

Subject-ivity in the Classroom: Feminism Meets Academe¹

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The literature of feminist pedagogy emphasizes the transformation of women from passive recipients of knowledge to active knowers who see themselves as agents of social change. This transformation is linked to consciousness-raising and experiential learning — as means to empower students. I here discuss problems encountered as a white, heterosexual teacher developing such pedagogical practices in the university classroom, showing how these problems are related to the unexamined epistemological basis of these practices. I show how an over-emphasis on subjective, experiential learning can lead to epistemological relativism as resistance to the hegemony of Eurocentric, academic feminism. Challenges to my authority as a white academic “expert” have led me to advocate a feminist pedagogy based on relational thinking that brings together subjective and objective dimensions of knowing. Ironically, this approach heightens rather than diminishes the contradictions we face as feminist teachers.

Les écrits sur la pédagogie féministe mettent l’accent sur la transformation des femmes, de réceptrices passives des connaissances à connaisseuses actives qui se voient comme des agentes des changements sociaux. Cette transformation est liée à la conscientisation et à l’apprentissage par l’expérience personnelle, deux moyens de responsabiliser les étudiants. L’auteure analyse des problèmes auxquels elle a à faire face en tant que professeure hétérosexuelle de race blanche ayant recours à de telles méthodes pédagogiques à l’université; elle explique comment ces problèmes sont reliés au fait que le fondement épistémologique de ces méthodes n’a pas été approfondi. Elle montre comment la trop grande importance accordée à l’apprentissage au moyen d’expériences subjectives peut mener à un relativisme épistémologique qui correspond à une forme de résistance à l’hégémonie du féminisme universitaire eurocentrique. La contestation de l’autorité de l’auteure en tant qu’“experte” universitaire de race blanche l’a amenée à prôner une pédagogie féministe reposant sur une pensée relationnelle qui conjugue les dimensions subjectives et objectives de la connaissance. Ironiquement, cette approche intensifie les contradictions auxquelles font face les professeuses féministes, plutôt que de les diminuer.

“Women’s studies” aims to transform women from objects to subjects of inquiry. In feminist research, this has meant “research by women, on women, for women” (Stanley & Wise, 1983, pp. 17–20).² Feminist research differs from that designated as mainstream in its use of methodologies that empower participants through inclusion in all stages of inquiry (see, for example, Klein, 1983; Mies, 1983; Ralph, 1988). Inclusion necessitates

rejection of the hierarchical relationships and proscriptions of objectivity characteristic of normal scientific practice. In teaching, the transformation of the student from passive recipient of “truth” to a subject actively engaged in constructing knowledge has become a central goal of feminist pedagogy. Adrienne Rich (1979) distinguishes between receiving and claiming an education: although receiving an education is to come into possession of; to act as receptacle or container for; to accept as authoritative or true—claiming an education is to take as rightful owner; to assert in the face of possible contradiction (p. 231). For women, Rich argued, this means refusing to let others do the thinking, talking and naming. Although this pedagogy finally challenges the conceptual separation of production (that is, through academic research) and transmission (that is, through teaching) of knowledge, I begin my inquiry with transmission.

The purpose of this paper is to share and to analyze problems I have encountered as a white, heterosexual teacher attempting to develop a feminist practice in the classroom. In order to make sense of my experiences, I review feminist criticism of traditional approaches to learning which lead to classroom practice that over-emphasizes reason while neglecting intuition and emotion. From this perspective, a number of writers suggest we abandon all prescriptions for objectivity in knowledge. In my own classroom, however, this notion of purely subjective knowledge often led to the claim that because all knowledge is relative no universally valid knowledge of women is possible. This relativism acted to hinder rather than to encourage sharing of knowledge among students. On that basis, I explore relational ways of knowing as an alternative, to connect subjective and objective knowledge. In this exploration I examine the role experience plays in the construction of theory, the relevance of theoretical knowledge for political struggle, and the problems arising from the institutionalization of feminism as an academic specialty.

Although anger aroused by curriculum in women’s studies is a response familiar to me as a feminist, my most difficult and worrisome moments as a feminist teacher concern anger that comes from the classroom—including teacher/student and student/student dynamics—rather than from course content.³ In the extreme, this anger led to an encounter during which unbridled emotion on the part of a handful of students threatened to create divisions within the class difficult to remedy through appeals to “reason.” As we shall see, I do not view this anger as a problem to be resolved simply through “proper” technique or teaching method. Rather, I view it as arising from contradictions inherent in the endeavour to bring feminism into the classroom. These contradictions led me to explore how attempts to reclaim subjectivity through experiential learning, as a goal of feminist pedagogy, raise important epistemological questions. Although debates about the efficacy of feminist theorizing are not new to the women’s movement,⁴ the collision of experiential and theoretical knowledge in the classroom has not yet received widespread consideration in published literature.⁵ As a contribution to the

emerging discussion of this issue, this paper moves beyond the question of classroom practice to an interrogation of both the current conditions under which we struggle to employ a feminist approach to learning and to the epistemological base of practice.

THE SUBJECT IN THE CLASSROOM: CHALLENGES TO OBJECTIVITY

By now, a large literature sketches out the characteristics of a distinctly feminist style of teaching in the classroom (see Klein, 1987). Although the notion of “critical” pedagogy for feminist teaching is ambiguous, Elizabeth Ellsworth (1989) connects it to the rejection of oppression, injustice, silencing of marginalized voices, and authoritarian social structures (p. 300). The goals are generally identified with:

critical democracy, individual freedom, social justice and social change—a revitalized public sphere characterized by citizens capable of confronting public issues critically through ongoing forms of public debate and social action. Students would be empowered by social identities that affirmed their race, class, and gender positions, and provided the basis for moral deliberation and social action. (Ellsworth, 1989, p. 300)

