Feminist Pedagogy Is for Everybody: Troubling Gender in Reading and Writing

Four teachers share their lessons for drawing students into a critical examination of race, class, gender, and sexual identity. They strive to heighten students’ awareness of ways literature “and gendered patterns in the world foreground or silence groups of people or issues,” and they offer students and teachers tools for change.

In education news, 2006 marked the year of “the boy crisis.” Following more than two decades of scholarship decrying that schools “short-change girls” (AAUW), several reports surfaced indicating that efforts to remediate “failures of fairness” to girls (Sadker and Sadker) have undermined boys’ achievement. Several scholars have debunked “the zero sum game” by which concern for girls’ achievement translates to neglect of boys (e.g., Brown, Chesney-Lind, and Stein) and forwarded good news that boys are not faring worse but girls better (Mead). “Unfortunately,” as Sara Mead reports, “the current boy crisis” and “debate around it are based more on hopes and fears than on evidence. This debate benefits neither boys nor girls, while distracting attention from more serious educational problems—such as large racial and economic achievement gaps—and practical ways to help both boys and girls succeed in school” (4; italics added).

We do not dismiss concerns raised about boys’ literacy achievement (e.g., Fletcher; Newkirk; Pirie; Smith and Wilhelm). Nonetheless, we are wary of antigirl backlash emerging from the so-called boy crisis. Though perhaps faring better on achievement tests, girls still struggle to define positive and equitable gender roles, a struggle Colleen A. Ruggieri describes as “the fight for identity that often leads to unhappiness or even violence toward our girls” (48). While adolescent girls may “handle school,” cultural attacks on girls seem relentless.

Gender trouble (Butler) in the form of sexism continues. In March 2007, the American Psychological Association released “Report of the APA Task Force on the Sexualization of Girls,” a report that links sexualization of girls at younger ages (Marcus) to common mental health problems that girls and women face: eating disorders, low self-esteem, and depression. Successful marketing schemes illustrate troubling and enduring trends in contemporary gender socialization (Lamb and Brown). For example, sexily clad Bratz dolls—designed for four- to eight-year-old girls—sell girls a desire for fashion, shopping, and clubbing, while Boyz, their male counterparts, sell action with soccer balls and skateboards. Sexism is a problem for everyone. We owe all young adults opportunities to discuss these issues and to work for transformation.¹

Feminist Pedagogy Is for Everybody

Since feminist pedagogy is for everybody (hooks), we reexamine feminist literary theories and pedagogies to include all people disenfranchised by traditional approaches to literacy education (Bruce; Ginsberg, Shapiro, and Brown; McCracken and Appleby). The primary question before us is, “How do we begin to achieve equity and justice in classrooms?” Introducing students to ways that texts and human interactions can be read differently heightens their awareness to ways literature, fiction and nonfiction alike, and gendered patterns in the world foreground or silence groups of people or issues. This means choosing literature that invites critical thinking, developing writing assignments that recognize students as thinkers,
and facilitating discussions that are illuminating while not polarizing.

We know many teachers are constrained by curricular mandates; however, we need alternatives to open discussions about gender, race, and class inequities. Teaching literature that portrays powerful women dealing with injustice, such as Melinda in Laurie Halse Anderson's *Speak*, LaVaughn and Jolly in Virginia Euwer Wolff's *Make Lemonade*, or Louise White Elk in Debra Magpie Earling's *Perma Red*, provides a start. Additionally, we strive to create conditions where students can leave school with a set of critical questions upon which they might draw to ask of everything they read and experience: “Who is speaking?” “Who is silenced?” “What’s missing in this story?” “How do race, gender, class, and sexual identities of characters or persons affect the trajectory of the narrative?” “How might it be otherwise?” See the sidebar for resources for teaching gender analysis. Here we summarize our collaborative engagement with practices that address these questions.

