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Building Dialogue in Feminist Classrooms: Building a Feminist Vocabulary

Sera Mathew

Point Park University, smathew@pointpark.edu

Barbara Barrow

Point Park University, bbarrow@pointpark.edu

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Building Dialogue in Feminist Classrooms, Part 1: Building a Feminist Vocabulary

Introduction and Rationale

There are two parts to these linked articles, in Part 1 of these linked articles, I describe how feminist vocabulary lists can encourage students to embark on the learning process with a shared set of concepts and ideas¹. In Part 2, there is a discussion of how student generated discussion points support dialogue and community building.

Centering building a shared vocabulary is an essential first step towards community building and better dialogue in the classroom. I have taught a wide range of classes centered on gender, including undergraduate women's and gender studies courses, feminist theory, and a special topics' graduate seminar on feminist perspectives for community psychology. These classes allow me to address deeply polarizing conversations about structures of exclusion by drawing on a wide range of interdisciplinary readings. Especially for students who may not have yet engaged in feminist theoretical conversations, I want my classroom to be a space that makes feminism accessible, not a distant idea and only practiced by the elite. Drawing on hooks (1994) in *Teaching to Transgress*, my goal is "to educate as the practice of freedom is a way of teaching that anyone can learn" (p. 13). It is important to note that some of my students have had prior feminist coursework that allows them to engage in inquiry about structural inequalities, but most of them are new to the discipline. Students often confide in me that they desire to engage in feminist conversations but struggle to navigate the highly theoretical language and nuanced terms used in assigned readings and the classroom. A student once shared that it felt like they were learning a new language in my class.

To support students in their journey, the primary feminist pedagogical strategy I use in my class centers on building a feminist vocabulary. Using feminist vocabulary lists serves two main goals: 1) to level the playing field for students, specifically for those engaging in these conversations for the first time, and 2) to allow students to start from a place of inquisitive engagement with feminist ideas instead of uncertainty and discomfort.

¹ For ease of reading, the authors have chosen to use "I" in this piece. However, the authors collaborated on these two linked Original Teaching Activities, and the order of the authors' names are not hierarchical.

Learning Objectives

- Identify and apply feminist terms and ideas used in readings
- Discuss feminist terms and ideas in class discussion and writing

Explanation

In the first week of class, I provide students with two vocabulary lists that include feminist terms and ideas that guide our discussions for the rest of the semester. The first list includes terms and ideas from feminist literature: sex vs. gender, representation, essentialism, hegemony, intersectional analysis, oppression, patriarchy/patriarchal, etc. The second list focuses on sexual orientation and gender expression identity: ally, queer, cisgender, gender identity, pansexual, etc. I encourage students to bring these lists to class throughout the semester and use them during class discussions. Two examples of robust vocabulary lists are available online: 1) the LGBTQIA+ Glossary of Terms for Health Care Teams (LGBTQIA+ Health Education Center, 2020) and 2) The Feminist Movement Builder's Dictionary (Just Associates [JASS], 2013). I have found it to be essential to include a set of guidelines for students along with the vocabulary lists. I also build time into class to explain the rationale behind the vocabulary lists.

Example guidelines I use include the following:

- The vocabulary list is not about superficial engagement with feminist ideas. Instead, these terms aim to give you a language to address and discuss structural inequalities. Spend time familiarizing yourself with the terms and their meanings.
- Use the vocabulary lists in class discussions and written assignments as building blocks for your arguments. You may agree or disagree with the ideas presented in the readings, but the goal is to present an informed argument.

Debriefing

My students, especially those engaged in discussions of feminist literature for the first time, have written about the usefulness of vocabulary lists in my course evaluations. I encourage students to keep the lists accessible during class, which allows them to adjust their language without intervention from me. One of the biggest strengths of this approach is that it encourages democratic dialogue in the classroom. It is essential to ensure that students recognize that we are learning collectively and that vocabulary lists are tools to support our collaborative learning. When communicating my classroom expectations to students, I draw on hooks

(1994), "Critical reflection in my experience as a student in unexciting classrooms enabled me not only to imagine that the classroom could be exciting but that this excitement could co-exist with and even stimulate serious intellectual and/or academic engagement" (p. 7).

Below are classroom expectations that I share with students:

1. It is okay not to know. We are here to learn together. We embrace excitement, discomfort, and debate in this classroom. Spend time with the vocabulary lists as a first step towards learning a feminist language, then practice the language in class discussions and writing.

2. Using feminist language is not about political correctness; it is about equity. Engage with the distinction between these two terms and what they represent when you engage in class dialogues. Be kind, inclusive, and equitable in your words and actions.