Interactive participation in the classroom, achieved through the principles of openness, promotion of equality, trust-building, and respect for differences (Disch & Thompson, 1990, p. 69; see also Schniedewind, 1983) receive emphasis. Feminist pedagogy, as part of this “critical” or “radical” approach to teaching, emphasizes the particular rather than the universal, in order to bring the least members up to relations of equality, and draws on “lost parts of self” by bringing into focus the feel of self (Moe, 1990). This approach requires that the learner consult with others, and is contrasted with methods emphasizing how knowledge can be generalized and universalized, maintain or increase status differentials between persons by positing the knower as expert, and focus upon the logic of self. In these ways, feminist pedagogy has been established as much more than transformation of the curriculum: it entails transformation of women as knowers.⁶ Although there is disagreement about the nature of the transformation required, most writers link it to rejection of the prescriptions of scientific objectivity. These Western methods of inquiry maintain that the thinker can acquire knowledge of the world through the exercise of disembodied Reason. Rich (1976), for example, argued that objectivity, as that detached attitude of science which demands the researcher remain emotionally uninvolved so as to view all social phenomena as “things,” merely represents the term that men have applied to their own subjectivity. Central to her claim is the Cartesian method,⁷ which separates soul/mind and body in ways that explicitly support the principle of men’s domination of women (see Bordo, 1987; Fox Keller, 1985; Lloyd, 1984; Merchant, 1980). As Science gained ascendancy during the seventeenth century, Reason came to be seen as a distinguishing feature

of human nature and as a distinctive mode of abstract thinking giving male content to what it means to be a good knower.⁸ Scientific discoveries⁹—such as the sun being much larger than it appears to the eye—drew attention to the way the senses, as well as emotional commitment to beliefs, could lead to error in the pursuit of truth. As Bordo (1987) notes, by thus locating error outside the faculty of Reason, Descartes upheld then-dominant beliefs in Godly goodness and perfection: Descartes solved the “problem of evil” by locating threatening elements “outside” the intellect, associating them with the impurity of the animal-like body (p. 81; see also Douglas, 1982). Although drawing upon already-prevalent disdain for the body, Descartes went to the extreme of defining body and mind in terms of mutual exclusivity.

Genevieve Lloyd (1984), in particular, explicates the ways Cartesian dualism—however unintentionally—provided justification for a sexual division of mental labour. Within the legacy of normative dualism, “woman”¹⁰ has been associated with the body, “man” with the mind, hence Reason. Moreover, the categories of male/masculinity are constructed in opposition to those of female/femininity, in a way that requires negative evaluation of polar opposites: reason versus emotionality as unreason; the universal opposed to the particular as parochial; transcendence as a higher state than immanence; doing juxtaposed to merely being; culture as above nature; order preferred to disorder; and the masculine preferred to the feminine.¹¹ These beliefs—which women’s studies directly challenges—were used to legitimize exclusion of women from educational institutions and, consequently, from participation in many areas of public life.¹² In challenging the Cartesian method of knowing, therefore, feminists confront an entire system of gendered social organization. Inclusion of women in institutions of higher learning is accompanied by a revalorization of “feminine” ways of knowing: feminists emphasize intuition, emotional commitment, and personal experience over traditional, “objective” methods of inquiry. By now, however, many of us are wary of the way subjectivity, as an epistemic position unrestrained by consideration for objectivity, can slide into pure subjectivism.¹³

Feminist scientist Sandra Harding stands in direct contrast to writers who reject tenets of objectivity outright: she calls for a stronger commitment to objectivity. Harding (1991) points out that, paradoxically, the “objectivity” feminists criticize is both too narrowly and too broadly applied. Objectivity operationalizes the notion of maximum objectivity too narrowly:

The concept of value-free, impartial, dispassionate research is supposed to direct the identification of all social values and their elimination from the results of research, yet it has been operationalized to identify and eliminate *only* those social values and interests that differ among the researchers and critics who are regarded by the scientific community as competent to make such judgments. If the community of “qualified” researchers and critics systematically excludes, for example, all African Americans and women of all races . . . it is not plausible to

imagine that racist and sexist values would be identified within a community of scientists composed entirely of people who benefit—intentionally or not—from institutional racism and sexism. (Harding, 1991, p. 143)

But objectivity also conceptualizes the desired value-neutrality too broadly: “Objectivists claim that objectivity requires the elimination of all social values and interests from the research process and the results of research. It is clear, however, that not all social values and interests have the same bad effects upon the results of research” (Harding, 1991, p. 144). Traditional notions of objectivity, therefore, are contradictory. However, this contradictory character is largely responsible for the usefulness and widespread appeal of science to dominant groups. In its place Harding proposes a concept of “strong objectivity” that extends scientific inquiry to include systematic examination of background beliefs and the relationships that give rise to and sustain these beliefs. She claims this maximizes, rather than diminishes, commitment to objectivity. She also argues that this examination can perhaps be best carried out by those, or from the perspective of those, whose lives have been neglected and devalued by the hegemony of scientific knowledge.

Also questioning scientific objectivity, Lorraine Code (1991) notes that the epistemic agent of the Cartesian project parallels the autonomous individual of Enlightenment humanism: like the juridic individual of classical liberal theory, the Cartesian knower exists a priori for the society of his investigation. But, as Marilyn Frye (1983) notes, it is women’s work, whether in the private or public realm, that re/produces and sustains this preconstructed Subject, through personal service (the work of maids, cooks, personal secretaries), sexual service (including provision for his genital sexual needs and bearing of his children, but also including “being nice,” “being attractive for him,” and so forth), and also ego service (encouragement, support, praise, attention) (p. 10). By denying the body, Cartesian epistemology cannot account for women’s activities, silencing women and denigrating their experiential knowledge. Because very little of what we know is actually a solitary accomplishment, Code argues for a way of knowing that acknowledges both physical and cognitive interdependence. She posits a relational approach to knowing that displaces the centred, autonomous Subject, the hero of philosophical moral and political discourse. This displacement requires a shift from “first-person” to “second-person” knowing:

“Second person” thinking presupposes relationships qualitatively different from the ones implied in third-persons talk about people. “Second persons” engage with one another and care about the quality of that engagement—whether in fondness or in fury. . . . Imposing meaning on someone’s existence from a position removed from it and ignorant of, or indifferent to, its specificities is at the furthest remove from second-persons relations in their normative dimension. (Code, 1991, p. 86)

She describes her position as constrained by objectivity and committed to realism, but (because it refuses the tyranny of ideal objectivity, universality, and gender-neutrality) capable of taking subjectivity, accountability, and a range of perspectives seriously into account. The question raised for me—and explored in the remainder of this paper—is what a relational approach means in terms of subjectivity and objectivity in the classroom.

