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Applying Feminist Perspectives to Teaching Diversity:
The Experiences of Two Female Professors

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ABSTRACT. In this paper, we narratively describe our perspectives and experiences as two female professors teaching courses on family diversity. We begin by outlining our subjectivities, including an explicit identification of the ways in which our identities are privileged versus not privileged. We then use a feminist lens to discuss the teaching goals and strategies used in our courses. The teaching goals discussed in this paper include: self-awareness of the instructor, reducing hierarchy in the classroom, empowering students, and caring for the individual student. Our strategies include: promoting dialogue, encouraging respect, and creating a class environment in which individuals feel safe enough to disagree. The paper concludes with a discussion of how instructors can use self-disclosures and personal experiences in their classes to help reduce the power hierarchy and facilitate learning. We recommend that every classroom in higher education be inclusive and respectful of diversity, which would perhaps increase the retention of all students.

“We all should know that diversity makes for a rich tapestry, and we must understand that all the threads of the tapestry are equal in value no matter what their color.”-Maya Angelou

Introduction

Teaching students about culturally diverse families can be challenging. In order to move past the “tourist” or etic approach to a more reflective or emic understanding, instructors might consider applying a feminist perspective to the teaching of diversity. A feminist perspective involves being self-aware, promoting equality and respect by reducing hierarchy, empowering students to become more aware of how their assumptions and actions affect others, and caring for students in their learning process (Blaisure & Koivunen, 2003). In this paper, two female professors narratively describe how they have applied feminist principles and strategies to teaching classes on diversity. The paper begins with an identification of subjectivities because as instructors, we must be aware of how our personal characteristics influence the classroom setting.

Identification of Subjectivities

Biases or subjectivities emerge through socialization and can influence student-teacher interactions (e.g., Anderson & Middleton, 2005). Therefore, it is imperative for both students and

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teachers to identify their subjectivities and consciously reflect upon how they influence their work. As professors and authors of this paper, we will explicitly identify our subjectivities and encourage our students and audience members to do the same. We reflect upon our statuses and identify those that are privileged versus those that are not. If we have a goal of challenging the existing system of oppression, we must first recognize our role in maintaining the system (Megivern, 2005).

Roudi. Born in Tehran, Iran, my family immigrated to North Vancouver, Canada when I was five years old. My parents moved to Canada in order to give their children greater opportunities. They were especially concerned for me because I was their only daughter and they did not want me to grow up oppressed by a regime that did not respect the rights of women. I grew up aware of the fact that my parents left an upper middle class life-style, where my mom did not work and my father owned his own company, only to face many barriers in a new country where they had limited language skills. My parents worked two to three jobs during my adolescence and they have always promoted a hard work ethic in me and my siblings. I attended the University of British Columbia for both my Bachelors in Psychology and my Masters degree in Family Studies. I left Canada at 27, which is ironically the age my mother left Iran, to pursue a Ph.D. at Kansas State University. I am currently working as a second year tenure-tracked assistant professor in a Family Studies and Human Services Department. I know that I am privileged to have received an education and to have been raised by two parents who have always supported me, emotionally and financially. I am also privileged in that I am young, heterosexual, and able-bodied. However, there are aspects of my identity that are not privileged, which include my gender and skin tone.

Kelly. I am a 33-year old woman who was born and raised in Vancouver, Canada. My father was born in Greece and my mother is of British descent, but born in Vancouver. When I was seven years old, my parents divorced. After the divorce, I was raised by my mother and my father's mother (e.g., my Greek grandma or yiayia). I grew up in a low income family but the importance of education was strongly emphasized. As such, I was the first in my family to graduate from college and the only member of my family to hold an advanced degree. After completing my Bachelors and Masters programs at the University of British Columbia, I moved to the southern U.S. to complete my Ph.D. at the University of Georgia. I am currently working in my fourth year as a tenure track professor of Psychology and Human Development in southern California. In terms of privilege, I recognize that my status as a young, educated, heterosexual, able-bodied Caucasian individual is associated with certain advantages in society. I also recognize that my gender, religious/spiritual orientation (i.e., non-Christian), and childhood socioeconomic status (SES) represent minority identities in terms of power and privilege.

