

September 2021

Remapping a Feminist Classroom: Talking Circles and the Space for Agency

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Recommended Citation

Strand, Amy Dunham Ph.D. (2021) "Remapping a Feminist Classroom: Talking Circles and the Space for Agency," *Feminist Pedagogy*. Vol. 1 : Iss. 1 , Article 2.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.calpoly.edu/feministpedagogy/vol1/iss1/2>

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Remapping a Feminist Classroom: Talking Circles and the Space for Agency

In what ways do syllabi bend or reinforce normative cartographic rules? The way we construct curricula and the pedagogies we use to put such curricula into practice tell a story, or tell many stories of gendered, racial, and sexual bodies in work and home spaces. “Stories” are simultaneously “maps” in that they mobilize both histories and geographies of power (Alexander & Mohanty, 2010, p. 563).

INTRODUCTION AND RATIONALE

Living through a global pandemic and the U.S.’s necessary racial reckoning in 2020 made me want to redraw the map of my syllabi, to reinvent the cartography of the syllabus in ways that mobilized students and increased their awareness of the world as well as their agency within it. While constructing a syllabus for a new, 300-level women’s studies (WS) course on global women’s narratives for spring 2021, Alexander and Mohanty’s voices were in my head, alongside a heightened consciousness of my own positionality: white, middle-class, cisgender, able-bodied. How could I redraw this WS syllabus in an attempt to decenter and disrupt a single narrative of global women’s narratives (Adichie, 2009), “globalise compassion” (Tivona, 2011, p. 317), and explore forms of women’s narratives, but without simply reproducing the “servant-served paradigm” (hooks, 1994, p. 103) in my classroom, “under Western eyes” at our religiously-affiliated, small midwestern liberal arts institution (Mohanty, 1984/1991, p. 327)? Was it even possible to do this? I still don’t know the answer to this larger question, if or how it is possible to increase students’ awareness of the world from the distance of the classroom but without remobilizing “histories and geographies of power” (Alexander & Mohanty, 2010, p. 563). But I do know that, after remapping this particular WS course, a new feminist pedagogical paradigm, the “talking circle” (Steinem, 2016, pp. 31-67), has emerged for me that seems to increase the possibility of doing so, while also, or perhaps by, increasing student agency in the classroom. This feminist paradigm models a collaborative approach to teaching and learning that refigures course design.

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

Approaching my Global Women’s Narratives course with what I now term a talking circle feminist pedagogical paradigm meant widening and deepening my learning objectives beyond those stated in the course description. For me, it moreover meant thinking of teaching and learning objectives in terms of the talking circle form of shared governance that Steinem (2016) describes as transformative for her and

instrumental for her feminist organizing.¹ A talking circles mindset implicitly grounded the course goals, which included understanding contemporary, gender-related topics from various disciplinary perspectives informed by intersectional feminist theory, applying geographical scale to these topics, and providing a community engagement component, in support of WS program learning objectives. While these goals are valuable in themselves, drawing on talking circles as a philosophy for feminist pedagogy, guiding courses from creation to conclusion, also means, for me, an “engaged pedagogy” that, in hooks’ (1994) terms, embraces the learning project of self-actualization for both teachers and students (p. 15).² And, for both teachers and students, having a sense of agency is one vital step on a path toward self-actualization.³

EXPLANATION

My first application of talking circles was through collegial reconceptualization of the class in terms of the forms of women’s narratives, in particular the memoir. When colleagues asked one another about texts we’d loved and might want to teach, Nafisi’s memoir (2003) was one I named.⁴ It eventually became central to my WS

¹ Reflecting on time listening to villagers in India, Steinem writes:

It was the first time I witnessed the ancient and modern magic of groups in which anyone may speak in turn, everyone must listen, and consensus is more important than time. I had no idea that such talking circles had been a common form of governance for most of human history, from the Kwei and San in southern Africa, the ancestors of us all, to the First Nations on my own continent, where layers of such circles turned into the Iroquois Confederacy, the oldest continuous democracy in the world. Talking circles once existed in Europe, too, before floods, famines, and patriarchal rule replaced them with hierarchy, priests, and kings. I didn’t even know, as we sat in Ramnad, that a wave of talking circles and ‘testifying’ was going on in black churches of my own country and igniting the civil rights movement. I certainly didn’t guess that, a decade later, I would see consciousness-raising groups, women’s talking circles, giving birth to the feminist movement. All I knew was that some deep part of me was being nourished and transformed right along with the villagers (p. 36).

