

Feminist Pedagogy

2011 Carrie Nordlund pre-K-12 Feminist Pedagogy Award Speech

Nan Waterstreet

I want to thank the Women's Caucus of NAEA for honoring me with this award. By recognizing me in this way, the school that I teach at, as well as my district, has received positive attention from the press. At a time when public schools and teachers are often devalued, it has been a great help in advocating for the arts, and I appreciate the opportunity to be a part of something larger.

I'd also like to thank my colleagues and advisors that have nominated me for this award. I am in constant awe of their brilliant minds and ways of thinking about art and society, and I have learned so much from each and every one of them.

In preparing for this presentation, I referred to an article by Craig Roland from the University of Florida for tips on making a presentation memorable. To avoid long wordy excerpts, he suggested imagining that each word in your Power Point is costing you \$50. I'm afraid on this first slide alone, I would have already spent over 7000 dollars. (Quote by Pearl S. Buck: *The truly creative mind in any field is no more than this: A human creature born abnormally, inhumanly sensitive. To him... a touch is a blow, a sound is a noise, a misfortune is a tragedy, a joy is an ecstasy, a friend is a lover, a lover is a god, and failure is death. Add to this cruelly delicate organism the overpowering necessity to create, create, create -- so that without the creating of music or poetry or books or buildings or something of meaning, his very breath is cut off from him. He must create, must pour out creation. By some strange, unknown, inward urgency he is not really alive unless he is creating.*). But, I wanted to begin with this quote, which is my favorite of all quotes on creativity, because it illustrates the sensitivity that goes along with the field of art, and the importance it has in my approach to teaching. Feminist pedagogy encourages an empathetic understanding of students, and also guides me in meeting my students where they are in the present moment.

So, as I begin my "15 minutes of fame" in explaining the influences of feminism on my teaching practice, I'd like to begin with a brief personal story, which I refer to as...Stuff. We all have stuff affecting us everyday. I think of "stuff" as the things weighing you down, the things that may distract you from what you are trying to accomplish, the things that make the day a little rougher to get through when trying to be productive.

We all have those times in our lives when the stuff hits extra hard, and my time was December of 2001.

This is my mom. When I think of the great feminists in history, there are so many great women, and men, that have supported feminist causes, but my mother was the

most instrumental in shaping my outlook. I'd like to share a story with you from 1968, when I was in third grade. Many of you will not remember a time when girls and women did not wear pants or jeans in public, but my mother decided that I had that right. You could not run to the store and search through racks of pants for girls and women, so my mother bought a pattern, let me choose some fabric, and in typical third grade fashion, I chose a rather hideous windowpane checkered material in red white and blue. My mother sewed a pantsuit for me, with a long zippered tunic; and when it was finished, it was time for the test. As I dressed in the morning for school, my mother instructed me that the principal might call her to come pick me up during the day, but for me to not to worry, that she would be right there if need be. At the time, I didn't understand the statement we were making by this act of wearing pants, or how brave my mom was being by questioning the status quo, but I look back on this story with admiration for her activism. I can still remember her waiting by the door when I got off the bus, and asking, "Did the principal say anything?" and telling her, "Yes, Mrs. Johnson saw me, and she said she liked my outfit." How fortunate I was to have a principal that also supported feminism.

Well, moving on, to the story of my stuff, we're back to December of 2001. My mother, this strong and loving presence in my life, this influential feminist, passed away. She had entered the hospital on my birthday, and died a week later. Grief and loss take a toll on any life, and can make it difficult to carry on with day-to-day matters, but I had other stresses also happening at that time.

In December of 2001, I was in the process of going through divorce, after almost 20 years of marriage, which led to my raising my three children, for the most part, on my own. Juggling their homework, their gymnastics classes, tae kwon do lessons, cross country meets, music concerts, was difficult, but I also had a resolve to keep them in their home to provide as much stability for them as possible during a time that was sure to be painful and difficult for them. This meant, although I was teaching art full time at an elementary school, I also took on freelance artwork on the side, to help make ends meet, while also taking classes at night, to finish up my Masters degree. Of course, this grueling pace was exhausting, but I also found out at this time that my exhaustion was also due to hypothyroidism, a condition that affects your metabolism and makes you physically exhausted and often depressed.