Goals of Feminist Teaching

As previously mentioned, we hold statuses of both privilege and non privilege in our lives. However, as instructors, we are perceived as having privilege and power with respect to our students. We have attended to issues of power in the classroom by applying aspects of feminism in our teaching philosophies. There are several goals pertaining to feminist teaching that address the issues of power dynamics in the classroom. In this paper, we focus on four of these goals

(i.e., self-awareness of the instructor, reducing hierarchy, empowering students, and caring for the individual student) and describe how each pertains to our courses.

Self-Awareness of the Instructor

Self-awareness is an important practice not only for the instructor, but also for students enrolled in family diversity courses (Allen & Farnsworth, 1993). In all human interactions, it is imperative to be aware of how we come across to others, and in order to accurately convey a message, we should try to understand how the audience views the messenger. Self-awareness is also important in terms of recognizing the situations in which we feel comfortable versus those in which we feel uneasy.

Roudi. According to the US Census Bureau (2010), and as a person of Middle Eastern descent, I am categorized as White. I, however, do not see myself as White, and have had plenty of negative experiences indicating that others do not see me as White either. At the beginning of the semester, I conduct a class activity that involves flashing pictures of diverse individuals on the screen and asking students to write down three characteristics for each individual. I include a picture of myself in these slides. Once the slides are shown, I ask students to share some of the characteristics they wrote down. When we discuss my picture, students tend to agree that I am a female, but they also identify me as either Latina or Indian (from India). For me, this activity confirms what I already know: although the Census classifies me as White, I do not fit in with the dominant group in terms of physical characteristics. My goal is to help students identify and reflect upon their impressions of others, and demonstrate how easy it is to make incorrect assumptions.

Kelly. One of the first things students notice is my strong Canadian accent. I feel that the etic or outsider identity benefits my teaching because it helps me foster connections with students. Although this seems contradictory, the objective stance works well in classes such as Race and Racism that address controversial topics. Given that I do not feel as emotionally attached to the material being presented, I am able to discuss controversial issues with a degree of comfort. I am also genuinely interested in understanding diverse perspectives on the issues, in part because I have not already formulated my own strong opinions. To provide one concrete example: In my class, I state that throughout history, U.S. politicians have promoted racist agendas to win elections. Some students react harshly to this information and suspiciously ask, "Who do you vote for?" My response is that as a Canadian citizen, I do not currently have the right to vote in the U.S., but I believe voters should examine the policies and principles of each candidate, rather than aligning with one party. This information seems to relax the students and helps us continue building rapport, which is essential if students are going to challenge their existing schemas (Marger, 2011).

Reducing Hierarchy

Reducing hierarchy in the classroom is an important goal in feminist teaching (Blaisure & Koivunen, 2003). By reducing the power hierarchy, students feel more involved in their learning experiences. They also feel more comfortable expressing their viewpoints without fear of judgment.

Roudi. On the first day of class, I tell students that we are all here as learners, including myself. Although I am the professor on record, I want them to know that we have come to this place with different experiences and that each person can contribute to the learning environment. Where better than in an institution of higher learning can we discuss what we hold to be true? In addition to examining our belief systems, we also assess the source of our schemas, and identify how our schema have been shaped by dominant norms. By informing my students that I intend to learn from them, just as they expect to learn from me, it is my hope that they perceive some reduction in the hierarchy of professor-expert and student-learner.

Kelly. In my syllabus, I include the sentence “It is expected that everyone is putting forth their best effort in this class”, and I include examples to illustrate how the students *and* professor accomplish this goal. Typically, instructors outline expectations for their students only, but by communicating the ways in which the instructor is also putting forth effort, students may come to understand how each individual is responsible for contributing to an optimal learning environment. Examples of ways the instructor puts forth his/her best effort include providing a clear syllabus and outline of the course, offering ways to engage the material in class, structuring assignments and exams to fulfill the learning objectives, encouraging questions in class, being responsive to students, being available outside of class, treating all students equally, and providing supplemental resources to the class. Other methods that are used to reduce hierarchy include taking class votes (e.g., “Do you prefer to have a video or lecture next class?”), soliciting feedback from students about their preferred methods of learning, and having student panel sessions in which they earn extra credit for discussing their experiences as members of a self-identified cultural group.