Making Visible the Invisible (Heather)

In *Reading, Writing, and Rising Up: Teaching about Social Justice and the Power of the Written Word*, Linda Christensen writes “to say the name is . . . to begin questioning whose story is told. . . . [P]eople who have the power to name also have the power to tell the story” (10). To build community and to illustrate that naming is simultaneously personal, cultural, and political, Christensen asks students to write to “tell the history of their name, the meaning of their name, memories or anecdotes connected to their names. . . . to write about their feelings about their names or their nicknames” and to share their name stories in class (13). Christensen discusses with students how naming traditions vary according to family, cultural group, and national and religious affiliations and how those with power are entitled to name. Making visible the invisible is central as Christensen explores primary questions: “Whose voices get heard? Whose voices are silenced?”

Following Christensen, I discuss how gender affects naming traditions, giving voice to some and silencing others. I draw attention to the common practice of women assuming a husband’s surname. This is a sensitive topic with teens: Most females think the tradition constitutes “true love” and “romance”; most males have never thought about it. “What’s the big deal?” they wonder, which is why I deconstruct the practice with students. Students—who readily empathize with the unfairness of the arbitrary alteration at Ellis Island of surnames deemed too difficult for immigration officials to pronounce and with the stripping of names and histories from Africans stolen from their homelands and forced into slavery—struggle to understand how women’s changing their surnames silences their histories.

I explain how I have lost track of numerous friends because they have changed names through marriage and divorce. I detail loss of significant parts of my history because of name change following marriage and return to my birth name.

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**RESOURCES FOR TEACHING GENDER ANALYSIS**

- Soter, Anna O. *Young Adult Literature and the New Literary Theories: Developing Critical Readers in Middle School*. New York: Teachers College, 1999.
In these discussions, I consciously use “birth name” rather than the gender-marked, more commonly used “maiden name” and deconstruct its meanings with students. Thus, we raise consciousness about the effects of gendered naming traditions.

I then describe the historical tradition of considering a woman as her husband’s legal property. Fathers arranged marriages for daughters—selecting (frequently older) men and negotiating money or other material goods in exchange—and such practices, including the father’s “giving away” the bride, continue in many contemporary cultures. The patrilineal function of surnames following the father’s historically marked not only a child’s lineage but also a patriarch’s entitlement to govern his wife and family. Although students laugh at such absurdity, I tell about a former student whose boyfriend threw her against a row of lockers in a crowded school hallway and beat her unconscious while dozens looked on without intervention. A buddy hollered, “Knock it off!” but shrugged when the offender snarled, “She’s my girlfriend!” as if that entitled him to such behavior. They see the reprehensible violence that sexism provokes.

These historical facts and contemporary anecdotes spark discussion, which leads to introduction of “She Unnames Them” by Ursula K. Le Guin, a liberation story, a parody of Genesis 2:19–3:20 in which God authorizes Adam to name every living creature, including Eve. In Le Guin’s story, Eve erases Adam’s given names for the creatures by “unnaming” them, which leaves them free to name themselves. In so doing, she undoes man’s dominion over “every beast of the field and every fowl of the air,” levels voices among the creatures, and brings them all closer together. It is a terrific piece to discuss the power of naming, its relationships with gender, and the effects of stereotypes, hierarchies, inequities, and religious beliefs. Reading and discussing it with students generates plenty of interesting conversation. I use numerous strategies with this and other texts to discuss implications of the power of naming as springboards to discuss gender roles and sexuality as constructed in literature. (Additional strategies and texts are available as an EJ Extension at http://www.englishjournal .colostate.edu/Extensions/extensions0801.htm.) I use Christensen’s suggestion that students write about their names; alter Linda Rief’s quickwrite for a “Rambling Autobiography” (30), asking students to quickwrite a “Rambling Gender Autobiography”; and assign a “My Femininity/Masculinity History” narrative essay (Bruce 92–94).

