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Feminist Fat Activist Pedagogy Beyond the Classroom

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Cover Page Footnote

Thank you to the Southern Oregon University Center for the Advancement of Teaching and Learning for support in developing this course as well as all of the students in Fat Studies over the years.

Feminist Fat Activist Pedagogy Beyond the Classroom

Introduction and Rationale

As more instructors are teaching feminist approaches to body size, we will do well to consider our goals not only in the classroom but beyond. What will students take with them, and why does it matter? In developing the Health at Every Size (HAES) activist project presented here, a central goal has been to facilitate and inspire student activism that centers intersectional feminist approaches. This teaching activity adds to the pedagogy “now challenging the dominant ‘obesity’ discourse in university classrooms” (Cameron, 2015, p. 29) and encourages students to implement their own challenges to this discourse beyond the classroom through activist projects that use intersectional feminist understandings to address fatness.

In preparation for the project, students learn about and engage with health approaches to body size, including the Health at Every Size model; intersectionality is critical to HAES, particularly in its principle of respectful care, which includes “Provid[ing] information and services from an understanding that socio-economic status, race, gender, sexual orientation, age, and other identities impact weight stigma, and support[ing] environments that address these inequities” (ASDAH, 2019). Feminist intersectionality, with its foundation in Black feminist scholarship and activism (see Crenshaw, 1991), is thus essential to this feminist fat activist project by addressing the ways that intersecting embodied categories impact structural experiences of fatness. As one student in this class noted, “An intersectional framework is necessary to see the whole picture of fatness in society.” Students engage with a feminist fat activist intersectional approach through activist projects chosen and designed by them that meet the overall assignment criteria: to share HAES knowledge beyond the classroom using an intersectional framework.

The project discussed here was developed for the course *Fat Studies: Bodies, Culture, and Politics*, an undergraduate Gender, Sexuality, and Women’s Studies program upper division elective that focuses on student engagement with feminist fat activism through an intersectional framework. In addition to being relevant to courses in fat studies and feminism, this project may also be well-suited for courses with a focus on activism and social change, bodies and embodiment, medicine and healthcare, and more.

Learning Objectives

The learning objectives for this activist project are:

1. Analyze fat studies scholarship to inform an original fat activist project.
2. Incorporate an intersectional feminist approach to understanding body size

and apply it through the HAES framework.

3. Implement the activist project beyond the classroom to effect change.

Explanation

The term project for this course, completed over 10 weeks on the quarter system, involves student-created, group-oriented, feminist intersectional activist projects that promote the HAES model beyond the classroom through project-based learning (see Kokotsaki, Menzies, & Wiggins, 2016). The purpose of the project is for students to articulate and share a fat-positive approach to body size and health, thus demonstrating their understanding of this framework. Students are asked to use their activism to educate others on the five HAES principles: weight inclusivity, health enhancement, respectful care, eating for well-being, and life-enhancing movement (ASDAH, 2019). Working in groups, students make feminist intersectional social change by implementing ideas from the scholarship we read and discuss throughout the term.

The central goal for this project involves student groups creating a resource about HAES that serves as a form of activism. Each group works together across the term to create and then share a resource based on Health at Every Size that makes social change beyond the classroom. Each resource must provide information about HAES and specifically focus on gender and/or sexuality in intersection with another social category such as race, age, disability, or class. No constraints are given to students on the form of the resource, as long as they justify how it educates others about HAES using an intersectional feminist approach (example formats include zines, workshops, panels, pamphlets, webpages, videos, art installations, and other creative resources). Students submit a draft resource for instructor approval, and, after approval, they implement their project beyond the classroom. To reflect on their projects, students then create a presentation for the class that demonstrates how they have integrated specific concepts from class readings into their activist project.

Through the project, students engage with both feminist fat studies and feminist fat activism in a continuously reflexive relationship, each building on the other; as Rinaldi, Rice, and Friedman (2020) state, fat studies is the “academic sister of fat activism” (p. 1). Students use scholarship from the class to identify and define key terms, such as intersectionality and feminism, in relation to their projects. Scholarly readings from the class that inform their activist projects include scholarship about critical fat studies as an area of inquiry, the connections between fat and feminism, other significant intersectional work, and literature related to body size, health, and HAES. For instance, students apply concepts from readings that address intersectionality in fat studies (Himmelstein et al., 2017; Kwan, 2010; Schoppelrei, 2019; van Amsterdam, 2013), including intersections with gender (Bergman, 2009; Boisvert, 2012; Cooper, 2012; Fikkan & Rothblum, 2012; Friedman, 2015; Fujioka et al., 2009; Gailey, 2012; McPhailet

al., 2016; Monaghan, 2005; Parker, 2014; Salk & Engeln-Maddox, 2011; Shaw, 2005; Sojka & Sanchez, 2019; Strings, 2015; Swami & Tovée, 2009; Ward & McPhail, 2019; White, 2014) and other categories such as sexuality, queerness, race, ethnicity, Indigeneity, disability, class, religion, and age. Students actively draw from this scholarship in developing their HAES activist project, applying and critiquing scholarship as they develop their own models to put those ideas into action. While students begin identifying ideas for their project toward the beginning of the term, they refine these in response to scholarship and other course activities. Students then implement their activist project, and finally, they deliver presentations reflecting on their projects.

