Equity in the Women's Studies Classroom

The Politics of Voicing Difference

by Jacqueline Reid-Walsh and Elaine Correa

Les auteures analysent et critiquent les conflits dans la salle de classe—inversant les problèmes pour les questionner—dans un geste de réflexion et d'amélioration de leur pratique d'une pédagogie féministe.

If "safe space" was once an understood ideal espoused by a group of like-minded women, this is no longer the case. Like every aspect of feminism it must be interrogated to be understood and must be related to the current social-political situation.

Entering the debate on "safe space" and the need to provide a forum for all voices to be heard has become a controversial position to address within the feminist classroom. Given that the feminist classroom is no longer viewed as a safe haven, but rather a possible site of conflict, tensions, and sometimes ongoing hostility (hooks), the issue of space and subsequently voice have become integral concerns facing both students and teachers in terms of equity in the classroom. This article draws from our experiences teaching a senior undergraduate seminar in women's studies.

Situating the university class

The university classroom has become a highly unsettled and unsettling domain (Bannerji) contested and often conflictual for students and instructors alike. The typical university class is premised on the "banking tradition" (Friere) whereby students expect to listen to demanding lectures, read the prescribed texts, and regurgitate the allocated information in order to obtain their "A" grades. The situation is similar in women's studies classes. Women's studies classes are no longer small and intimate groups but large seminars or lectures with the attendant lack of individual attention. Both students and faculty exist in a highly competitive world where, apart from the exceptional few, all are scrambling for fewer resources to survive. In this poor econo-mic climate, students simultaneously display expectations of "entitlement" and "constraints" (Skeggs) which impact on the classroom dynamic as a microcosm of the academic field as a whole and society at large.

The composition of the women's studies classroom in terms of students has changed noticeably in the 1990s. Students are "differently constructed" (Ng *et al.* 44) in terms of race, class, and sexuality and expressions of these forms of "identities" may cause sharp disagreement with one another. The instructors, too, are "different" in terms of race, class, and sexuality, and some are now trained specifically in women's studies or feminist theory. Others are "crossovers" from traditional disciplines who learned about the field through apprenticeship, through self-directed reading, and from trying to apply in practice what they are doing in their research.

The tenet of safe space

The idea of "safe space" lies at the heart of women's studies pedagogy. Yet, if "safe space" was once an understood ideal espoused by a group of like-minded women, this is no longer the case; nor is it a "neutral" term politically. Like every aspect of feminism it must be interrogated to be understood and must be related to the current social-political situation. Some strong and penetrating criticisms have been directed toward the term to indicate that "safety" is relative and may be experienced in contradictory ways by different people in different positions (hooks, Bannerji). For example, does the term "safe" apply to students who are marginalized by their race, sexuality, and/or religious beliefs? Why should they feel "safe" in a women's studies class any more than anywhere else? On the other hand, where does the student with "conventional" ideals situate herself if the dominant tone stems from a few outspoken "radical" speakers? Regarding the teacher, does the term "safe" apply to the instructors as well as to the students? How does the race of the instructor influence her teaching techniques, and how does the class and age of the instructor bear on classroom dynamics? For example, one women's studies instructor talks about excessive demands being made on her and false expectations being raised due to her youth, approachability, and her class background vis-à-vis her older and sometimes wealthy students (Pearce).

Can we conclude that "safe space" classrooms are only another expression of privilege as Roxanna Ng suggests? Bell hooks has critiqued the notion of safe space as implying "comfortability" and stated that as a woman of colour she believes that space needs to be one of disagreement, not concord; confrontation, not agreement. Other critics of the ideal such as Dawn Currie have questioned the validity of the notion of teacher as "midwife" who facilitates "connected" knowing (Belenky *et al.*) and suggested that dialogue, debate, critique, and self-critique need to be brought into the classroom.

Locating ourselves

As so-called "lecturers" within the university setting, our perceived status rests upon a contractual authority which lasts for the duration of the academic session. Thus, unlike full-time tenured academics, our tenuous employment is conditioned upon a number of fluctuating factors: student enrollment, program requirements, departmental criteria/guidelines, and student evaluations. We are perceived by students as representative of the establishment in our roles as "lecturers" (with power and associated privilege) yet, we are not protected by the establishment for the very nature of our employment conditions renders us powerless and dependent. Other factors which contribute to our perceived status include, race, age, class, sexuality, and ability. The intersections of these categories for each of us has profoundly different impact.