Text Rendering to Level Voices (Shirley)

Researchers Deborah Tannen and Robin Lakoff demonstrated how males in group settings take up more airtime, set topics, and employ different vocabularies than females. To offset imbalance, many teachers use strategies such as sharing journal entries without comment, rotating roles in literature circles, and calling alternately on girls and boys. All approaches help give girls and boys equal access in classrooms. Text rendering also helps equalize voices. This strategy, adapted from David Bleich’s idea for readers to pick out the most resonant word, phrase, and sentence in a text, helps readers dissect difficult passages.

Following discussion about gender and naming, I have used text rendering after reading “My Name” from Sandra Cisneros’s The House on Mango Street. This allows students to bring in personal stories and cultural practices around names. I also draw attention to the history of male property inheritance when “junior,” “senior,” or II or III is invoked in the text. Students might consider the prevalence of “son” at the end of many names (Johnson, Dickinson) and concomitantly the absence of “daughter” (Johnsdaughter, Dickensdaughter) within this context.

Text rendering may seem simple, but it has transformative power. Everyone contributes without judgment, which creates a powerful “meta-text.” The steps follow:

1. Select a short passage from a text, a difficult poem, or any work that is the focus of classroom discussion or reading.
2. Have students read it silently.
3. Have them read it aloud.
4. Ask students to select one sentence, then one phrase, and finally one word that resonates with them.
5. Finally, ask students to choose a word to illustrate the meaning/impact of the piece.
A volunteer guides students through the steps. Once students have selected their passages, the volunteer reads her or his selected sentence. Everyone follows, individually reading sentences aloud. The first person leads the group in reading all selected phrases, then all words the same way. When all have recited, each person states the single word selected in response to the piece. When everyone has read, I let the silence linger.

The “poem” or metatext created from text rendering is powerful, providing multiple entry points into any text. Imagine the collective resonance of your female students’ voices repeating their individually selected sentence, “I have inherited her name, but I don’t want to inherit her place by the window” or “I would like to baptize myself under a new name” (Cisneros 11).

The understanding that comes from text rendering can be enhanced by class discussion of what people heard or why they picked the word they did. Alternatively, students can write about what they heard and share in small groups. Choosing similar texts that raise gender questions provides key elements in developing students’ critical awareness of gender as an analytical tool.

Opening the Discourse of Argument with Paired Nonfiction Texts (Nancy)

Girls—and boys who do not fit the dominant images prescribed for them in a patriarchal society—often confront words and images of themselves in print that do not fit with what they know and feel. Without thoughtful classroom support, such readers may decide that this dissonance is not worth mentioning in or out of class.

Carol Gilligan cites Normi Noel’s research journal in The Birth of Pleasure to make an important point about dissonance and silence:

Just as . . . acoustics for . . . strengthening . . . sound require certain physical properties, so too do the voices of . . . girls depend on a sympathetic “sounding board” or environment. . . . [A patriarchal culture] is filled with a dissonance that separates intellect from feeling. When there is no longer a “place” or “room” to strengthen their truth or practice speaking directly what they know, . . . girls then leave the vibrations of their speaking voice and move from breathiness to silence. In this silence, an inner cello world or resonating chamber keeps alive the energy of the initial thought/feelings, preserving an integrity that risks everything if taken back onto the speaking voice in a culture still unable to provide a resonance for such clarity, subtlety and power. (qtd. in Gilligan 224–25)

It is important to support reticent students as they begin to “risk everything” by arguing with dominant positions taken in published nonfiction. Yet when issues of race, class, and gender are entirely suppressed in informational texts, as they often are, it is not so easy for students even to see that an argument is underway, let alone find a way to enter that argument.

In the strategy illustrated below, I use paired nonfiction texts to give students a listening ear to an argument taking place across space and time, and I invite them to enter that discourse in their writing.

