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## bell hooks Feminist Pedagogy in the Library Classroom

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**Introduction**

The theory and teaching of bell hooks provides a framework to interact with, and identify, the ways knowledge and information are in relationship with the patriarchy, and how the academy has institutionalized, perpetuated, and maintained this relationship. Identifying literacy as a feminist issue, hooks (1984) asserts that the ability to read and write in conjunction with the ability to think critically and analytically is key to critical consciousness. The ability to gain critical consciousness through reading and writing is the foundation of a “person’s capacity to think for herself, to go against the norms of culture, and to conceive of alternatives to society—all of which are fundamental to acting politically” (Bunch, 1983, p. 257).

The purpose of this original teaching activity (OTA) is to employ feminist theory to develop research practices. Reflecting on my own positionality as a first-generation college student from a multigenerational, working, poor family, I used the work of bell hooks to create an activity that could help explain my own feelings of “otherness” in the academy and to teach information literacy in a way that felt authentic to me. The activity provides students with the theoretical foundation to recognize knowledge as socially constructed; identify the role positionality plays in how we approach research; and understand how systemic arrangements (i.e., race, class, gender, sexuality) create a political landscape out of scholarly publishing, research, authority, knowledge production, and information access. This teaching activity was prepared for an information literacy session for an upper-division gender and sexuality studies course. This OTA focuses on the second part of a two-part lesson. The first lesson familiarizes students with how to access the library and its resources, provides them with the competencies required to develop search strategies, and the skills to evaluate information resources.

**Rationale**

Enacting bell hooks’ liberatory teachings allows for students to learn new ways of engaging with information and research that centers them as producers of knowledge. It provides the tools for integrating the sociopolitical dimensions of information and knowledge production to critique how power shapes the creation, distribution, and reception of information (Drabinski & Tewell, 2022). The insistence on privileging one type of knowledge production over another, one that is socially constructed, is a concept that hooks (1994) connects to the historical conceptions of knowledge shaped by the white male-dominated majority culture. Naming this pronouncement of authority and learning to navigate these constructs creates the opportunity for students to move beyond the traditional notions of

ways of knowing and explore the concepts of knowledge justice (Leung et al., 2021).

### **Learning Objectives**

There are three primary learning objectives for this lesson: 1) Interrogate information and research practices using feminist theory; 2) Understand the relationships between gender, race, ethnicity, class, disability, sexuality, age, religion, information systems, and the production of knowledge; 3) Develop and apply feminist information-seeking behaviors and practices to research.

### **Explanation**

The course culminates in a final project that asks students to trace the origins of a feminist keyword to understand how feminist knowledge is created, evolves, gets used, and is applied. This activity can be adapted for a wide variety of courses with critical thinking and/or research components. To do so, simply align the examples with the content of the course, from the social sciences to the sciences.

The lesson begins with a discussion about positionality. As hooks (1994) teaches, the role of positionality is inextricably linked to the ways knowledge is produced and constructed. I discuss that positionality in research refers to how our identities and experiences not only influence the choices we make in the research process but also how those factors shape the way others see us and give us power and/or insight (University of California Los Angeles, 2021). We then view *Positionality and research: how our identities shape inquiry* on YouTube (University of California Los Angeles, 2021). The video introduces the significance of positionality in research: how our positionality affords us unique experiences and insight that influence our research and helps to identify ways to remain aware of positionality throughout the research process. I then ask that students take a moment, if comfortable, to share a few keywords that make up their positionality. If students do not feel comfortable, I ask them to take notes on a piece of paper or in a Word document to reflect on as they move through our time together.

After this reflection, I expand upon how positionality is correlated with knowledge and transition into a discussion on how knowledge is socially constructed. Conceptions of knowledge have been shaped throughout history by the male-dominated majority culture. Drawing on their perspectives and visions, men have constructed the prevailing theories, written history, and set values that have become the guiding principles for everyone (Belenky et al., 1986). Knowledge and power are inextricably linked, resulting in systems designed to exclude and maintain dominator culture (hooks, 2003). Male epistemology has been privileged over others to maintain patriarchal intellectual and material

power. Applying hooks' (1984) perspectives on power, students learn that in order to change the relationship between information and power they must reconceptualize power and work to change the value system in which information is rooted.

Continuing to draw connections between the role of intellectual power and the construction of knowledge, I explain how this power is replicated via peer review. I ask students to tell me what they know about the peer review process, then pose a follow-up question about how one's positionality may play into the peer review process and the construction of knowledge. I then relay that scholars of color are underrepresented in publications and cited less often than their white peers, which furthers racial dominance and reduces valuable avenues of intellectual inquiry. Contributing further to racial exclusion in publishing is the lack of diversity in the pool of editors and reviewers—a direct result of the pervasive role of systemic racism in academia (Inefuku, 2021).

To demonstrate the imbalance of scholar representation by race/gender, I divide students into groups and ask them to find a scholarly article and work through the first ten citations of the paper's bibliography using the internet to attempt to identify the race/gender of the authors. I instruct them to look for positionality statements, faculty bios, social media, etc. I explain that while academic publishing is an imperfect system, and making assumptions about someone's race/gender is not ideal, broad tallying provides the context to demonstrate the disparities in representation in scholarship. Students are then asked to share their results with the class, harkening back once again to hooks' (2003) insistence on practicing freedom and “rather than punishing students for interrogating the forms of knowledge offered them, encouraging them to repudiate educational practices that reinforce dominant ideology, to open their minds and think critically” (hooks, 2003, p. 71).