² For hooks (1994), “engaged pedagogy” emphasizes teachers’ active commitment “to a process of self-actualization that promotes their own well-being if they are to teach in a manner that empowers students” (p.15).

³ New psychological understandings of agency (e.g. Bateman, 2020) articulate it as the desire for self-expansion and individuation working alongside communion on a path toward human flourishing, which itself is a redefinition of self-actualization, formerly at the top of Maslow’s iconic pyramid. See Kaufman (2018) for reconsideration of characteristics of the term self-actualization.

⁴ I thank Michelle DeRose and Molly Patterson for this conversation. I’d first read *Reading Lolita in Tehran* in a book club circa 2013, an enjoyable experience, perhaps no surprise given my academic grounding in gender and language in American literature and culture. The book turned out to be a favorite of Patterson’s, too. In it, a professor and a diverse group of female students read, gather, and discuss American literature in the professor’s home during the Iranian revolution. They find pleasure and even agency in asserting intellectual resistance within this context. The idea of a

course because, when I mentioned Nafisi's book to a dear friend at another institution, she noted that I had periodically taught memoirs by women around the world in other courses. Couldn't they be taught, in this WS seminar, with attention to diversity in contexts but consistency in the form of the memoir?⁵ I spent the bulk of winter break reading, rereading, and visually mapping the class's texts, authors, places, and their relevant gender issues and feminist theories, placing highlighter-orange sticky notes on my wall's map of the world in preparation for the class's spring semester academic journey.

What emerged from reflection after experiencing the class is that what made this classroom "feminist," of course, was not simply the "feminist" narrators of these memoirs, the content, or even my attempt at a decentered approach to the material, but a process of co-authoring the class; forming and re-forming the class in concert with colleagues and students, such that course concept, the syllabus, and the classroom all became collaborative spaces, building my own and my students' agency on a path toward self-actualization. Inspired by my initial collegial talking circle, the stories of these memoirists were certainly gathered into a global talking circle; but we also, simultaneously, worked to create in our classroom a talking circle that fostered self-actualization among and within class members, making possible that redrawing of the syllabus. To create talking circles, circles that have no head but many collaborators and embrace the project of self-actualization, the question becomes: Where is the space for agency in this class? Where do students have control to make decisions and to act on behalf of their own learning?

The talking circle of Nafisi's living room was originally a kind of orienting center for the syllabus.⁶ We read and discussed memoirs by women around the globe: Steinem (2016), Harjo (2012), Dandicat (2011), Yousafzai (2013), Nafisi (2003), Mernissi (1995), Dirie (2011), Hernandez (2014). We moved from the mid-20th-century to today, across continents and countries, from North America to Haiti, Pakistan, Iran, Morocco, Somalia, England, Cuba, and Colombia. And, through these texts, we took up a range of common themes and contemporary women's and gender issues: coming of age, challenges of representation, claiming one's voice, women's agency, settler colonialism, sterilization, education, religious extremism, war and violence, totalitarianism, democracy, the veil, Western occupation, oral tradition, nomadic life, sexual assault, female genital mutilation, beauty ideals,

book club, with its fluid, organic discussion, as the center of a course about women's narratives and as a route to agency was compelling. Our conversation also resonated with brown's *Emergent Strategy*, which I'd revisited in fall 2020 and which advocates for centering pleasure in the work of organizing for social change.

⁵ I am indebted to Leigh Ann Litwiller Berte for this exchange, and many like it, that have inspired and nurtured my teaching and learning for many years.

⁶ In Tharp's (2003) terms for the creative process, this would be called the "spine" of the course, something invisible but the "first strong idea" informing the work, "the toehold that gets you started" (p. 142).

(im)migration, sexuality, and English language learning. In our classroom talking circle, as many feminist teachers do, I attempted to deconstruct the syllabus, to foreground it as a series of choices and to problematize and change it when needed: What does it mean that we begin the semester with Adichie’s and Crenshaw’s TED Talks and Lesser’s writing? What would have happened if we’d heard about Mohanty and Carty’s online *Feminist Freedom Warriors* project earlier in the semester? Necessary calendar changes were facilitated because the syllabus, while distributed in full at semester’s start following college guidelines and including all course plans and policies, was also available as a live shared Google doc that could accommodate revision as our COVID-19-fluid situation demanded; its use as a revisable communication tool, a talking circle in itself, was an important part of the feminist pedagogy of the class.