One voice: the issue of academic ghettoization

As a white, part-time faculty member of long standing, responsible for women's studies within my department, I experience academic privilege by the nature of my title/rank. Simultaneously, I must contend with the dilemmas inherent in sessional work while trying to maintain an academic profile. "Part-timers" or "sessional workers" (adjuncts) occupy an "invisible" position within the university hierarchy. Academic ghettoiza-tion results in constraints in terms of support services, funding, and time allocation for research.

An'other voice—the issue of race

As a so-called "visible minority" the constant struggle of recognizing my position as a "minority of privilege" as well as my responsibility in terms of membership in a marginalized group, are points of both identity and conflict to which I am made aware. Viewed as a "contaminated" and marginalized member (an outsider by virtue of having gained access to elite privilege), my voice cannot be seen as representative of marginalized women who exist within the struggle from the periphery. However, by virtue of the process in which a "voice" gains access to elite privilege and is thereby "heard," an inevitable position of "authority" becomes reinforced and it is possible to see how a marginalized "voice" can be labeled "authentic" and exist "unchallenged." In spite of the desire to assume a sense of detachment from the process, the privileged minority voice is thus given credence, emerging as the representative voice of all marginalized group members. As a result, the responsibility to remain one voice in the choir of many is often less controlled by the supposed "voice of authority" and more so a product of the multi-layered hierarchy, in which the tainted voice of difference is seen as a rarity.

Perceptions of us

We acknowledge that our entrance into the classroom does not come without associated perceptions by our students; first as instructors, with a history (herstory) that is based on relayed fragments of narratives transmitted between students from semester to semester. Second, students make assumptions about our identities as premised by our visible racial, ethnic affiliations, as well as ages and sexualities. Thus our identities may be assumed to inform our politics. Third, classifications may be determined according to our socio-economic status as indicated by our dress, social attitudes, and codes of behavior.

The tenet of voice

Acknowledging the dilemma of "representative voice," and the central issue of "safe and or confrontational space" in the classroom, the politics of "whose voice?" "authority of experience," and "agency" become crucial points of disrupture and censorship within classroom discussion. Reflecting on some of the issues discussed within the search for appropriate space and voice, concerns addressing the politics of difference: race, class, sexual orientation, religion, and ability/disability, are viewed intensely as pivotal identity markers that permit barriers, segregating the classroom into camps. The space for voice is now a "space for constructive confrontation and critical interroga-

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tion" (hooks 37) in which some degree of pain may be unavoidable.

The idea of "pain" associated with shifting paradigms is recognized as part of the process (hooks; Ellsworth). Confronting one another across differences means that we must change ideas about how we learn. According to hooks, this process cannot take place by fearing conflict. Thus some

degree of pain will be involved in giving up old ways of thinking and knowing while learning new approaches. Shifting paradigms and discussing the discomfort these shifts may cause are important for students engaged in liberatory practices (Friere). However, attempting to help students recognize nonprogressive thinking, which impedes dialogue, necessitates providing equal time for each student's voice to be heard while insuring that everyone's words are seen as having value. These conditions in themselves are problematic, giving rise to questions of censorship, protection, and fundamental rights of expression.

The problematics of voice and space

At present the ideal of "safe" space and equal voice does not exist for both students and instructors alike. As bell hooks points out:

> Critical feminist writings that focused on issues of difference and voice have made important theoretical interventions, calling for a recognition of the primacy of voices that are often silenced, censored, or marginalized. (173)

Obviously, the teacher needs to recognize that students from marginalized groups enter classrooms within institutions where historically, their voices have been neither heard nor welcomed (regardless of whether these students discuss facts or provide personal experiences). Thus, creating classroom communities where there is respect for individual voices requires that students feel free to talk—and talk back. This may often prove counterproductive when students embrace the right to voice but do so without accepting responsibility for their voice. Critical feedback, which is essential to the voicing process, results in a barrage of negative commentary employed to devalue and effectively silence any voice which is considered "limited." The classification of "limited" is usually rooted or invested in some underlying form of identity politics (Gunew) in which the only "valid" players are those "voices" representative by means of group membership, experience, theoretical disposition, or current affiliation in terms of activism.

