

Gendered Spaces: Examples of Feminist Pedagogy¹
By Linda Hoeptner Poling, Ph.D.
Kent State University
(lhoeptne@kent.edu)

Having roots in feminism, feminist pedagogy is based on the central tenet that all human experiences are tempered by gender and are therefore not immune to social dictates of cultural expectations. The goals of feminist pedagogy in seeking gender equity include empowerment of students, creating community or communal classroom spaces, and shared leadership. According to feminist scholars in art education (Garber, Sandell, Stankiewicz, & Risner, 2007; Rosenberg & Thurber, 2007) teachers should treat students as individuals, necessarily upholding the feminist goal of creating equitable conditions for male and female students. This paper shares the outcome of two case studies of women art educators that exemplify feminist pedagogy and equitable practice in action.

There is no lack of discussion about gender and feminism in the field. Those concerned with gender issues and feminist pedagogy in art education often talk about what feminist pedagogy *should* be; but rarely do we see *how* it takes form in our practice. Understanding how gender impacts art teaching and learning can improve how we make sense of our experiences in striving to be more equitable art educators who establish a sense of community and collaboration. Empowerment of both boys and girls to reach their full potential, as learners and stakeholders in society, are goals toward which equitable educators work. They promote gender awareness and critical thinking within their curricula, with a focus on positions of privilege and power in connection to gender. Understanding what forms feminist pedagogy takes was the aim of my two case studies of self-proclaimed feminist art teachers.

Research Framework

Data were collected over seven months during the 2007-2008 academic year in an attempt to answer the research question *how do art teachers conceptualize and negotiate issues of gender related to their practice?* Both teachers studied are National Art Education Association Women's Caucus Carrie Nordlund Award recipients, an award that recognizes the practice of feminist pedagogy in PreK-12 art classrooms. Ways in which art teachers Jessica and Grace² applied principles of feminist pedagogy in their classrooms are the foci of this paper.

I observed Jessica in her suburban high school and Grace in her rural elementary art room. Mixed gender and abilities characterized students at both schools. The majority of students were Caucasian and of lower- to middle-class socio-economic status. Working from my field notes and interviews, I described and analyzed the gender dynamics, focusing particularly on teacher-student conversations, whole class discussions and critiques of both artists' and students' works.

¹ The complete version of this paper will appear in the forthcoming M. L. Buffington & S. Wilson McKay (Eds.) *Practice Theory: Seeing the Power of Teacher Researchers*

² Pseudonyms have been assigned.

Findings and Discussion

Safe Spaces: Courage in the Controversial

Both Jessica and Grace took, in their minds, *necessary* risks in cultivating a safe classroom climate that confronted—not ignored—the controversial, including incidents related to gender. Concerning controversial art, Jessica recalled being asked by a student, “are you sure that you are supposed to be showing us this kind of art?” For example, Jessica showed contemporary versions of Leonardo da Vinci’s *Last Supper* (1495-8) with Jesus Christ and the apostles replaced by the heads of women artists (*Some Living American Women Artists/Last Supper* [1972], by Mary Beth Edelson, <http://www.marybethedelson.com/content/posters.html>) and superheroes (Don Wilkinson’s *The Last Superhero Supper* [2006], <http://lastsuppers.blogspot.com/2008/12/last-superhero-supper.html>). Within the context of showing and discussing the gender issues both overt and latent within the images, Jessica expressed her realization that she felt very comfortable taking important risks within the classroom. She said, “I easily made decisions that were in the students’ best interest even if it meant taking a bit of flack from fellow teachers, administrators and the community.” I observed Jessica repeatedly establishing a safe atmosphere in which inquiry about controversial contemporary issues took place.

Similarly, in a sixth-grade lesson, Grace took a courageous risk in showing and teaching Judy Chicago’s controversial feminist piece *The Dinner Party* (1974-9). She distributed paper plates. On one side was the name of a female artist; on the other, the name of a male artist. She asked the students first, “Who knows the female artist named on your plate?” Two out of twenty-two students recognized the female artists. Grace then asked the students to flip their plate over, and said “Raise your hand if you know this male artist.” Eleven students now knew the artists. This activity initiated a lively discussion. Grace posed the question, “why is it that we know more male artists than female artists?” Students’ answers varied: “men did more things in history than women;” “we study men more;” “women didn’t have the same rights that men did, so they couldn’t do the same things.” Grace followed this discussion with a viewing of *The Dinner Party*, explaining that Chicago’s goal was to symbolize and highlight women who have done important things, but have been minimized in and erased or omitted altogether from history. Grace followed the discussion with a studio challenge: to explore the “branches” and “roots” of those that have inspired the students in their lives, resulting in drawings titled “Plant the Seed” to symbolize the inspirational person’s impact on students’ personal growth and development. This lesson was a very personal, powerful, and visibly feminist way of connecting art curriculum to gender issues. She, like Jessica, did not shy away from showing or discussing controversial subjects.