As Renate Klein (1987) notes, there has been until recently a remarkable dearth of critical literature, particularly theoretical work, on feminist pedagogy. In the early years of women's studies, discussion emphasized the empowering of women as knowers in a "chilly" and silencing climate. Drawing on the work of Carol Gilligan (1982), the invisibility and silence of women in the classroom was generally interpreted as an effect not just of gender dynamics advantageous to male students, but also of the fact that women "have a different voice[s]." Classroom practice based on tenets of critical pedagogy emphasized ways to encourage students to know themselves:

By speaking, in their "authentic voices," students are seen to make themselves visible and define themselves as authors of their own world. Such self-definition presumably gives students an identity and political position from which to act as agents of social change. Thus, although it is true that the teacher is directive, the student's own daily life experiences of oppression chart her/his path towards self-definition and agency. The task of the critical educator thus becomes "finding ways of working with students that enable the full expression of the multiple "voices" engaged in dialogic encounter," encouraging students of different race, class, and gender positions to speak in self-affirming ways about their experiences. (Ellsworth, 1989, p. 309)

Beginning from this commitment to affirm the authentic identities of women, writers painted a glowing picture of the passion for learning that characterizes feminism in the classroom (see Howe, 1985). Rosenfelt (1973), for example, reported that "the enthusiasm and energy level of both faculty and student participants are unusually high in Women's Studies, with much emphasis on consciousness-raising, self actualization and political activism" (p. 1).

We ask of classes that they impart knowledge while raising critical questions; that they consciously explore rather than suppress the feeling and imaginative dimensions of knowing and thinking; that they help both students and teachers know themselves better for having talked together. (Minnich, 1979, p. 6)¹⁴

I do not question the importance of subjectivity in the learning process (see also Jaggar, 1989). Indeed, my most rewarding teaching experiences stem from personal growth which occurs when "felt"—rather than purely intellectual—connections are made between the "private troubles" of women's personal lives and the political agenda of the women's liberation movement. My introductory courses are explicitly organized around this

theme and have for the most part been positive experiences. Where I have encountered problems is in attempting to shift from an experientially-based description of women's personal lives to theoretical abstraction about women's shared oppression and liberation (see also Bunch, 1979). In attempting the latter, not all passion displayed by students has been unequivocally positive.

COLLIDING EXPECTATIONS: FEMINISM MEETS ACADEME

The particular example I have in mind arose during a large undergraduate course designed as an introduction to feminist theory in the social "sciences." As such, a critique of disembodied Reason provided a point of departure for the course, which explored ways consciousness-raising and personal experience are a basis for feminist knowledge and the development of distinctly feminist theory. Experience, then, was implicitly privileged as a place from which to deconstruct patriarchal—but also feminist—knowledge. Retrospectively, therefore, I should have been prepared for the resistance to academic feminism among certain quarters of the class. During a particularly emotional moment in debates on whether white women can fully understand racial oppression and, in a similar vein, whether men can contribute to the development of feminist knowledge, dissent led to a handful of students walking out in protest. Reflecting a widespread view endorsed by the postmodern emphasis on diversity and the politics of difference, whereby all knowledge is viewed as partial, these students questioned who can speak about, or on behalf of, others. More seriously, perhaps, their dissent signaled rejection of theoretical feminism: included in this disavowal of knowledge disconnected from experience was my authority as an academic "expert." After all, what could someone with my privilege and identity know about the actual lives of the poor and underprivileged, of women of colour, or of women whose identities are not framed within the parameters of patriarchal femininity?¹⁵

The surprise I experienced was unpleasant, given that dissent arose not from those students whom I identify as "accidental tourists"¹⁶ in the classroom, but rather from students politically engaged both on and off campus in feminist politics. Having imagined these students to be the most likely enthusiasts of a course designed by a feminist, on feminism, for feminists, my disappointment led me intensely to re-examine the goals I held as a feminist and, more generally, those of "feminist" pedagogy. My introspection began with an interrogation of my emotional response to these events, then led me to seek a link between feminist pedagogy and Subject-ivity in the classroom. On the surface, it appeared this particular protest was about the validation of personal experiences of oppression. Lectures were accompanied by regular small-group discussions that gave students an opportunity to share their experiences. This visibly reduced tension in the classroom and dispelled scepticism about the willingness of students from diverse back-

grounds and with different perspectives to respect others' viewpoints. This re-organization of the classroom format solved the immediate problem of maintaining an atmosphere of trust and empathy, particularly between students. Fundamental questions arose, however, about the epistemological foundation of feminist pedagogy.

FROM OBJECTIVE KNOWLEDGE TO "CONNECTED" WAYS OF KNOWING

Exploring the dynamics of her classroom, Margo Culley (1985) describes her students' anger both at patriarchal society and at herself as a women's studies teacher (see also Baker, 1984; J. Nadelhaft, 1984; R. Nadelhaft, 1984). Although this anger was disturbing, she found that reclaiming rather than denying it could be empowering for those involved:

The real danger of the anger in the feminist classroom . . . is if we cause our students to assume the burden of emotions we will not acknowledge as our own. . . . Yes, we are angry, and the feminist classroom is one arena where the historical, social, economic, cultural and psychological sources of that anger can be studied. Anger is an important source of energy for personal and social change in facilitating the transition from passivity to action. (p. 216)

Similar to Culley, I wanted to learn about, but also learn from, my students' anger.

Although it is not difficult for me to understand passionate resistance to the materials and dynamics characteristic of "other," traditionally oriented courses, I was deeply disturbed by resistance to an approach grounded in criticism and rejection of patriarchal knowledge. Thus my immediate response related to the loss of authority. I was in a no-win situation: although colleagues often discount my intellectual competence because of my feminist commitments, feminists seemed to be saying that "I hadn't got it right."¹⁷ The temptation was to disavow my institutional authority; to assume the stance that, ironically, because of our differences in identity there are no differences in our abilities¹⁸ to talk about, or on the behalf, of women. The contradictions of this position aside, in the final analysis it seemed to me simply another way of confronting difference without transcending its construction or investigating how this construction acts to create divisions of all kinds. What I wanted was a way pedagogically to reconnect us in our differences rather than simply to reaffirm difference, and thereby to connect analytically the real/particular aspects of personal experience to the abstract/general claims of theoretical knowledge.