Realizing that feedback is always critical, and more often "critical" is understood as "negative," the experience of instructors who educate for critical consciousness (Friere) are plagued with a number of interrelated issues when working to provide voice. Many students, especially students of colour, may not feel at all "safe" in what appears to be a neutral setting, as the concept of safe environment or space goes counter to all their experiences within the schooling process. Some students, especially students who have been conditioned to sit silently within the classroom—avoiding to draw attention to their own presence—may also feel uncomfortable with the concept of "space" given the historical climate to which they have learned to exist in the educative environment. Although it can be argued that the absence of feeling safe to voice has promoted prolonged silence or lack of student engagement in the classroom, it must also be recognized that shifting from a position of silence to a position of voice does not occur automatically. Students will need to "unlearn" past practices and "relearn" appropriate forms of "voice" which enhance inquiry in the classroom (hooks).

Who speaks, who listens, and why?

The call for acknowledgment and celebration of diverse voices in the classroom has been translated into three major questions: who speaks? who listens? and why? (hooks). The extreme responses to these questions fall under the designation of "authority of experience," "agency," and "representative voice." Two positions, "authority of experience" and "authenticity of voice"—diametrically opposed—are sources of conflict and polarity in the classroom.

Teachers who resort to the practice of only legitimating students' claims by means of "authority of experience" restrict student voices solely to their "lived experiences." All other knowledge claims or topics to which the student may wish to identify are placed out of reach, reinforcing the students' limited accessibility to other knowledge. Thus "authority of experience" as the only means of asserting voice, is a misuse of power that reaffirms the presence and right of students to speak by their experiences, while disenfranchising them from voicing in multiple ways on diverse topics. As hooks suggests, "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" (148).

The debate of voice and authenticity

The sudden pressure for identification of the speaker in feminist discourse under the rubric of authenticity has propelled a scathing attack by both minority women engaged in elite privilege as well as marginalized women. (The distinction here is consequential as positions of marginalization like other categories or classifications are also plagued with degrees of stratification and subsequently power). The need to identify the speaker becomes suspect when the concerns for location arise simultaneously as the concerns of marginalized women are voiced. The appearance of subverting the real issues of marginalized women by questions of authenticity of voice, and appropriation, relinquishes responsibility for past injustices while recreating new obstacles for marginalized women to address. This form of restructuring issues compounds past injustices by addressing questions central to the right of access, with responses formulated under the guise of authenticity and appropriation. Instead of responding to the concerns of marginalized women the debate becomes trivialized by questions of whose voice should speak for whom and how representative the

voices are which are being heard. Never is the issue addressed as to why questions of "authenticity" only emerge when positions of white-privilege and authority are challenged.

Where do we go from here?

Striving for equity in the women's studies classroom is a starting point for redefining the educative environment for all learners. The complexity and dynamics of issues involving "space" and "voice" are constantly changing. Hence there are no absolute solutions. We propose deconstructing, or "unpacking," the idea of "safe space" in order to create a viable alternative or a set of alternatives that have some negotiable spaces from which to critically explore issues of import to the class and to ourselves. As Angela McRobbie notes:

> Allowing for this kind of gender space-for-difference makes teaching and research a more exciting project. It forces us to ask all the time why are we teaching this, does it still apply, is it relevant to our students. (9)

Furthermore, it is necessary to recognize that "the engaged voice must never be fixed and absolute but always changing, always evolving in dialogue with a world beyond itself." (hooks 11). This is perhaps a beginning point from which issues of space and voice can be challenged, interrogated, rethought, and implemented so that students and instructors alike can address issues confronting the politics of equity in the classroom. As Ng *et al.* suggests, "we need to create spaces for students to interrogate existing paradigms and explore alternative ones, and to support them in other endeavors" (44). We also need to constantly interrogate our own presupposed ways of acting, thinking, and being in the world.

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