Pluralist and Separatist Practice

In both classroom spaces, I observed the fostering of gender equity through *pluralist* and *separatist* practices. Pluralist teachers recognize *diverse* viewpoints (Collins & Sandell, 1992). The separatist approach is characterized by highlighting

gender issues, particularly of women, *separately* and in isolation from existing mainstream (male dominated) art content (Rosenberg & Thurber, 2007).³ I observed the separatist approach in action particularly in the feminist art criticism both Jessica and Grace conducted as a means to teach feminist principles. Jessica's students, for example, were very familiar with the politically charged work of The Guerilla Girls whose work aims to expose the gender inequity in women artists' visibility in mainstream art venues. Both Jessica and Grace consciously worked toward correcting the gendered notion that women serve as objects—instead of producers—of art and culture through critiques of art and student art. As such, Jessica and Grace confidently shared with students societal obstacles, constructs, and biases associated with gender identity, particularly in the art world, and ways to overcome them. During my observations of them conducting critiques and introducing lessons, I witnessed a distinct disposition in which Jessica and Grace expressed no hesitancy or tentativeness when discussing issues of gender. For example, Grace shared a conversation she had with a male student: “I had a student say to me that his mom in his house was his maid; that's what his mom is for. I responded, ‘your mother is more than that, and I don't even know your mother.’ I said something like ‘mothers do *this*, and mothers do *that*, or you know, and I was pretty disgusted with him, and I let him know that; my opinion.” Grace also stated, “I try to project a strong woman, an intelligent woman, an artistic creative woman.” Her way of being and conceptualizing her gender tacitly and concretely communicated to her students that both women and men matter in the world and art world. According to Brookfield (1995), democratic discourse associated with such pluralist as well as separatist approaches to teaching is characterized as the ability to talk, listen, and respond respectfully to those who hold differing views. This ability certainly characterized Grace's and Jessica's teaching.

Critically Reflective Practice as Part of Feminist Pedagogy

When we critically reflect, we confront taken-for-granted beliefs and assumptions and consciously engage with ideas and our resulting actions through reflection (Brookfield, 1995). In my study, it was clear that both Jessica and Grace take a critically reflective stance toward how they teach within the framework of feminist pedagogy. They possess a personally reflective “habit,” which, I believe, provided a buffer against the risk of making potentially poor or controversial decisions that could lead to community, parental, or administrative objections to course content. What made Jessica's and Grace's reflection particularly critical is two-fold: reflection as illumination of power, and reflection as an aid in recognizing hegemonic assumptions (Brookfield, 1995).

The character of Jessica's and Grace's critical reflection illustrates the recommendation of Garber et. al (2007) for conceptualizing gender equity. They propose that we define goals of feminist teaching practice as something fluid, flexible, and inclusive. Over the course of my study, Jessica and Grace's reflections were at times shared verbally in broad and sweeping terms; other times, their reflections were more specific and contextually bound, yet connected to a broader social context. One such

³ For more detailed explanations of the pluralist and separatist approaches to teaching, see Collins & Sandell, 1992; Rosenberg & Thurber, 2007; and Zimmerman, 1990.

example shows how Grace's critical reflection is fueled by her students' individual stories as well as by larger societal conditions. She shared with me during an interview that reading students' dreams as expressed in their written texts interwoven in their visual images through Aborigine Dreamtime-inspired journey drawings moved her. She internalized and critically reflected upon the feelings of powerlessness the students felt in their lives. Her critical reflection on this resulted in a renewed impetus to give students empowered voice, a key feminist principle (Garber et. al, 2007).

Art Teachers as Transformative Intellectuals

Giroux (1988) recommends reconceptualizing the work of teachers as something transformative. Through feminist pedagogy, Jessica and Grace advance and affirm their commitment to issues of equity in the art room. This transformative intellectualism enhances in turn students' critical powers. Both teachers treated their students as individual critical agents with voices, ideas, and visions capable of impacting their own lives and the lives of others. In her Carrie Nordlund Award acceptance speech, Grace addressed transformation achieved with students: "Our knowledge combined with our students' knowledge is transformative knowledge. If it's shared, connected, linked with others, we are all better for it."

A visible example of transformative intellectualism in action was Grace's "The Power of an Image: Chief Wahoo" bulletin board. Chief Wahoo is the controversial Cleveland Indians baseball team logo well loved by many and hated by others who deem it racist in nature. She encouraged students to post their opinions on the board for all to read. This open invitation to democratically express an opinion is potentially transformative, reinforcing in students that their voice matters among countless other voices.

Positioning through Radical Love

Also transformative in nature, Jessica and Grace practice the critical pedagogy notion of "radical love," whereby, "[n]othing is impossible when we work in solidarity with love, respect, and justice as our guiding lights... Love is the basis of an education that seeks justice, equality, and genius" (Kincheloe, 2004, p. 3). Both Grace and Jessica worked in tacit ways to confront the zeitgeist of the current wars in which the United States is involved, terrorism, and ultra-(American) patriotism. They allowed and encouraged the expression of opinions about the war within student artwork. Both Grace and Jessica with loving verve taught the visual tools, language, and thinking skills that promote confidence in freely expressing opinions and feelings, often of a very personal nature. I observed numerous student artworks that boldly expressed their confusion of being children in a time of war; of being confused by the reasons for war; and of visualizing a time of peace.

Jessica and Grace both believe in a central tenet of critical pedagogy, to create knowledge that works to reduce human suffering (Kincheloe, 2004). Through expressions of radical love the teachers openly expressed to their students a vision of elimination of gender inequity as well as other social ills.

Conclusion: The Complications of Feminist Pedagogy

Feminist pedagogy is complicated, as is making sense of the gendered spaces art teachers create in classrooms. With sustained engagement and commitment to attending to gender dynamics with openness to the belief that gender differences exist and do matter, we can create equitable, empowering, and transformative learning in spaces where individual voice is nurtured and honored. Jessica and Grace revealed how they created safe spaces and dealt with controversy. Each taught through pluralist and separatist lenses and each reflected critically on her teaching practice. They embodied what it means to be a transformative intellectual, and each practiced radical love. These are qualities of feminist pedagogy that deserve closer examination.

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