The first level of connection that seemed necessary was between the classroom and its broader political, cultural context. It had been a particularly volatile term, characterized by a number of racist, homophobic, and sexist occurrences across campus. Connecting these events to analytical/theoretical materials covered during the course offered a way to transcend the subjectivism of purely personal feelings and reactions to the issues at hand, and to

build on the notion of consciousness-raising as a principle of feminist practice. Klein (1987) identifies consciousness-raising as one of the most frequent themes in discussions of women's studies "gynagogy" (p. 189). Beginning in the early days of women's studies courses, it was assumed that the consciousness-raising (CR) so central to the women's liberation movement is integral to feminist teaching practice. As a teaching method, CR has been defined as a process of "becoming conscious of something one did not formerly perceive, raising something from the unconscious to the conscious mind, or to heighten consciousness of oneself or a state of affairs" (Cassell, 1977). In this way, CR has been likened to becoming aware of the patriarchal nature of social reality and its construction by drawing on women's unarticulated experiences of oppression. Adopted as feminist practice, consciousness-raising is linked to Marx's concept of change through political action of a group united by their recognition of shared oppression. When Marx analyzed working-class oppression, he argued that liberation requires class identity which would come not only through recognition by workers of their "objective" position relative to the means of production, but also by their "subjective" sense of having common identity and interest. Conjunction of the objective and the subjective creates class consciousness: unless the proletariat is a "class for itself," as well as a "class in itself," it will not take action on its own behalf (Jaggar, 1983, p. 333). For Marx, then, the role of the philosopher/intellectual is not just to speculate about the need for change, but to participate actively in shaping working-class consciousness.

This view has been adopted by critical educators,¹⁹ most notably Paulo Freire. To Freire the goal of education is for knowers to become conscious of themselves in historical perspective and actively to participate in the creation of a political culture. He called this process "conscientização" and described it as one of "learning to perceive social, political and economic contradictions and to take action against the oppressive elements of reality" (see Bowles & Klein, 1983, p. 126). Although Freire developed his approach with oppressed peoples in the "third world," feminist writers (see Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger, & Tarule, 1986; Klein, 1987) view this coming to consciousness through dialogic relations as a means to empower especially women as knowers. Belenky et al. see this coming to consciousness as developmental,²⁰ facilitated by feminist pedagogy. Here differences in ways of knowing²¹ are accounted for in terms of the degree to which students are able to combine subjective knowing with contextual, analytical thinking. Their work offered a place to begin my search for understanding my goals as a feminist teacher.

From interviews with women in various educational settings, Belenky et al. (1986) maintain that in becoming "connected" knowers, students ideally progress from passive recipients of knowledge who perceive authority figures as sources of truth, to knowers actively engaged in the construction of knowledge through the exercise of reason, intuition, and collaboration. For them, the first transition occurs when the student rejects the view of

truth as externally imposed and, instead, experiences truth as personal, private, and subjectively known or intuited. The authors view this transition as positive, in that women become their own authorities and then can move toward greater autonomy and independence. At the same time, however, this way of knowing is characterized by a rigid belief in right and wrong. Consequently, it can lead to little tolerance for ambiguity, and blindness to the way total reliance upon what “feels right” can be limiting. Thus development of students requires that they transcend purely subjective knowing. This involves incorporation of deliberated, systematic approaches to knowing, in a way that carries the student beyond knowing as simply a procedure or “method.”

By procedural learning, Belenky et al. (1986) mean the type of analytical training typical of most liberal arts education, which emphasizes the skill of doubting and the abilities to listen to others and to recognize that debate and argument are disagreements over position and not between persons (p. 104). Although often a painful process that requires (temporarily) putting feelings aside, procedural thinking enables the student to enter into a dialogue with authorities and into public languages (such as those of science, law, or medicine). The problem for the authors is that this procedural way of knowing suppresses Self, because feelings and beliefs are excluded. They thus describe the full development of student through what they call “connected” knowing: knowing that is analytical, but not purely abstract or impersonal. Connected knowing requires empathy and understanding rather than purely separated, theoretical knowledge. The goal of connected knowing is life-long learning through incorporation of the quest for knowledge into the student’s sense of well-being. The authors describe this way of knowing as “opening of the mind and heart, to embrace the world” (p. 141). Connected knowers in their study could listen to others without denying Self, although, conversely, “talking about Self, from Self, does not make women unable to hear and understand others.” This position connects the knower to others beyond simply taking their standpoint, through shared thinking.

Not surprisingly, Belenky et al. (1986) associate connected knowing not with traditional learning in educational settings but rather with the type of question-posing “central to maternal practice in its most evolved form”:

Question posing is at the heart of connected knowing. We argue that women’s mode of talk, rather than being denigrated, should become a model for all who are interested in promoting human development. It is through attentive love, the ability to ask “What are you going through?” and the ability to hear the answer that the reality of the child is both created and respected. (p. 189)

In formal learning, the authors equate question-posing as a classroom method with competency-based learning, where the teacher no longer acts as the embodiment of knowledge and so becomes less “important,” less the authority and more a coach. Belenky et al. (1986) describe the ideal teacher

as “midwife”: someone who assists students to give birth to their own ideas, to make their own tacit knowledge explicit, and to elaborate it (p. 217). Rather than depositing knowledge in the learner’s head, the midwife assists in the birth of ideas, knowledge. Drawing on Ruddick’s notion of “maternal thinking,” the authors suggest the midwife teacher’s first concern is to preserve the student’s fragile thoughts, to see that they are born with their truth intact, that they do not turn into acceptable lies. The second concern is to support evolution of the student’s independent thinking (Belenky et al., 1986, p. 218). In the final analysis, the midwife teacher emphasizes not her own knowledge (as the lecturer does) but the student’s knowledge. She may contribute when needed, but it is always clear that the baby is the student’s, not hers (p. 218). The midwife teacher also tries to discern the truth inside students (p. 224). Belenky et al. conclude:

that educators can help women develop their own authentic voices if they emphasize connection over separation, understanding and acceptance over assessment, and collaboration over debate; if they accord respect to and allow time for knowledge that emerges from firsthand experience; if instead of imposing their own expectations and arbitrary requirements, they encourage students to evolve their own patterns of work based on the problems they are pursuing. (p. 229)

To these authors, then, feminist pedagogy as consciousness-raising is about making connections: between the objectivity of analytical knowledge and feminine compassion and intuition; between teacher and pupil; between experience and theoretical knowledge. The teacher is characterized as facilitating this work.