Empowering Students

It is important for all students to have a voice in the classroom. By involving and challenging students, feminist teachers can empower them to become actively engaged with their learning process (Allen, Floyd-Thomas, & Gillman, 2001). When students are engaged in their own learning a greater sense of accountability is created.

Roudi. Even though I tell my students from the very beginning that I hope to learn from them, I reiterate this point throughout the course and implement procedures and activities that acknowledge it. For example, I will often have students give themselves and their group members’ participation points on an activity in class and I honor their points. Using this system, I have found that students who do not participate very much (as indicated by other group members or from my own observations) often give themselves low scores.

Kelly. In my classes, students can select from a variety of assignments and readings in order to cater the course to their diverse needs. For example, in one of my classes, a major project involves reading autobiographies related to culture (e.g., *The Color of Water*, *The Delaney Sisters*, *Rain of Gold*) and commenting on how concepts from the course are addressed in the books. Students select from a list of books for this assignment and can apply concepts from any of the assigned (and optional) readings provided to the class. I additionally have a policy whereby points on an exam or assignment can be contested, as long as students provide evidence to support their perspective. In this way, students not only learn more about the course

material by searching for empirical support, but they have power and control over their learning process.

Caring for the Individual Students

Caring for students as individuals should be a goal of all teachers in order to ensure that their students grow and achieve their potential in the classroom (Cornelius-White, 2007). A positive student-teacher relationship is predictive of academic success, particularly for ethnic minority students (denBrok & Levy, 2005). Professors should therefore do as much as possible to foster and maintain personal connections with their students.

Roudi. I recognize the value in learning students' names and make it a point to do so in every class I teach. I also make efforts to read everything and anything they write for class. Their writings typically include personal disclosures, which I try to validate in my written comments and feedback to them. I also spend time during my first class session acknowledging that many of my students have multiple responsibilities outside of school (e.g., jobs, children), but I make it clear that they are as much a part of the learning process in my class as I am. I encourage them to take an active role by having regular check-ins. These check-ins are anonymous comments that I collect at the end of class where students can tell me how they are doing with certain assignments, content, or whatever they care to share with me. I read these comments, look for common themes, and address their feedback in class. Throughout this process, I acknowledge what they like, dislike, and would like to have changed in the course, and do my best to implement their recommendations.

Kelly. In order to build rapport with my students, I have them complete an assessment in which they identify their preferred methods of learning and respond to personal questions, such as identifying their favorite music artists or songs. I then design the course according to their preferred methods (e.g., discussion groups, lecture) and play their favorite music prior to the start of each class. For example, I go through their assessments and tabulate the most commonly requested songs/artists, and then play 1-2 selections prior to class and during our break. My students are also encouraged to supply photos for class. Each day, prior to lecture, I show 3-5 photos from different students, which have been sent to me by email. The students are called upon to provide a description for each of their photos. I believe this approach helps build a sense of community within the classroom, which ultimately facilitates learning. I also conclude each class with inspiring quotes that have been provided by students through our class website.

Teaching Strategies

Teaching about diversity can be difficult and we have often discussed how to reach students in order to truly make a difference. For example, how can we talk about the oppression of ethnic minority groups when the classroom is composed solely of the ethnic majority (i.e., Caucasian individuals)? In such cases, do students understand the realities of what is going on for others? Are we just building and/or supporting the stereotypes our students have of minority groups? And, how do we talk about the oppression of minority groups in the U.S. when the majority of students in our classes categorize themselves as part of these minority groups (e.g., African American, Latino American)? For example, in southern California, Latino students may be the numerical ethnic majority in our classes, so we must hold a discussion about the term

minority as referring to power rather than numbers. And, how do we hold a discussion about unity within minority groups when individuals in those groups perceive of themselves as distinct? These are the questions we have asked of ourselves and each other. Our teaching strategies evolved from these questions and have been guided by the feminist perspective. Some of the strategies we currently use in our classrooms are discussed below.

