing awareness of subjectivity and authenticity in the classroom (McCusker, 2017).

Discussion

Feminist instructors in the classroom utilized explicit and implicit communication strategies to be intentional and directly relate to course content. The self-disclosure allowed instructors to make courses more comfortable for students and directly connect feminist beliefs with content. The variety of strategies indicate no one way to reveal feminist beliefs. An instructor self-disclosing feminist belief when relevant to course material can help debunk negative stereotypes surrounding the term "feminist," expand students' worldview, and even encourage students to be more likely to intervene in everyday sexist acts (Weis et al., 2018). This encourages feminist instructors to take ownership of feminist ideology and continue educating others.

Additionally, feminist instructors utilized feminist pedagogy to discuss feminism in the classroom. Instructor and student participants noted discussion, group work, and collaboration in the classroom environment, which adheres to feminist pedagogy as intentionally constructing knowledge together among all members of a classroom (Philip, 2009). Students viewed instructors as active participants in a belief system, enabling students to claim feminism by learning the tools and language needed to understand what feminism means.

Applications for Teaching

We recommend the following strategies: (a) explicitly self-disclose feminist beliefs as relevant to course material, (b) self-disclose feminist beliefs and how they influence the instructor's worldview and/or beliefs, (c) discuss the language and terminology needed to participate in feminist conversation, (d) incorporate a collaborative, discussion-based atmosphere for students, (e) use discussions framed by feminist pedagogy that do not require agreement but require respect.

Finally, an instructor's feminist identity does not exist without influence from other social identities. Intersectionality should be considered when examining a feminist identity (Hoskin et al., 2017) to enhance discussion with students and consider potential disparities in student reaction based on instructor social identities. These recommendations could help develop proactive strategies to introduce belief systems, such as feminism, into a classroom where students may or may not be receptive.

It is important for college students to understand different belief systems, including feminism. While this study population focuses on liberal arts students, which could influence their openness to feminism in the classroom, future research could examine students in various majors and colleges.

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