Emphasizing these types of connections, Belenky et al. present an appealing picture of feminism in the classroom. As teacher, I know how positive relationships with individual students can be, and how rewarding it is to share in intellectual “coming into being.” In many ways, therefore, the authors seemed to speak to my own goals as educator: to facilitate development of critical thinking firmly rooted in the context of students’ lives and in their self-perceptions as Subjects. When I compared Belenky et al.’s experiences to my own, though, I soon saw that much of the appeal of their work rests on idealizations.²² To be sure, empowerment of individual students is a goal I would not want feminist pedagogy to abandon. However, in my view idealization of the teacher-student relationship, particularly through maternal metaphors, hides more than it reveals about classroom dynamics.²³ As teacher, I saw in my students’ protest a breakdown of what I would have preferred to experience as a “partnership” in learning; on the other hand, as a feminist I understood not only the depth of feeling discussions of sexism, heterosexism, and racism tap, but also the students’ correct identification of me as part of the university apparatus, representative of the process whereby theorizing of primarily white middle-class academic women is legitimized as “knowledge.” My response to events cannot be separated from my professional/occupational position, which raises a number

of contradictions about bringing feminism into the classroom.

The university where I teach is large, exceedingly bureaucratic, and characterized by “old-guard” administration. The struggle to legitimize feminism has been long, successful only through commitment of a handful of faculty willing to take personal risks.²⁴ In particular, I recognized the ways my awareness of suspicion about feminism as “nonacademic” shapes the ways I design curriculum, conduct classes, and “measure” my students’ individual “knowledge.” As untenured faculty, I do not feel “in charge” of the classroom, able to ignore flagrantly the expectations of those who evaluate my competence. At the same time, I accept the goal of feminism as one of transforming the educational institution into a context that values understanding over acquiring knowledge, encourages cooperative rather than competitive learning, and cares more about the thinking of every individual student than about the performance of the few “exceptional” students. The problem is that this context as a goal makes much of what I do in my teaching not simply irrelevant but contrary to these feminist goals. Once again, I was faced with fundamental questions about what we can do as educators, what we want to do as educators, and how these goals provide the foundation of a feminist pedagogy. Like many questions that never “go away,” these questions are not easy to answer. They forced me to re-think the nature of connections—conceptual and political—we are trying to make. In the following section, I discuss relational knowing as an alternative way to achieve “connected” ways of knowing.

RE-THINKING CONNECTIONS

Although perhaps appealing, idealization of my relationship with students as a maternal benefactor conceals precisely what I am attempting to bring to consciousness as a goal of feminist pedagogy: full awareness of the nature of social relations that construct the knowing Subject. As a goal this takes the student’s quest for authenticity and Selfhood beyond the realm of personal feelings and self-affirmation. The problem is that although we indeed want to encourage acts of individual empowerment, expressions of subjectivity cannot replace a deeper understanding of the Subject. Although Belenky et al. propose that the student learn to connect their personal experience and theoretical knowledge, they fail to demonstrate their own awareness of this connection through an analysis of their role in the classroom and of how this role reflects their relationships, as feminists, to the women’s movement. Their model implicitly assumes that silencing of women is the result of an educational practice founded on a masculine, adversarial style of discourse²⁵ (Clinchy, 1990, p. 62) rather than an effect of power (see hooks, 1988). Similar to the way conscientization has been understood by many in the women’s movement, in terms of becoming aware of one’s suffering as a woman, Belenky et al. frame the oppression that occurs in the classroom as a problem of group dynamics and role-specific

behaviours, rather than one of social relationships (see Mies, 1983, p. 127).

Not only do maternal metaphors obscure very real differences between teacher and student, they promote a benevolent view of power relations in the classroom that can be misleading. Although we indeed may consciously treat our students with compassion and sensitivity, objectively we are part of a power structure. To suggest otherwise grossly oversimplifies our task by leaving unaddressed those contradictions we face as feminist teachers, as well as those students subjectively express through various protests in the classroom. Although the kinds of confrontations I have encountered can be painful, their neglect seriously undermines what I believe we want to accomplish through feminist pedagogy. The remainder of this paper shall therefore locate feminist pedagogy in its political, economic, and social context, to help us rethink our goals as educators. The result is, I believe, a much more radical view of the potential of feminist approaches to knowledge.

To begin, I do not reject consciousness-raising as a useful method of feminist pedagogy. However, as I have already noted, recognition of one's political membership in an oppressed group goes beyond subjective identification with that group as an expression of Self-affirmation. Since my goal was to acknowledge but yet strive to overcome divisions between women based on membership in all kinds of oppressed groups, I was faced with the question of how to transform my students' "identity politics" into political identity as a collective. As an act of subversion, identity politics resists Subject positions assigned by hegemonic discourses and is a way to reclaim the authenticity of repressed histories and experiences. Although this act can be empowering, in my classroom it became problematic because it led to epistemological relativism, whereby all/any criteria to adjudicate competing truth claims were deemed invalid.²⁶ As Harding (1991) notes, listening to different voices and attending thoughtfully to others' values and interests can enlarge our vision and begin to correct for ethnocentrism. However, preoccupation with relativism can lead to the conclusion that because all knowledge is partial, no knowledge is capable of universal truth claims. She points out that relativism is, in fact, a logical complement to the absolutism of Eurocentric thought: historically, relativism appears only when the hegemony of the dominant group is being challenged (p. 153). For example, it allows men to appear to acknowledge and accept feminist arguments without actually giving up any of the conventional androcentric beliefs and practices that operate to their advantage (p. 154).

For similar reasons, Hazel Carby (1990) argues that identity politics is compatible with liberal individualism and pluralist ideals of political change (p. 85). Although "oppression" and "resistance"—categories associated with identity politics—imply that membership in an oppressed group is a place from which to take political action, the notions of "systemic exploitation" and "revolution"—associated with socialist approaches to collective change—are based on recognition of the nexus of social relations through

which both the identity and the oppression of groups is constituted. This recognition is made complex because, as Marx noted, social relations are not always immediately apprehensible. There is no necessarily obvious connection between how experiences are “subjectively” felt or interpreted and how they are “objectively” constituted. To Marx, this non-correspondence characterized a capitalist society. In his analysis of commodity fetishism, Marx connected subjectively experienced oppression through the market to the objective relations through which market commodities are produced. In this way, his use of historical materialism makes apparent those processes beyond the individual that, although not immediately apprehended, actively shape personal experience. It reveals experiential categories as expressions of social relations. As Hartsock (1985) notes, Marx gained this understanding by taking the perspective of the working class, rather than accepting as given dominant meanings constructed by bourgeois economic theory. In doing so, he posited two epistemological systems: one at the level of appearance, given by activities of commodity exchange, through which profit is realized; the other at the level of social relations, rooted in activities of the working class, through which the value of commodities is produced. By articulating his theory of exploitation, Marx illustrated that although the experienced need of the proletariat for waged employment fosters the appearance that economic expansion is in the interests of both the capitalist and working classes, objectively the interests of these classes are mutually antagonistic. This recognition of objective interests transforms the proletariat from a class in itself into a class for itself. By bringing to awareness the social relations that underlie class oppression, Marx’s theory epistemologically connects individual experience and collective political action. Historical materialism therefore provides a method of bringing both subjective and objective ways of knowing into the development of theory, a way of connecting theory and political action.