Promoting Dialogue

We believe that by promoting dialogue, we empower students to be more involved in their learning process. Promoting dialog can be difficult at first, but once trust and respect amongst students and instructor are established, it becomes an important aspect of each lecture. This strategy facilitates learning both in- and outside the classroom.

Roudi. One of my favorite learning tools involves incorporating video clips from the news or YouTube into class. I find that clips related to race/ethnicity and/or social class issues generate an enormous amount of dialogue. At the beginning of the semester, I ask students a couple of questions about what they have just viewed and students usually express a singular view. I try to encourage further dialogue by pointing out an alternative perspective. I also tell my students that I am not always arguing in favor of what I might personally believe, but if I see the class is only seeing the world from one view, I will present another view to help them understand multiple perspectives. As the semester goes on, students start to naturally discuss the multiple perspectives associated with each video clip.

Kelly. When I teach classes that pertain to controversial or sensitive topics, many students feel uncomfortable expressing their opinions. Therefore, I create multiple forums for discussion. Students are encouraged to submit comments and questions through our class web site, where they can dialogue with each other in a more safe setting. I also solicit anonymous feedback at various points in the semester so that students can voice their opinions and ask questions they are too shy or embarrassed to ask in class. Many times, I purposely refrain from providing my perspective so that the students can respond to each other's comments and questions.

Encouraging Respect

Encouraging equality and respect of all individuals and families is an important part of feminist teaching (Allen & Baber, 1992). In our classes, we outline the difference between research and opinion based information. When students are expressing an opinion, or listening to the opinions of others, we describe strategies to use that encourage respect.

Roudi. In my courses, respect is an issue we discuss on the very first day. I simply say "in this class I do not expect anyone to agree with me or any classmates' views, but I do expect that you respect all individuals in this class and their rights to have their own views." I also add that I will step in if anyone is being disrespectful but if I ever miss something said or if my students feel uncomfortable with anything that happens in the classroom, I encourage them to come see me or send me an e-mail. When students come to me with issues from class, I ask if they would personally like to handle the situation or if they prefer that I address it as an issue

with the entire class. It is important for me to act as an advocate for my students, but at the same time, I do not want to take away their voices.

Kelly. At the beginning of the semester, I outline four ground rules for class: everyone is expected to 1) express themselves concisely and with respect, 2) express their *own* opinion only, and not speak on behalf of other people, even members of their own cultural group, 3) let everyone have a chance to speak (i.e., do not dominate the discussion), and 4) listen to others with respect because each opinion is equally valid. If these ground rules are violated, I remind the students as a whole that we agreed to abide by these rules. If one student consistently violates the rules, I email or meet with him or her in person. I also provide guidelines in the syllabus stating that “Differing opinions can be expressed in ways that communicate respect. Examples of how to respect others include listening when others talk, talking one person at a time, speaking only for oneself, and not engaging in side conversations.”

Safe Enough to Disagree

Encouraging equality and respect not only makes the classroom feel safe for students to disclose information, but can also create an environment in which students feel comfortable disagreeing with issues and ideas (Blaisure & Koivunen, 2003). We believe it is the instructor’s role to facilitate discussions where all students’ voices are heard. The instructor must also remain engaged in order to navigate discussions that may veer off to a disrespectful place.

Roudi. Unlike the old proverb that if you have nothing nice to say don’t say anything at all, I actually encourage my students to say what they are thinking or feeling, but to first reflect on how they are going to say it. I believe students need to engage in discussion where sides are taken, but more importantly they need to learn how to do so in a respectful manner. I encourage this with the following statement in my syllabus “There will be opportunities to participate via questions and comments in classes. I will give participation credits to students who stand out in this regard.” At the beginning of the semester, students often tread carefully not wanting to disagree, but once the first student does (and when that happens they usually keep their eyes directly on me), there is somewhat of a snowball effect. As the students become more familiar with each other, they begin turning their bodies to face the person they disagree with. This is a powerful moment where students start to feel it is okay for them to disagree. By the end of the semester, however, students from diverse backgrounds learn they have more in common with other students than they thought. This goal is primarily achieved through in-class self-expression.

