Merging the Personal and the Academic for Greater Learning: A Successful Assignment

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CRITICAL COMMENTARY

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As a college student in the 1960s during the women’s movement, I left behind for good my upbringing in a small Southern town and gladly embraced new opportunities to learn about women in society. With that foundation, I became a lifelong student of women and politics. Since then, as an academician and political scientist for more than 40 years, I have incorporated the study of women’s issues in my classes, from large sections of first year students to senior capstone classes. Today, I welcome this wonderful opportunity to discuss an example of feminist pedagogy.

In 1980, as an assistant professor of political science and history at a small liberal arts college for women, I witnessed firsthand in the lives of many young women the lessons I was teaching. When in 1990 I moved to a large public university in another state and was given the opportunity to select a course that I would like to develop and teach, I chose Women and Politics. The timing was a convergence of my knowledge and interest and my belief that a modern political science department should be offering such a course.

Women and Politics began with an overview of feminist theory and progressed through key points of the modern women’s rights movement. With that beginning in mind, we moved on to exploring the political, legal, and policy aspects of many topics related to the experiences of women, including education, employment, marriage and family, sexual harassment and assault, domestic violence, healthcare concerns, such as abortion, and, of course, the concept of equal protection. As you see, it was an introductory class that might provide students with a foundation for future learning. It was in that context that I designed what I consider to be one of the most successful student assignments I ever made, an accomplishment I attribute to luck rather than brilliance.

Assessing the Class

I taught Women and Politics as any political scientist would, by incorporating historical events, legal precedents, policy analysis, and current data. That’s what students were expecting, and they were fine with it, except that I noticed a strong tendency on their part to personalize the topics we covered and an urgency to tell their own stories. Each topic moved beyond facts and concepts into the emotional realm as they connected what we were studying to their own experiences. I understood
that longing, given the childhood experiences of my own mother, a brilliant woman whose education ended with high school as a result of her having been adopted by a rural family of limited means during the Great Depression. While we all know that connections make information meaningful, I did not want the academic and intellectual aspects of the class to be overtaken by the personal experiences of my students. The question I asked myself was how to merge the academic purposes and content of the course with personal experiences to engage my students, connect them with the topics we were studying, and deepen their understanding. That question led me to this assignment.

The Assignment

Students were asked to interview three people: a woman of about their own age, a woman of a generation before, and a woman of two generations before. The intent was for students to see issues concerning women through the eyes of another person their age, as well as through the eyes of someone their mother’s age, and then someone their grandmother’s age. Because this class was offered in the early 1990s, a person a generation before would have lived during the civil rights movement, the women’s rights movement, and the Vietnam War. A person two generations before would have experienced World War II and the Great Depression. Admittedly, these were times rich with information and experiences for students to explore. The professor provided a list of questions to be asked of each interviewee, but students were required to add questions of their own. Each interview was to take at least forty-five minutes to give interviewees time to warm up to the project and to feel free to share stories and experiences.

Since those days, I have taught thousands of students and, although I no longer have specific lists of questions, I recall that they were general in nature, such as what was in the news when they were children, what their family did for fun and relaxation, and what was the money situation in the home. This was an easy way to get the discussion started before the questions became more specific about particular issues. Questions were best framed as friendly inquiries, beginning with phrases like “Tell me about…..,” thereby giving the respondent room to elaborate and answer as they wished. Were it to be today, world and national issues would be different, but it matters not, as human experiences are remarkably similar, even as the world changes around us.

Students then had to prepare a paper that not only shared what they had heard and learned during the interviews, but also in which they
analyzed that information to draw conclusions. Following submission of
the papers, class discussions allowed students to compare notes and ideas
with one another, which further deepened their understanding. The best
interviews tended to be those with older women, as they shared stories of
hardship and deprivation brought on by the Great Depression and World
War II. Paper after paper included declarations about what they would
never eat again: rice, beans, cornbread, because that was all they had
during the lean times. Students realized that every generation suffers
hardships and that all women across generations deal with many of the
same issues, often centered around bearing and raising children, carving
out a path for their own rights, and coming to grips with how they could
make their own life satisfying, or even if it were possible to do so.

Were I teaching an upper level class on women and politics these
days, I might adapt the project to encourage research that compares how
women’s lives are affected by specific events over time. A student might
compare the lives of women during the Great Depression to the lives of
women during the pandemic, focusing on the care of children, or they
might compare the lives of working women with children during World
War II to the lives of working women with children during the pandemic.
There is always more to be learned.

Why I Consider This Assignment Successful

The overall accomplishment of the assignment was this: it not only
allowed for but actually encouraged and provided a means by which
students could relate the academic and intellectual aspects of their learning
to the personal experiences of women across three generations. The
experiences of women in the United States have changed drastically in
some ways while remaining the same in others, an overarching fact that
students discovered on their own.

And in particular, this assignment supported the desire of students to
understand how the law and policy issues we were studying related to the
personal experiences of women from their own community, however they
defined it. As their teacher, I saw great beauty in the linkages students
built from the important concepts we were studying to the meaningful
experiences they discovered across generations of women. As one would
expect, both commonalities and differences emerged, ranging from the
subtle to the dramatic.

This assignment also supported higher forms of learning that can
be scarce in introductory-level courses where large sections, dominated by
lectures and multiple choice tests, prevail. The nature of the project led students to higher forms of learning, including analysis, synthesis, and evaluation, rather than the memorization of points so often found in introductory courses.

Finally, the assignment overcame what had earlier seemed like a tug-of-war, with the professor’s insistence on policy discussions and court cases and students wanting a chance to see issues from their personal perspective. While students no doubt embraced my academic and intellectual goals, the class was greatly enhanced by merging the academic goals with the personal. The result was a synthesis of issues with new levels of understanding. I credit the assignment with achieving what might have been a difficult bridge without it. The assignment has stayed in my mind as an extraordinarily effective learning experience, one that my students and I greatly appreciated.

Epilogue

More recently-trained scholars of political science now teach courses of greater sophistication about women and politics, but the span of years allows me to see how far women have come since the 1960s. From Title VII of the 1964 Civil Rights Act to the Title IX Education Amendments, and right on to Reed v. Reed in 1971 that brought women under the equal protection clause of the Fourteenth Amendment, there has been progress. Still, debates continue in many areas, the most important of which at this moment is reproductive rights. From the long view, we can see not only the gains, but also the areas where much remains to be done.