By similarly taking the perspective of women as an oppressed group,²⁷ feminism has differentiated two epistemological systems: the official one, in which masculine rationality and modes of action dominate and through which patriarchal interests are furthered, and the other one, embedded in women’s everyday activities and experiences, excluded from public/political discourse. As an excluded discourse, the standpoint of women as an epistemology²⁸ lies “latent” in the experiences of women. Thus Smith (1981) argues that feminist inquiry must begin from the everyday lives of women because their experiences will direct us to questions not yet posed by traditional investigation. The current emphasis on difference reflects the fact that, in doing this, feminism has revealed dominant categories of thought as produced through relations not only of gender, but also of class, race, and (hetero)sexuality. The problem is the tremendous diversity of experiences among women excluded by a feminism authored primarily by white academic feminists (see hooks, 1984, 1988; Moraga & Anzaldúa, 1981; Ramazanoglu, 1989).

Despite the obvious advantages of providing a unified perspective for

collective political action, a number of writers have argued that differences among women mean that there can never be a standpoint of women. Winant (1987) resolves this problem by defining standpoint as a location in the political and cultural world that carries commitments to projects for political and cultural transformation. Obviously there are many standpoints of women, according to women's varying specific locations in the social order. However, any or all of these standpoints can be philosophically committed to equality and the liberation of women (see also hooks, 1984). Further, because women are embedded in multiple networks of relationships and identities, any feminist standpoint is never complete or fixed, but must be able to adapt to whatever emerges from work to eliminate oppression. Sharing this view, Currie and Kline (1991) suggest that standpoint epistemology can deepen our understanding of the dilemmas and impasses that are the current source of debates about the nature of feminist theory and of differences between women, as well as between feminists. We view standpoint epistemology as a way to make explicit the point from which inquiry begins; unlike Cartesian epistemology, in which the knowing subject comes from nowhere, the epistemic subject of feminism provides a view from where she is. By thus identifying rather than obscuring the social locatedness of author-ity and author-ship, standpoint epistemology provides a point from which to interrogate and make apparent the workings of all noninclusive discourses. As a pedagogical device, it therefore provides us with more than simply a way of knowing: it brings to the fore questions about the exclusionary nature of much feminist theory, about who has been included in the production of feminist knowledge, and about the ways divisions between women are revealed in what we do as feminist academics and feminist teachers. Although these questions emphasize the instability rather than coherence and stability of central feminist concepts, Harding (1989), maintains that this instability characterizing current feminist thought should be viewed as a resource rather than liability: if we can learn how to use it, feminism can invent a new kind of theorizing (p. 34).

As Marlee Kline (1989) notes:

white privileged feminists have always maintained and still maintain hegemonic control over feminist discourse. If we now attempt to maintain the appearance of uniformity and universality for strategic reasons at the expense of ignoring our own hegemonic position and the challenges of, among other things, women of color, we risk irreparable fragmentation. (p. 147)

Kline concludes that acceptance of the challenge to acknowledge and to understand heterogeneity and complexity of experience and oppression will ultimately be feminism's strength, not its weakness. She further notes that working toward solidarity rather than maintaining a pretence of union will not be easy: conflict, resistance, and anger are likely to ensue. With these comments in mind, I return to the classroom as a site of feminist struggle and of feminist learning.

CONNECTIONS IN THE CLASSROOM

In the final analysis, academic feminism cannot be separated from the women's liberation movement; indeed, feminist pedagogy emphasizes this connection (see Howe, 1979; Rutenberg, 1983). We should not be surprised, therefore, that the conflicts and struggles of the latter play out in the classroom. I believe the relational thinking of standpoint epistemology can help us explore these conflicts. Although relational thinking is about making connections, it goes beyond Belenky et al.'s notion of "connected knowers," which does not sufficiently challenge the Archimedean point of inquiry. Connected knowing, as described in *Women's Ways of Knowing*, retains what Code (1991) refers to as the first person Subject—the "I" as a privileged centre of constructed knowledge.²⁹ Relational knowing, which can show how persons are essentially second persons, has the heuristic value of withholding endorsement of the autonomy, self-sufficiency, and/or self-making the philosophers consider integral to mature moral agency. There is no sense that, as second persons, people naturally become and operate as autonomous and self-sufficient individuals, only incidentally engaged in relationships. Second personhood, although a necessary condition for human existence, is precisely what is suppressed in traditional philosophy, which then denies inter-subjectivity in knowing. In order to know the world as second persons, Code (1991) rejects strict objectivity in favour of "passionate detachment"³⁰: a kind of objective sympathy, a mode of participation without intervention, of compassion without passion (p. 108). It requires a kind of perception at once cognitive and affective. As a moral agent, the Subject positions and repositions herself within a situation to become clear about what is at issue and to examine possible courses of action—always within the situation, for no God's-eye vantage point is available. Hence the deliberate position that emerges is dialogic, open to criticisms, self-criticism, and debate (Code, 1991, p. 109).

Although my notion of relational knowing similarly accepts "objective sympathy,"³¹ it further provides a method for objective analysis of commonalities from which sympathetic knowing others may, or may not, become political allies. What I have in mind is perhaps closer to Linda Alcoff's (1989) epistemic model, which combines identity politics—which has the positive effect of introducing identity as a factor in political analysis—with a concept of the Subject of positionality (p. 323). She notes that the external situation determines a person's relative position in a network of elements involving others, the objective economic conditions, cultural and political institutions and ideologies, and so on. Through social criticism and analysis we can identify women via their position relative to an existing cultural and social network. The key difference between her approach and other analyses of women's relative position is Alcoff's insistence that the very subjectivity (or subjective experience of being a woman) and the very identity of women is constituted by women's position. Thus emphasis on positionality includes

two points: the concept of women as a relational term identifiable only within a (constantly moving) context, and recognition that the position in which women find themselves can be actively utilized (rather than transcended) as a location for construction of meaning, as a place where meaning is constructed rather than discovered (Alcoff, 1989, p. 324).