For this series of lessons, I draw on The Crisis in America’s High Schools, a report by The Alliance for Excellent Education. The report includes a full-page section, “Why Does It Matter? The Cost to America.” On the left side of one page appears a striking black-and-white photograph of a girl, sitting alone on the floor by her locker, her head in her hands. I begin by presenting students the title of the report with the photograph, but without accompanying text. I ask students to freewrite what they imagine, based on the photograph, may be the crisis in America the authors want us to care about.

Next, I invite students to read the full page of text accompanying the photograph. I label this page as “Text A.” This text says much about implications of high rates of high school dropouts and, in particular, about large differences in incomes of male high school graduates versus dropouts. The text swiftly answers the question in the title, “Why does it matter?” by concluding in bold font, “America loses more than $50 billion annually in federal and state income taxes from the 23 million high school dropouts aged 18 to 67.”

Following students’ reading, I distribute a page on which they are invited to answer the following:

Who is talking in Text A?
To whom do they seem to be speaking?
What groups or big ideas seem to interest them?
Who is being spoken about?
Whose voices are missing from this text?
In the lesson that follows, I present another nonfiction text (labeled “Text B”), which represents one of the missing voices, a text that may be seen as “talking back” to the first. One text I have paired with The Crisis in America’s High Schools is National Organization for Women president Kim Gandy’s article “School Shooters Target Girls, Point to Larger Problem of Violence against Women” available at their Web site. This article reflects on recent shootings of girls in Pennsylvania and Colorado schools and asserts, “For the most part, reporting on these two recent killings has glossed over the fact that girls were the chosen victims. Had students from a specific racial or religious group been targeted for murder, it seems likely that the killings would have been deemed hate crimes immediately and vigorously. Not so when gender is the target” (par. 6).

Another text I have paired with The Crisis in America’s High Schools is one or both of these excerpts from Elizabeth Cady Stanton’s 1892 “Solitude of Self”:

It is sad to see how soon friendless children are left to bear their own burdens before they can analyze their feelings; before they can even tell their joys and sorrows, they are thrown on their own resources. (par. 8)

and

The girl of sixteen, thrown on the world to support herself, to make her own place in society, to resist the temptations that surround her and maintain a spotless integrity, must do all this by native force or superior education. (par. 12)

Students are invited to answer the following questions:

Who is talking in Text B?

To whom do they seem to be speaking?

What groups or big ideas seem to interest them?

Who is being spoken about?

In what ways does this text seem to “talk back” to Text A?

Whose voices are missing from Text B?

Finally, I ask students to use the materials they have read and written to enter the print dialogue. I scaffold this entry into dialogue by giving students a page on which they are invited to complete the following:

Text A seems to suggest that . . .

Text B seems to talk back by suggesting that . . .

As for myself, I believe/wonder/notice that . . .

Reading voices of published writers “talking back” across space and time helps students to discover that indeed there is an argument afoot, and that there are models and places for them to enter that argument in dialogue. It doesn’t take long before students begin to bring in suggestions for other pairs of nonfiction texts, one that suppresses certain voices and another that provides those voices a chance to talk back. Even the most reticent students are often eager to read and write critically within the scaffolded dialogue of nonfiction texts.

Using Poetry to Help Girls Write (Mary)

Vartan Gregorian, quoting from a past National Commission on Writing report, states, “If students are to make knowledge their own, they must struggle with the details, wrestle with the facts, and rework raw information and dimly understood concepts into language they can communicate to someone else. In short, if students are to learn, they must write” (2). The troublesome task of getting students to write is like starting a fire in the midst of a winter storm: there is always a chance that the fire will be put out by unexpected wind. We teachers must search for classroom strategies to keep the fire burning. I have found that teaching poetry can improve vocabulary development and the understanding of figurative language necessary to powerful thinking and writing. Poetry provides models of writing in various styles and helps both boys and girls conquer fears about writing. Writing poetry assists all students to write better because it allows them to feel more relaxed when expressing feelings,
viewpoints, or personal stands on social issues. Poetry can assist students in discovering self-identity, increasing self-esteem, examining gender socialization, and providing an outlet for releasing inhibitions. Poetry can help students evaluate past experiences and provide life lessons toward unpredictable results.

