FEMINIST PEDAGOGY AS PRAXIS

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Jane Roland Martin, *Changing the Educational Landscape: Philosophy, Women, and Curriculum* (Routledge, 1994)

bell hooks, *Teaching to Transgress: Education as the Practice of Freedom* (Routledge, 1994)

Jean O'Barr and Mary Wyer, eds., *Engaging Feminism: Students Speak Up and Speak Out* (The University Press of Virginia, 1992)

Teaching is inherently conservative. Teachers tend to lecture, run seminars, and grade exams the way they were lectured to, precepted, and graded. Yet something has changed. The increased diversity of the educational environment, both in terms of students and teachers, has challenged the status quo. This is most apparent in curriculum transformation, as course material is beginning to reflect the experiences of marginalized groups. Changing content, however, is only half of the picture. To change what we teach requires us to change how we teach.

Feminist pedagogy encompasses a wide range of responses to this challenge of restructuring education. There are as many answers to the question "What is feminist pedagogy?" as there are feminist teachers. While no set of writings can do justice to the wide diversity of views that fall under the term feminist pedagogy, recent works by Jane Roland Martin, bell hooks, and Jean O'Barr and Mary Wyer illustrate three different approaches of using feminist analysis to challenge the current educational system and to advocate alternative practices.

Jane Roland Martin's *Changing the Educational Landscape: Philosophy, Women, and Curriculum* is a collection of essays written between 1969 and 1993. In these works Martin critiques the philosophical framework underlying contemporary education. Examining the works of educational theorists such as Jean-Jacques Rousseau, John Stuart Mill, R.S. Peters, Paul Hirst, Maria Montessori, and Alan Bloom, Martin notes that our vision of liberal education promotes a hidden curriculum of misogyny and anti-domesticity. Liberal education is solely intellectual, excluding what Martin calls the reproductive values of society: everything from child rearing to running a household and maintaining healthy relationships. Because society equates liberal education with valuable education, whatever the definition of liberal education excludes, society deems unimportant. The current ideal of an educated person coincides with cultural stereotypes of a male

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human being. This ideal values those traits society attributes to men and excludes those it attributes to women. This educational framework, by preparing people for only the public, not the private world, reproduces a mind-body dualism and results in ivory tower minds, not educated people. Because of societal expectations, this puts women in a double bind. They must give up their culturally assigned world view and be ostracized for becoming like men, or they must remain uneducated.

This definition of liberal education is self-perpetuating. While being schooled, people are indoctrinated into the belief that "the present configuration of education is one of this world's brute facts."[1] They forget that academic subject matters and disciplines are constructed, not found. Martin challenges us to redraw the boundaries of education. We must redefine liberal education to join thought and action and mind and body. Education's goal must be liberated people, not disembodied intellects. Martin sees the study of gender as a key to transforming education. Including women as subjects allows us to pay attention to underrepresented subject entities. A gender sensitive education includes as an educational goal the development of a person as a member of home and family, it promotes the three Cs of caring, concern, and connection, examines the hidden curriculum of misogyny, and values domestic practices. According to Martin, unless we address liberal education's failure to transmit to the next generation, one-half of our cultural heritage, the misogyny and anti-domesticity of the status quo will continue.

While Martin critiques the definition of liberal education, bell hooks focuses on teaching practice. In *Teaching to Transgress: Education as the Practice of Freedom*, hooks examines the classroom as a locus of oppression and as a potential site for liberation. Too often contemporary education is based on the "banking system of education."[2] In this model, the professor has the currency of knowledge and deposits it into the students' minds where it is stored and withdrawn at a later date. Classroom rituals of control and the unjust exercise of power frequently reinforce this dynamic of the powerful professor and the passive, objectified student. This results in the students' primary lesson being obedience to authority. Such a classroom reinforces societal hierarchies and domination.