There has been surprisingly little deep resistance to the tenants of fat studies through this project. Cameron (2015b) notes that many who teach in fat studies find that it “evok[es] deep student discomfort and resistance” (29); while deep resistance may be somewhat missing, students have expressed discomfort and skepticism. Skepticism often comes in the form of students who admit that they agree with some of the tenets of fat studies but identify select aspects that they do not embrace. Students who remain suspicious of fat activism in this way are prompted to find an area of fat activism they can accept and then create their project in relation to that.

The most successful student projects focus on feminist, queer, anti-racist, and disability/crip approaches to fat activism. These projects “actively de/reconstruct ... dominant discourses” (Cameron, 2015, p. 29) and often promote fatness as “dangerous, disruptive, and confrontational” (Fahs, 2016, p. 227). These students subvert healthism and ideals of the “good fatty” that can explicitly or implicitly be perpetuated through some HAES approaches (Watkins & Concepcion, 2014), and they also use approaches that serve “as body-becoming pedagogies—as interventions that create alternatives to conventional biopedagogies whose instrumental, outcome-oriented methods and moralizing overtones enforce physical conformity over diversity and creativity” (Rice, 2015, p. 395). These students show vulnerability in their activism, dedication to disrupting systems of oppression, and critical insight that moves this work into new arenas.

For instance, one group’s activist project consisted of creating a student club called FATTIES! They called their first event a fatnic (i.e., fat picnic) ice cream social. They included lawn games for life-enhancing movement during their fatnic, and they did so in a way that made them accessible to a variety of bodies. The name choice for the group was unapologetically fierce, and their choice of an ice cream social was in resistance to healthism and the concept of ‘good’ and ‘bad’ foods.

Other students created zines or websites featuring poetry, visual art, personal essays, and more, that they shared with particular audiences. One zine essay addressed stimming as a form of life-enhancing movement during a

discussion of neurodiversity and fatness. In another zine, a personal essay engaged with how the student's experiences of their gender, queerness, invisible disabilities, polyamory, and fatness all intersected during interactions with their health care provider. Another student, who discussed being thin, disabled, and trans masculine, wrote about how others perceived him as healthier than his fat partner, even though he experienced multiple health issues related to disability, and, by his account, his partner was healthier than he. Some students also incorporated their own critiques of HAES into their projects, suggesting limitations of the HAES model and finding ways to both use and move beyond the framework to resist sizeism. Their work exemplifies how students promote HAES principles in their intersectional feminist fat activist projects, and their final projects showed a wide diversity of ways students found to make this happen.

Debriefing

Students reflect on their project through a class presentation where they analyze their activism as well as the ways that scholarship has shaped their project. This offers a chance for students to both debrief on their own work as well as learn from the work of other groups. As part of their debriefing, students address their relationship to fat studies. The connection between self and society serves as a foundation for the activist project, helping students to understand their relationship to fat activism on a deeper level and encouraging them to investigate their reasons to engage in activism. This reflection on feminist fat studies and feminist fat activism encourages “students to look inward (examining such things as personal beliefs, attitudes, and biases...)” (Cameron, 2015, p. 34) and emphasizes feminist pedagogical values such as “multiple ways of knowing including personal experience” (Watkins, 2016, p. 162). As one student in this class noted, “For me, fat studies and fat activism include me as a fat person. I cannot remain an objective participant in fat studies without also engaging in fat activism because I see the negative effects of fat-related discrimination on a daily basis and I would like to engage with it in the world.” Through the activist project, students thus make fat studies scholarship ‘real’ by applying it concretely to their lives as well as through their activism.

Student reflection on the activist project can help to solidify transformative change that students experience through the course. One student wrote of their experiences, “This class provided the information and space for a profoundly deep transformation that I have been searching for a very long time. I have really significantly struggled with some of the topics we discussed in this class. I have gotten a wide range of professional help for these struggles, which I mention because I think it is significant that none of them were able to provide the healing and liberation that the personal vulnerabilty (sic) and acedemic (sic) information [in] this class did.”

Assessment

The assessment criteria highlight the overall objectives of this assignment, and the project is assessed through a combination of the project, the reflective presentations, and a collaboration assessment through which each student describes their own and other group members' contributions to the project work. Assessment criteria include the following categories:

1. Does the project provide information about HAES, including each of the HAES principles?
2. Does the project use an intersectional framework to address body size and fatness?
3. Is the project effectively shared beyond the classroom?
4. Is fat studies scholarship used to inform the activist project?

Conclusion

Because “fat pedagogy is inherently radical” (Russell & Cameron, 2016, p. 252), fat feminist pedagogy should also include ways for students to *become* fat activists and do the radical work of challenging sizeism in our society more broadly. Assigning activist projects that require engagement with fat studies is one way to make this happen. In creating fat activism that reaches beyond the classroom, students can work more deeply with the scholarly material while engaging in public pedagogies (Rich, 2016). Through projects such as these, students learn the skills to use a fat feminist framework to challenge sizeism and fatphobia within themselves and with those around them. In adapting this assignment, faculty may consider additional ways to strengthen this work, including by building ongoing relationships with community partners such as health care workers or nutritionists, through which student activist projects can build power across terms. The overall goal is for feminist fat activist pedagogy to ultimately orient students beyond the classroom and into the future, where they can continue to use their intersectional fat studies knowledge in their daily lives.

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