So, that's my rough time, my stuff. And I share this, not to expect pity, or to paint my life as so miserable, when I am well aware that there are horrific conditions and brave souls that are making great strides in their lives in conditions much worse than anything I will ever see. I share this stuff because it is what guides my teaching. Feminist pedagogy allows me to approach my students learning with the empathy and knowledge that we do not wear all our experiences on the surface. At any given moment, my students may have stuff that I cannot comprehend, and my resolve is to help them to learn in a safe and caring environment, where they know someone understands.

These principles of feminist pedagogy, from Webb, Allen and Walker, are pertinent descriptors of the themes that guide my teaching, and I will address each of them individually in the upcoming slides.

Reformation of the Student/Teacher Relationship: I believe in being a part of a democratic classroom, using questioning strategies with my students to encourage critical thinking skills, while encouraging them to teach each other, drawing on their own personal experiences, knowledge, and areas in which individually they each excel.

Empowerment: Last year, I piloted a choice-based teaching method with my students, with mixed results. I received much support from many parents and my principal, but I felt it was too difficult with choice-based teaching to include social justice learning that is so important to me personally, in art making. As Shrewsbury states, “While you can’t give away all power (it is a fact that the teacher grades and assesses and is in charge), the goal is to think of power as energy, capacity, and potential, rather than domination.” This year, I have concentrated on a mixed method of choice, some individual work, and many group projects, which has been positively received by the students and community. I think it is important to try new approaches and theories that hold promise in developing creativity, but to also reflect on what is best practice in your own community and provides the greatest opportunities for student learning.

Community. I have focused on building community with my art lessons, creating wall hangings that are woven stories of each student within the school, working across grade levels to piece together a “mystery” collage piece of Cassatt’s “The Bath,” chairing the position of Character Counts (a program designed to promote positive character traits), in which students pass around our duck mascot during the day when they spot another student exhibiting a thoughtful or positive character trait, and helping to develop our school community garden, by meeting with parents and landscape planners, and developing art lessons to promote sustainability and environmental concern.

Voice. I believe in privileging voice, understanding that students share their personal stories in various ways. While one student lovingly describes her older brother with humor, as “smelling like socks,” another student shares her anguish and pain of her parents’ divorce. Art making is a time for both humor and deep emotions, and I respect the emotions and experiences that shape my students’ work.

Diversity. In respecting the diversity of these experiences, I find it easy to encourage one of my Indian students to share her Mehdi after returning from a wedding celebration, and have her act as the teacher in describing how the henna is applied, and the importance the ritual is to her and her culture. I find it not so easy to understand the importance of sports and Justin Bieber to my students’ lives, but these, too, are a strong influence on their lives, and cannot just be discounted because of my lack of enthusiasm.

I encourage my students to challenge traditional views and perceived societal norms. In a recent lesson, while viewing Frida Kahlo's self-portraits, my third grade students initially expressed the opinion that she looks like a boy and is creepy. Together, we analyzed what makes us perceive her in that way, that heavy eyebrows are traditionally viewed as a male attribute, and that women are often expected to smile and appear welcoming. After reading a children's book to my students and discussing Kahlo's life and art making, the students' comments about her looks evolved into observations that her eyebrows were a sign of independence, that she didn't feel it was necessary to change her looks to please anyone else.

This final lesson that I would like to share with you involves my fifth graders and the current political upset in the Midwest involving the attack on unions and teachers' rights. Students viewed the French artist, JR's, work, which attempts to put a human face on conflict in areas of the world that are war-torn or struggling. Recognizing that we have a battle of ideals on our own home ground, we discussed bringing a face to this problem, not addressing the political aspects or rights and wrongs of the issue, but bringing it back to a human level. Titled "Faces of Teaching", each student chose part of his or her face to be photographed to represent a memorable moment in his or her schooling. The students will assemble the photographs on black paper in a montage, and then add quotes that describe these memorable moments. On completion, we are hoping to find a public venue to display the work.

All of these teaching moments have an influence on my research interests, which include ecofeminism, in which patriarchal systems are critically examined for their domination of nature, investigating ways in which the art room is influenced by consumerism and ways to promote a more sustainable existence, and ideas about the return to craft, how society may be moving away from cheap materials and throw away thinking to an emphasis on creating quality unique and special items that are, in fact, art.

In returning to the original quote by Pearl S. Buck, I would challenge you to recognize the sensitivity that is linked to being creative, that being thin-skinned and feeling things deeply can be a wonderful creative attribute, to attempt to put a face on those that anger you the most and recognize their humanity, and lastly, as my mother would say, "Be Kind."

Thank you.