To make talking circles feminist pedagogical practice in course design and daily planning certainly implies “bending cartographic rules” (Alexander & Mohanty, 2010, p. 563) to “map” the surface of a syllabus for diverse representation and content, and it means disrupting syllabus in ways I attempted to do. But it also means making way for potential deeper paths for student agency and voice. More specifically, I think it means “mapping” the class for at least two additional, overlapping talking circles of recursive inquiry, creating a kind of interplay among them. That is, first, an outward-focused practice of talking circles through the discursive activities of reading, writing, and discussing in order to discover what we think; and, second, a kind of inward-focused practice of talking circles among what we might call “inner” and “outer” selves, “surface” and “depth,” through ample openings for deeper self-reflection.⁷ To create opportunities for such collaborative, discursive and deep interplay, I must constantly redirect students’ bidirectional, boomeranging attention on my voice to multidirectional, ever-expanding attention to one another’s voices and to the voices in our texts. Yet, it also means that I must make space in the syllabus for personal talking circles; reflective space for students’ inquiry to spiral inward and then again outward, such that, as hooks (1994) says, they can “come to voice” in the context of our discursive exchange (p. 148).⁸

⁷ My emphasis on discursive practices is influenced by my training in composition and rhetoric pedagogy and feminist discourse analysis, as well as understandings of dialogue (e.g., Stone et al., 1999). My emphasis on inner dialogue is influenced by, among others, readings from the class that illustrated the relationship between our contemplative and active lives: Harjo’s (2012) use of the medicine wheel, Lesser’s (2020) distinction between “activism” and “innervism,” her term for the inner work of self-healing (pp. 128-29), and Steinem’s (2016) naming of “vertical history” (pp. 248-49), informed by teachings of Alice Walker and Paula Gunn Allen.

⁸ For hooks (1994), “coming to voice” is a complex process: “Coming to voice is not just the act of telling one’s experience. It is using that telling strategically – to come to voice so that you can also speak freely about other subjects” (p. 148). Confirming this idea, one of my students, while

Assignments that engaged both outward-focused and inward-focused talking circles seemed to allow for student agency. Making space for outward-focused talking circles, each student “hosted” book group for a day of class on a book of their choosing, taking responsibility for selecting their book, researching, and teaching a relevant topic of interest, and coming to voice by prompting discussion. The talking circle was expanded at times to add guest speakers’ voices and to illuminate pertinent contexts for our texts: an Ojibwe colleague on Native American storytelling and the medicine wheel; our director of International Studies on the rise of the Taliban; a political scientist on authoritarian government; a retired anthropologist on her experiences of living among Arab Bedouin women; an Education colleague on her own experiences as a black woman from Nigeria migrating to the U.S. at a young age, now writing her own memoir. A corollary application of the talking circle was directed inward; students kept independent, open reading response notebooks, which they ultimately revisited to tell narratives of their own learning in the course, selecting portions of their entries to share in a class storytelling circle at the end of the semester.

A talking circles feminist pedagogy is adaptable to courses outside WS. In the same semester, talking circles fed my 100-level Inquiry and Expression general education (GE) course, a first-year writing, reading, and critical thinking course. The reconception, design, and execution of GE 101 was likewise informed by a collegial talking circle over the winter break, in which a colleague’s sharing how she gives significant time for independent reading in her course led me to Kittle’s (2013) work, a plea for centering high school students’ choice in reading as a way to develop their stamina for college and to build independent reading lives.⁹ This discovery led me to reconceptualize this course as well, remapping the syllabus for GE 101 in order to make more space for student agency through more outward- and inward-directed talking circles within the class. I reduced common readings and common written essay assignments to the first two-thirds of the course, then integrated independent reading into the last third.¹⁰ Following Kittle’s model, I gave “book talks” on my current and past reads throughout the course, striving for a range of books, sharing my responses to each, and aiming to set up the class for the new, to me, experiment in independent reading at the end of the semester. The last

beginning to tell her own story, reflected on Dirie’s *Desert Flower*, writing that once you find your own voice, you can then turn it outward to advocate for others.