By teaching students how to redistribute the power of knowledge authority and knowledge structures, students work against upholding the status quo. I try to instill agency in the students by communicating that, as young scholars, they have the opportunity to upset the power arrangement and can disrupt imbalances by employing feminist research practices. I encourage students to choose their information sources with critical intentionality. Whose voices are they uplifting? What knowledge are they privileging? By asking students to reflect, and if they have any thoughts, feelings, or questions, I am honoring hooks by emphasizing feelings and emotions in the classroom.

The activity then moves on to looking outside of the academy for other venues of knowledge creation and intellectual production. Faculty often reinforce the politics of citation by restricting the type of information students can use in their papers/assignments to scholarly articles. This privileges knowledge production created within the academy and signals that information created

outside of the academy is less valuable. I implore students to look outside of the academy to capture a fuller conversation and better contextualize their research. Non-academic books, blogs, social media, zines, and podcasts are all platforms where knowledge is being created. Students are thereby reminded that there are authoritative voices outside of the academic professor. This insistence functions as a way to reconcile what hooks (2000) calls academization by helping students to interrogate differences between what the academy endorses and their own ideas surrounding who can create knowledge and where it can be created.

First, I demonstrate the value of books by introducing students to the importance of #OwnVoices, a hashtag created on Twitter in 2015 by Corinne Duyvis, a white, disabled, queer author. #OwnVoices is used as a descriptive term used to identify works by authors from a marginalized or under-represented group writing about their own experiences and from their perspective, rather than someone from an outside perspective writing as a character from an underrepresented group (Duyvis, 2022). While discussing scholarly publishing, hooks (1994) points to the importance of own voices in the creation of knowledge by referring to the necessity of representation of Black voices on Black issues: “without our voices in written work and oral presentations, there will be no articulation of our concerns” which are integral to arriving at a more inclusive feminist theory and practice.

Next, I cover social media. The first recorded instance of the term BIPOC has been traced back to a tweet (Garcia, 2020). Twitter is a great way to engage and read the discourse that is currently happening around a topic. Additionally, examining the current discourse on a social media platform such as Twitter exposes you to a breadth and depth of knowledge producers and lived experience. Social media can reduce the barriers to academic conversations, in turn increasing discourse between academics and non-academics and creating a space to be in community with each other. Similar to the way hooks (1994) approaches creating learning communities in the classroom, social media provides a virtual classroom learning community “for everyone's voice to be heard, their presence recognized and valued” (p. 185).

Lastly, I discuss zines and blogs. Zines are broadly defined as paper-based, Do It Yourself (DIY) periodicals that are created and shared within the context of a subculture. Zines have been a critical component of DIY feminism: a political outlook centered on communicating and elevating ideas through independent cultural production. I highlight examples of zine projects and libraries that are open-source and accessible online. Blogs can help clarify ideas and are not restricted to publishers' frameworks, and often serve as a platform for gaining feedback on new ideas.

To practice skills around alternative/non-academic sources, students are divided into groups and assigned a feminist keyword, i.e., misogynoir. Each group

chooses a category of information source (i.e., blog, zine, social media, non-academic book, podcast) through which they research the keyword as if they were writing a research paper. Groups use the category of source selected (i.e., zine) to find a particular source (i.e., zine on misogynoir) and then look for information on the author's positionality. Groups are asked to share the source with the class and explain what category of source they chose and why, discuss the author's positionality, and include an explanation of the contribution the author makes to the feminist discourse.

### **Debriefing**

Students are apprehensive about the freedom to use non-academic sources as the majority of their secondary and post-secondary education has privileged academic, peer-reviewed, scholarly sources. Deploying non-academic sources continues to prove difficult for students, even those who have been primed to think about the systemic power dynamics of race, class, and gender, further proving the chokehold dominator culture has on academia.

The exposure to new, anti-hierarchical, feminist-centered research practices challenges the patriarchal and parochial practices entangled in students' ideas of what it means to know something and their ability to produce knowledge. Though the disruption causes a fair amount of discomfort, such affect is necessary to education as the practice of freedom. hooks (1994) speaks to the role of discomfort in education when she says:

Our work is not merely to share information, but to share in the intellectual and spiritual growth of our students. To teach in a manner that respects and cares for the souls of our students is essential if we are to provide the necessary conditions where learning can most deeply and intimately begin (p. 13).

I preface our debriefing conversation with the fact that they will not always be able to employ these practices in other courses and will often be restricted by other instructors in doing so. Thus, serving as an example of how deeply entrenched these systems are in academia. However, this does not render the interventions learned any less relevant or valuable. In feedback, students reported that the activities gave them "more insight on feminist and justice-centered research practices" and "transformed the way [they] look for information outside of traditional knowledge structures." The more students are exposed to critical consciousness, the less likely they are to support ideologies of domination (hooks, 2003).

### **Assessment**

To assess student learning objectives, I consider to what extent students have demonstrated their ability to engage in feminist research practices by

locating an information source from one of the resource types discussed in class, as well as practicing community building by working in groups to create and discuss their approach before sharing it out to the class for further discussion. Additionally, students are asked to complete a follow-up homework assignment that requires them to submit a “non-academic” source related to their final research paper and provide justification for their selection.

The adaptability of this OTA makes it particularly valuable for those working to shift the practices that contribute to upholding oppressive research frameworks regardless of the discipline.

If the effort to respect and honor the social reality and experiences of groups in this society who are nonwhite is to be reflected in a pedagogical process, then as teachers—on all levels, from elementary to university setting—we must acknowledge that our styles of teaching may need to change (hooks, 1994, p. 35).

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