Although it can teach and perpetuate oppression, the classroom, for hooks, "remains the most radical space of possibility in the academy."[3] Learning can be liberating; education can become the practice of freedom. Instead of being the site for reproducing elite values, the university should encourage students and teachers to transgress "those boundaries that would confine each pupil to a rote, assembly-line approach to learning."[4] Throughout her work, hooks looks at ways to make learning an exciting process based on collective effort. Central to her vision of classroom transformation is the goal of the classroom becoming a democratic setting where everyone's presence is affirmed and valued. hooks sees teaching as a performatory act serving "as a catalyst that calls everyone to

1. JANE ROLAND MARTIN, CHANGING THE EDUCATIONAL LANDSCAPE: PHILOSOPHY, WOMEN, AND CURRICULUM 27 (1994).

2. BELL HOOKS, TEACHING TO TRANSGRESS: EDUCATION AS THE PRACTICE OF FREEDOM 5 (1994).

3. *Id.* at 12.

4. *Id.* at 13.

become more and more engaged . . . ."[5] This engaged pedagogy presupposes that all members of a learning community are responsible for classroom dynamics. Recognizing that authority and experience can exclude and silence, the professor must move attention away from her own voice to that of her students'. At the same time, she must enter the classroom as a whole individual, not a disembodied spirit whose erasure of body creates the illusion of objectivity. hooks' democratic classroom challenges the fundamental assumptions of hierarchical education and she recognizes that this decentralization of authority will undoubtedly meet resistance from students and academe as a whole.

Engaging Feminism: Students Speak Up and Speak Out takes hooks' prioritization of student voice one step further. Editors Jean O'Barr and Mary Wyer ask why all works on feminist pedagogy are written by teachers. If we take seriously the authority of experience, if one believes that learning is a collaborative, interactive process, it is inexcusable to ignore and silence student perspectives. To give voice to students, O'Barr and Wyer reprint excerpts from student journals that present candid, unsolicited critiques of education. O'Barr and Wyer frame these excerpts with a powerful introduction and a collection of three longer student works reflecting on specific moments of student initiated changes in academe.

O'Barr and Wyer see students offering a unique and valuable perspective. By focusing on student based critiques of learning, *Engaging Feminism* challenges the underlying power dynamics of teacher-student relations. Student journal entries approach teaching and feminism from a variety of viewpoints. For example, excerpts explore how "Truth has a 'look': seen from a different angle, truth might wear a different style;"[6] the creation of a two-classed society with a "class of knowers while others must be the recipients of knowledge;"[7] and the ideal classroom as "a huge womb—a private, safe place where we are all giving birth to ourselves and to each other and to a new way of looking at the world."[8] The writings protest an educational system based on "competition, isolation, and self-doubt."[9] Student entries talk of their disempowerment and, in the words of O'Barr and Wyer, students "despair of the waste of their talents."[10]

Despite their varied approaches, Martin, a professor of philosophy, hooks, a professor of English, and O'Barr and Wyer, professors of women's studies, all advocate liberating, student centered, collaborative, active education. Recognizing that theory and practice are inseparable, they challenge us to see feminist pedagogy as praxis, the synthesis of critical, self-reflective thought with concrete actions. Only through recognizing the inadequacies of the status quo, formulating a new vision of learning, and altering our teaching methods, not just our content, can we truly transform education.

5. *Id.* at 11.

6. ENGAGING FEMINISM: STUDENTS SPEAK UP AND SPEAK OUT 56 (Jean O'Barr & Mary Wyer, eds., 1992) (quoting Ann Burlein).

7. Connie E. Pearcy, *The Class of Knowers*, in ENGAGING FEMINISM, *supra* note 6, at 18, 19.

8. Judith W. Dorminey, *Midwives to Each Other*, in ENGAGING FEMINISM, *supra* note 6, at 69, 72.

9. ENGAGING FEMINISM, *supra* note 6, at 10.

10. *Id.* at 1.