This approach can help us understand the need for female students to affirm their varying identities, as women but also as members of other marginalized groups. We should take this demand for affirmation in the classroom as a reminder that academic feminism is “produced” by privileged women, in a context that is in many ways a microcosm of the nonacademic world. However, I disagree with writers who imply that everything that the student needs to know is already embedded in consciousness, merely waiting to be born (see also Grant, 1987). It seems to me that the classroom is a good place to begin to learn how processes and things about which we are not aware can, despite our unknowing, have “felt” effects. In the words of bell hooks (1988), perhaps the most revolutionary potential for feminist pedagogy is that it engages students in a learning process that makes the world more rather than less real (p. 51). Although it may appear or “feel” that classroom experience is shaped—if not controlled—by the instructor, both discursive and non-discursive practices played out there reflect broader relations of ruling (see also Glazer, 1987). In my university, decisions that directly affect classroom practice—the hiring of “experts,” the approval of course descriptions, the assignment of grades through conventional measures of individual performance, the rhythm of learning as determined by bureaucratic timetables—are made in a way neither democratic nor progressive. One consequence is an educational practice that favours co-optation. In the current climate of corporatism and the underfunding especially of liberal arts, I do not expect my university to become a more supportive environment for radically liberating education, at least not in the near future. To be sure, we teachers can play a role in our individual, personal relations with students. We have the potential to run the classroom along democratic lines, to encourage participation, to empathize with students’ uncertainties and problems in a way that encourages individual self-affirmation and empowers students, to be flexible in our expectations (see Shrewsbury, 1987). Indeed, most feminist teachers (female and male) whom I know adopt these principles as a matter of conscious choice. At the same time, I have found the classroom can seldom be an enclave of genuine democracy, reciprocity, and equality. I believe it is misplaced—if not dangerous—optimism to present it as such. Rather, it seems to me that the classroom is a good place to practice a pedagogy based on relational knowing, a place to connect everyday experiences of individual struggle for a meaningful “education” to the broader feminist struggle to have the diversity of women’s experiences included in the production of official knowledge and legitimate meaning.

Building these connections requires analysis of the relations through which women’s experiences and knowledges have been excluded from

official knowledge (see Smith, 1980, 1987). This analysis affirms the need for distinctly “women’s studies” programs and feminist approaches to learning. At the same time, this analysis of women’s exclusion must incorporate awareness of the ways the university, as a site of women’s current inclusion, is one constructed through relations of ruling that in/exclude women on the basis of class membership, as well as racial, sexual, and other identities. The division of intellectual and manual labour, as much as patriarchal relations, separates the classroom from the women’s liberation movement: real divisions underlie relationships that constitute “the classroom.” Academic feminists are not simply feminists who have been college-educated. For the large part, we are white, middle-class, heterosexual women. Challenging the discursive hegemony of institutionalized feminism, of which we are a part, is not simply a conceptual struggle, nor one about classroom dynamics. As outlined above, it begins from awareness of social relations of domination and oppression, but has as its goal the real—not merely conceptual—transformation of these relations. The dilemma clearly is that feminism within the academy is necessarily part of the same community that, ironically, gave rise to the need for “feminist studies” in the first place. This paradox raises haunting, and perhaps unanswerable, questions. Can feminist pedagogy possibly bring about, or even help to bring about, a revolution of the sort required to alter our dilemma? Or, is our theorizing a substitute for actions that would help bring about that sort of revolution?³²

Gloria Bowles (1983) maintains that as feminists and as academics we are simultaneously working within, as well as against, the academy (p. 32). Although working against the university brings us into conflict with those colleagues (male and female) who identify with the relations of ruling that govern the university, working within the university may bring us into conflict with our students, who see us as part of the relations of ruling. Although the latter may feel contrary to our own experiences of being oppressed as feminist academics, our students’ objective recognition of the relations through which feminism exists in the university should be read as a hope for change. Mary Evans (1983) notes:

It may be quite unsisterly to think this, but the thought does cross our minds that there is a huge difference between attacking the hierarchical organization of the academy, a kind of radical chic, and actually being confronted by people who are going to take this idea seriously enough to want to challenge it, and us. (pp. 326–327)

From this perspective, acts of rebellion do not simply mirror the contradictions and divisions within the women’s movement: they represent resistance to the domination of feminism by privileged women. To be sure, student protestations and confrontations do not make feminist teaching easy. However, it seems to me that they answer, in part, the neglected question “who shall educate the educators?” If our political identity is with the women’s

liberation movement—as we claim—it is not the experiences of other academic feminists that can teach us the most about what we need to know.

In closing, we are a long way from the idealized situation when it comes to feminist pedagogy as student-directed learning and political education. There are real exclusionary practices that prevent students from being “partners in knowledge” and instructors from playing a “midwife” role. Once we acknowledge our place in the nexus of relations that constitute the university, we cannot wish away our privilege in the classroom, although obviously we can be sensitive to its effects. At the same time, I do not believe we should abandon any hope of a meaningful approach to learning. I have tried to suggest here that we must come to terms with our own identities and memberships in privileged groups before we can help students challenge the conditions of their existence. Ironically, this means that we need to emphasize our position in the classroom as one of power, rather than to mystify or obscure the very real ways we are agents in an oppressive institution. As Evans (1983) notes, from the student’s perspective disagreeing with an identifiably sexist male is one thing; disagreeing with a woman who prefaces all her remarks with an invocation of sisterhood is another, far more fearful experience (p. 219). Although I emphasize that the interests of teachers often conflict with those of students, I believe this is unavoidable. For myself, the angst produced by this conflict has been a stimulus for continual re-evaluation of what I want to accomplish in the classroom.