Kelly. One method I use to encourage the articulation of different viewpoints is to validate student comments. When differences of opinion are expressed in class, I use phrases such as “yes, good” and “thank you for sharing” to validate their perspectives. When I read about differences of opinion on the course web site, I refrain from adding my own commentary and instead post notes like “I enjoy reading about your diverse perspectives” or “I am learning a lot from reading your comments.” If I find that students are making prejudiced or judgmental remarks, either in class or online, I ask for elaboration (e.g., “What do you mean by that?”) and I may also ask for supporting evidence. This approach often enables students to recognize the inappropriateness of their remarks (e.g., based on stereotypes), without requiring my formal intervention.

Self-Disclosure and Personal Experiences

Self-disclosure by the instructor can be an important strategy in feminist teaching (Allen & Farnsworth, 1993). By sharing information from our own lives, we reduce the power hierarchy and allow students to see us as daughters, sisters, wives, and friends. This process enables our students to develop a sense of connection and realize they have something in common with us.

Self-Disclosure of the Instructor

Roudi. Yes I do it, but it is done in a calculated way! At first, I talk about my husband and refer to him as my “partner.” Although this term is commonly used in Canada, it is most often used by non-heterosexual individuals in the United States. In one of my earlier teaching experiences, during a discussion on same-sex parents and child outcomes, a student told me I was biased because I was a lesbian. I smiled and felt no need to correct her on her assumption. I only stated that my discussion was based on research and not personal opinion. I continue to use the term “partner” because I feel that it is more inclusive. I also make mention of the fact that I am in a bi-racial marriage and incorporate examples from my relationship into class, when appropriate. I found that my willingness to disclose certain things to my students has led to richer discussions in which students have also shared their own personal experiences more readily.

Kelly. I encourage my students to ask questions about my personal life. If they ask a question that I prefer not to answer, or that is too personal, I simply say so. On the first day of class, I provide some general information about myself, much like what is outlined in the subjectivities section above. But throughout the semester, I incorporate additional stories from my own life into class to illustrate the course material. I also show some of my personal photos so the students can get to know me on a deeper level. I make a point of telling my students that I come from a low income family, that I am a first generation college student, and that I worked full time throughout my academic degrees. These characteristics are shared by many of my students and help us connect with each other, which ultimately facilitates learning.

Personal Experience of Students

Over the years we have come to learn that no class, regardless of how many times we have taught the content, is ever exactly the same. This is largely because our students bring very different personal experiences to the classroom each semester. Given the nature of our courses and the teaching strategies we apply the personal experiences of our students becomes a crucial part of our classes.

Roudi. Although I am often surprised at the level of self-disclosure that goes on during class discussions, the tool that is most useful for self-disclosure is journal writing. I was given this idea by my colleague, Kelly, who noted that students can use their journals to reflect on classes and readings. Most students want their journals returned once they have been reviewed and completion points have been recorded, which demonstrates the degree of honesty used in their writing. Typically, their final entries include reflections about their previous entries. They feel surprised to see evidence of personal growth throughout the semester.

Kelly. As noted above, I have used journals to encourage self-reflection in a number of classes. I vividly remember one student asking in his journal “Do you already know I am gay? I am unsure if people can tell.” I was the first person to whom he had “come out.” In addition to journaling, students may disclose information to the entire class when they speak on one of our minority group panels. The panels consist of up to six students and are held for every unit we cover. Panelists respond to the following questions: 1) When did you first become aware of your cultural group and/or stereotypes associated with your group?, 2) Have you been personally affected by prejudice and/or racism and/or what specific experiences may have affected your attitude, sense of competency, and self-esteem?, and 3) What suggestions can you offer this class to encourage mutual respect among various groups? Students are often very candid and thoughtful in their reflections and as a result, we gain a great deal from these sessions.

Conclusion

We feel privileged to teach students about culturally diverse families, not because we see ourselves as experts in the field, but because the content area creates a rich classroom experience that we have enjoyed for years. We hope to construct a classroom that is inclusive of everyone, and that enables our students to develop a greater sense of themselves and others. The goals we outlined in this paper are especially important for universities that experience problems retaining minority students. Perhaps if classrooms were more inclusive and respectful of diversity, the retention of all students would be higher.

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R. Roudi Nazarinia Roy Bio

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