I have found that encouraging feminist language in the classroom allows conversations to expand by centering accountability of systemic forces such as the patriarchy, oppression, and racism. My primary goal is to encourage meaningful student engagement with the vocabulary. I do not want students to get caught up in simply learning the language, but to instead engage with what feminist ideas represent and account for in the context of structural inequalities. Therefore, I constantly challenge students to lead guided dialogues and discussions on class readings using the vocabulary lists, which subsequently enables them to arrive at conclusions about the role and power of feminist language in dismantling inequity. For example, during one of the early sessions in my Introduction to Women's and Gender Studies course, we discussed the need to understand the role of the patriarchy and the manifestations of the patriarchy. We began with collectively reading and unpacking the definition in the JASS vocabulary list, second edition (p. 7):

Patriarchy: Literally means "rule of the father." Historically, patriarchy refers to systemic and institutionalized male domination embedded in and perpetuated by cultural, political, economic, and social structures and ideologies. These systems explicitly make women inferior and subordinate and confer control and decision-making on males while making values associated with masculinity the norm or ideal. Patriarchy has many particular forms in different stages of history and different cultures. The concept, as it has been developed within feminist writings (because it has existed in anthropology far longer), is not a single or simple concept but has a variety of different meanings.

One student indicated in a reflection that we commonly use the word patriarchy in conversations but reading it as the “rule of father,” and then working on how it is institutionalized, embedded, and perpetuated, supported their understanding of the patriarchy. In this instance, beginning the class session by unpacking the definition prior to discussing the assigned readings enables everyone to start at the same point of learning. The key idea is to challenge students to move beyond singular frameworks of analysis centered on the individual and encourage them to consider how multiple systems shape experiences. Redirecting conversations towards the underlying structural factors using a vocabulary list helps add depth to our conversations. I view it also as an intervention when essentialist generalizations and conclusions are reached during the discussions in the classroom.

Assessment

I evaluated the impact of vocabulary lists via examining formal and informal student feedback in my Introduction to Women's and Gender Studies classes. The central theme outlined in the students' feedback was that having and working with the lists made challenging concepts easier to understand.

Student familiarity with feminist terms was assessed by evaluating the depth of classroom discussions and active engagement with the readings. Speaking to depth in the discussion, one student shared, "This class required a lot of in-class discussion on issues and topics that affect everyone." As an instructor, I saw a change over the semester in how students addressed and identified feminist ideas and concepts in the class discussion. I observed students pulling up the vocabulary lists during class discussions; it helps create comfort around clarifying feminist language and ideas. In addition, it normalized students looking up ideas that were unclear to them. Another way that assessment was built into the classroom was through weekly writing memos to identify and expand on their understanding of the class material. Low stakes memo writing exercises allow for opportunities for practice. The instructions for these memo writing exercises encourage students to do the following:

- Identify core concepts
- Synthesize by making connections between concepts presented in the reading
- Reflect on how the concepts relate to self and community

These weekly writing opportunities also highlight how the goal of the using vocabulary lists is to move beyond rote memorization and engage with how knowledge production is relational and situated. Using a diversity of assessment opportunities allow students to practice their feminist vocabulary in weekly low

stakes settings. I have observed that low stakes activities are essential as they allow students to engage in a reflective practice while receiving instructor feedback and support. For example, in memo writing after reviewing intersectionality, one of the students shared and elaborated on their uncertainty in using intersectionality to address privilege: “One of the hardest ideas to really grasp this week was this idea of intersectionality and critically thinking about specific topics. I am so used to using everything as a binary.”

This struggle with shifting to an intersectional lens was a common theme observed after the introduction of intersectionality. Therefore, going back to the vocabulary list to revisit the definition was the first step towards giving feedback to students; JASS vocabulary list, second edition (p.9, Miller et al., 2006):

Intersectionality: An analytical tool that helps to understand and respond to the ways in which multiple aspects of each person’s social identity and status intersect to create unique experiences of oppression and privilege. The concept evolved in part as a response to a critique that “women” as a political category over-generalized women’s experiences, privileging white, middle-class women, while making invisible the ways that race, class, colonialism, and other factors of discrimination contribute to the experience of oppression. Intersectionality aims to move beyond overly simplified conceptions of identity – such as “working class” or “indigenous” – to examine complexities of multiple sources of privilege and subordination.

I observed that redirecting students to the definition of the concept as a starting place for feedback was helpful for students. Following this redirection, I explained and illustrated both in class and in written feedback how intersectionality is an analytical tool. Including the definition in feedback also reinforced the potential that the vocabulary lists have in supporting the learning of theoretically rich concepts. As hooks (1994) writes, “We communicate best by choosing that way of speaking that is informed by the particularity and uniqueness of whom we are speaking to and with” (p. 11). It is helpful to start with some building blocks that come in the form of vocabulary lists in my classes. It allows for a space where learning feminist vocabulary is integral to engaging in deeper critical conversations.

I draw on Bettez & Hytten (2013) in their conceptualization of critical communities in my classroom, “dialoguing effectively amid differences, establishing networks, and maintaining a stance of patient hopefulness” (p. 58). It was important as an instructor to support hopefulness in my classroom as students navigate learning a

new language. The use of vocabulary lists began with sensing student frustration as they read and spoke about feminist ideas; they needed some tools to shift from discomfort to comfort as they start to engage in deliberate and reflective dialogue. These simple and accessible tools, such as feminist vocabulary lists, when woven into class dialogue and feedback, have the potential to support students in contributing to feminist dialogue from a place of engagement.

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