ENDNOTES

- ¹ I thank Shauna Butterwick, University of British Columbia, and Faye Wiesen-berg, University of Calgary, for helpful comments on this paper. I also thank Helga Jacobson for her collegial support in my continual struggle to understand what it means to be a feminist teacher.
- ² We now recognize that this equation, although usual as a political slogan, is far too simplistic when it comes to the diversity of approaches to research done by feminists. See Carol Smart (1984) and Maureen Cain (1986), for example.
- ³ Obviously, these two issues are interrelated.
- ⁴ See Mary Evans (1983) and Janet Radcliffe Richards (1980).
- ⁵ This does not apply, of course, to the collision of women’s experiences and patriarchal knowledge, the subject of much discussion in feminist critiques of knowing (see especially Smith, 1987). Bunch (1979) and hooks (1984, 1988), in particular, discuss anti-intellectualism in the women’s movement.
- ⁶ By women as knowers, I refer to both students and teachers.
- ⁷ The primacy of Reason as the foundation of Western thinking has a long history. Although it is commonly associated with Rene Descartes, Plato presented intellectual life as “a purging of the rational soul from the follies of the body” (in Lloyd, 1984, p. 6; see also Grosz, 1987). Later Judaic and Christian thinkers elaborated upon this separation and thus legitimized its adoption by early scientists like Francis Bacon, known for his use of sexual metaphors in scientific writing.

- ⁸ For a discussion of how the masculinization of Science is seen in scientific practice, see especially Easley (1983). Lloyd (1984) points out that Descartes believed his account of the mind opened the way to a new egalitarian pursuit of knowledge (p. 48). Lorraine (1990) draws attention to contemporaries of Descartes who advanced alternatives to this disembodied view of knowing.
- ⁹ Added to scientific discoveries are the anthropological discoveries that accompanied the exploration (exploitation) of the New World. See Young-Bruehl (1987).
- ¹⁰ This is also true of peoples not of European origin or descent. See chapter 7 of Harding (1986).
- ¹¹ Similarly, white is preferred over black.
- ¹² The recent emergence of legal debates about whether women committing crimes during the premenstrual part of their monthly cycle are not to be held wholly accountable for their acts is a good illustration of why this equation of women with their bodies is not outdated (see Kendall, 1992).
- ¹³ In this paper I use the term subjectivity to refer to the sensations and feelings through which we can know about the physical and social world. I recognize that we make sense of these sensations and feelings (subjective experience) through culturally prescribed meanings and values. By subjectivism, I refer to an epistemological or political position for which knowledge claims are based entirely upon personal feelings, opinion, preference, and so on (see also Radcliffe Richards, 1980).
- ¹⁴ For discussion of how this can be oppressive for some students, see Ellsworth (1989). Briskin (1990) too points out that in the classroom the appearance of having transferred power and authority to the student can actually amount to abdication of our responsibilities as teachers.
- ¹⁵ Since beginning this paper (in 1990), I have become aware that a number of my colleagues have been challenged by their students in a similar way.
- ¹⁶ I use this term to describe those students mildly curious about, but not actively committed to, feminism and feminist knowing.
- ¹⁷ Informal discussions with my feminist colleagues reveal the sense of difficulty—not the unadulterated pleasure many of us anticipated—of teaching feminist courses. It is worrisome that students' resistance to problematic aspects of bringing feminism into the academy can reinforce the many ways the university undermines women's sense of authority. Hartung (1990), for example, describes the selective rejection of women faculty members by students at her university. She notes that although women's studies courses earn high evaluations by students, the instructors in these courses are harshly, even cruelly, assessed. See also the review article by Renate Klein (1987).
- ¹⁸ Here I refer to socially constructed abilities and not to a notion that there are innate differences in cognitive capacities.
- ¹⁹ A crucial debate here concerns the important distinction between university educators as "intellectuals" and as "academics."
- ²⁰ The authors are by their own admission sufficiently evasive to allow for varying interpretations of the changes identified as a progression of stages (Mary Belenky and Blythe Clinchy, seminar on *Women's Ways of Knowing* held at the University of British Columbia, Vancouver, on 27 April 1991).
- ²¹ These authors prefer the term "ways of knowing" to the term "having knowledge," which implies the "storehouse" view of knowledge as a product to be acquired and hoarded.
- ²² These idealizations include not only relationships but practical issues such as the size of the class and requirements of the particular university, for example.

- ²³ See Briskin's (1990) discussion of how students' expectation that they will be "mothered" by their female teachers simply reproduces dominant sex-role stereotypes and can foster resentment toward female instructors who depart from maternal expectations.
- ²⁴ I find it an uncanny coincidence to be revising this paper during a strike for pay equity by the predominantly female support workers at my university. Not only did this strike directly bring to light the "academic" materials covered in my gender relations class, it also provided a very real moment of political activism that often—but not always—cut across divisions of gender, class, race, and other identities.
- ²⁵ On this basis—as Code (1991) notes—a central problem raised in this work is that the authors become preoccupied with how students learn, bracketing questions of what they learn or of how to assess competing truth claims. For an illustration of how issues of feminist teaching (and of power in the classroom) are reduced to questions of style, see Gabriel and Smithson (1990).
- ²⁶ Here I want to point out that reclaiming identity for political purposes differs from doing so for epistemological purposes. I have experienced the former at public meetings or events where identity politics, although at times discomfiting, is necessary as a way to draw attention to racism, homophobia, and other unacknowledged group dynamics.
- ²⁷ It is more correct to say the perspective of women in Eurocentric patriarchal societies. The following discussion is based on that starting point.
- ²⁸ Smith refers to this approach as taking the standpoint of women. Writers following Smith have subsequently called this approach "standpoint epistemology" or "feminist standpoint theory." Unfortunately, differing interpretations and uses have led to a number of problematic claims. One is the claim that Smith is advancing the notion of a unified feminist standpoint. To avoid some of these difficulties and to emphasize Smith's approach as a method of inquiry (and not a theory), I use the term "standpoint epistemology."
- ²⁹ When translated into political practice, the first person can lead to the "us versus them" phenomenon.
- ³⁰ Code attributes this provocative notion to Annette Kuhn (1982).
- ³¹ Here use of the term "sympathy" refers to a relationship between persons or things wherein whatever affects one similarly affects the other (*Webster's Seventh Collegiate Dictionary*, 1970). In terms of affects, see Patti Lather's (1988) provocative discussion of feminist pedagogy.
- ³² These questions, the logical endpoint of the discussion here, were raised by an anonymous reviewer. At this time I do not know how to answer them.

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