⁹ I thank Gretchen Rumohr for this exchange, which radically changed my approach to this GE course and directly resulted in the book talks and library assignments mentioned below.

¹⁰ The first two-thirds of the GE course covered four common assignment “sequences” grounded in shared readings on themes of family, education, and technology in the U.S., with three shared essay assignments: cultural analysis, personal narrative, and a research essay. These were followed by a fourth “expanded” essay assignment, informed by Rich (1971), and creating a talking circle in writing to revise one of the previous three essays through the lens of a relevant reading taking up race, class, and/or gender.

third of the course was dedicated to this independent reading, the only homework. Students chose independent reading books based on their interests, genre, or level, ranging from *The Catcher in the Rye* and *Where the Crawdads Sing* to *Leave Only Footprints*. Short synopses of our independent reading books were posted to a 20-frame Google jam board at the end of the semester in an effort to surface thematic connections across books, what Kittle calls “big ideas boards,” with headers like “Friends and Friendship,” “Death and Dying,” “Justice,” “Hope and Faith,” “Nature and Environment,” “History and Memory,” “Perseverance,” etc.¹¹ The class culminated in talking circles that were both discursive and deep; students ended the course with their own book talks, responding to one another, and each submitted a reflective essay, characterizing themselves as readers and writers and naming goals for their reading and writing lives.

DEBRIEFING AND ASSESSMENT

It might be that talking circles feminist pedagogy is simply good teaching practice, something toward which I have been moving and just haven’t articulated until recently. This paradigm is imperfect and evolving in many ways. It certainly raises questions about the primacy of written literacy and “the master’s tools” (Lorde, 1994/2007, pp. 110-13). Also, who is to say that the talking circles of this WS class, a small and committed group of particular students, can be effectively extended to different, larger classes? Scaling is not a science. And the question persists about how much “content” to include in courses for which a significant part of the “content” is talking circles. Student responses to online end-of-semester course evaluations indicated the WS course might have fewer readings, and one student suggested that more time was needed for reading; the GE course might have included more student-driven readings, since one student reported that “being able to pick up independent reading again” was the most valuable thing about the course, as “I forgot how much I used to love reading.”

What is striking to me, though, at the end of the semester, is the apparent agency, a “coming to voice” in hooks’ (1994) terms (p. 148), that a talking circles framework seemed to support in both classes. While, as two WS students put it, the global women’s narratives class was ostensibly about “widening our bubbles” and “opening up a new world through literature,” it was also about students’ telling their own stories. In their reflections, students spoke equally as passionately to their need to “own” their voices as the memoirists did and underscored the important work of Lesser’s (2020) notion of “innervism,” or internal inquiry, to fuel empowerment and support their “activism.” And the GE students, in their reflections on reading

¹¹ We also had two on-campus library days for selection of books, a library app assignment for use with public libraries, and in-class “reading and writing workshops,” applying recent lessons I’d learned from Kittle, and more distant lessons from Kolln, to their independent reading texts.

and writing, consistently named their pleasure in independent reading, awakening a “joy for reading that COVID-19 crushed,” and identified discoveries about and goals for themselves as readers and writers, suggesting the potential for an ongoing inner talking circle.¹²

I’m also learning about myself and transforming as a teacher through this remapping of my pedagogy. Talking circles turn out to be good feminist pedagogy, reorienting my teaching, which has become increasingly student-centered over the years, but is now also committed to engaging hooks’ (1994) “process of self-actualization” both for students and for myself (p. 15). For now, talking circles are my “emergent strategy,” brown’s (2017) title term for “how we intentionally change in ways that grow our capacity to embody the just and liberated worlds we long for” (p. 3). Talking circles, whether in the form of a peace movement, a book club, or a classroom, fundamentally reconfigure the power of teaching and learning as a shared, anti-authoritarian endeavor.

¹² Students’ individual reading goals included reading instead of watching tv to “create a world of my own,” reading books by a single author, trying new genres or series recommended by classmates, increasing reading speed, finishing a novel every 2-3 weeks, reading more “classics” or books on a particular theme (meditation, environment, and national parks among them), and rereading favorite books. Writing goals ranged from using fewer “big words,” writing “more of what I want to say,” and pushing out of “my ‘writing’ comfort zone,” to adopting “micro-level” techniques of great writers, honing analytical skills, and expanding one’s understanding of contexts for reading and writing.

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