Poetry is especially useful to girls who benefit from the “resonant acoustics” poetry provides, which Gilligan suggests preserves the integrity of space girls need to air what they think and feel. Poetry exercises allow girls to express themselves through writing without feeling ridiculed by others. The main objective is to provide opportunities for girls to feel comfortable and to decide to share their innermost thoughts or experiences without needing to risk negotiating stereotypical views of society.

Teachers must stage a safe environment for students to express themselves before they risk sharing personal experiences. In *When I Whisper, Nobody Listens: Helping Young People Write about Difficult Issues*, Helen Frost suggests several considerations before incorporating poetry about personal issues into classrooms:

- Know yourself—A teacher should be clear about his or her values.
- Understand your motivation—Why are you interested in having students write about their personal lives?
- Create an environment for writing—Create rules to govern students’ behavior and treat students with respect.
- Establish a relationship with students—Encourage them to write honestly and freely. Support students and don’t judge.
- Share your writing—Students enjoy hearing personal writings from their teachers.
- Read literary pieces written by teenagers, various poetry books, and songs (1–10).

An effective, nonthreatening strategy for helping students understand poetic form and structure is copy-change. First, I introduce the poem “Where I’m From” by George Ella Lyon. I ask students to close their eyes and think about their family background and traditions, and their personalities. Then, I ask students to write their version of “Where I’m From.” Students more likely participate in this activity when I provide a template (http://www.bright.net/~dlackey/wherefrom.pdf). I also use “The Red Wheelbarrow” by William Carlos Williams and “The Negro Speaks of Rivers” by Langston Hughes (McCracken and Manna).

Second, I use the writing exercise “I Am What I Am” from Tom Romano’s *Crafting Authentic Voice* (105–07), which aids students in expressing voice and sharing identities. Students are more likely to express themselves without fear of being rejected by classmates because they can craft many different representative visions of themselves. This writing inspires students to read their literary work aloud in class.

Third, I incorporate music to aid students in writing and creating dialogue about their writing, school, and home experiences. Students are willing to write more if given options to write about topics that interest them, such as love, social issues, education, race, and gender. The voices of Helen Reddy in “I Am Woman,” Aretha Franklin in “Respect,” Natasha Bedingfield in “Unwritten,” and many other lyricists capture students’ attention and entice their untapped creative side, bringing forward hidden emotions and forgiven past experiences.

Once students expose their poetic voices, I encourage them to create a portfolio with their personal writings. On Poetry Day, students bring in these portfolios and share their writing with classmates. Students also choose one of their poems and create a computer-generated visual design to represent it. They transfer the design onto a T-shirt and wear that on Poetry Day. The atmosphere is charged with voices from the past and wisdom for the future. Poetry can lead us one step closer to improving teaching and learning in order to serve all students (Jocson). Through strategies such as these, teachers can help students examine hidden and deep-rooted gendered assumptions and expectations so that they “consciously provide a wide range of explicit opportunities for all students to develop their identities more fully” (Sanford 314).

**Conclusion**

Before the decades of interest in girls’ success and achievement, schools relied primarily on traditional pedagogy that honors the impersonal, something
Feminist Pedagogy Is for Everybody: Troubling Gender in Reading and Writing

we acknowledge more boys seem to value. With incarnations of feminist pedagogy, among other things, girls found a home for personal interests. While we do not wish to reduce the effects of feminism(s) strictly to a focus on the personal, the personal did become a valued part of the English curriculum, in part—though hardly entirely—as a result of feminist influences. “We,” indeed, “have come a long way, baby!” to demonstrate advantages of blending experiential and academic perspectives to show that merging personal and scholarly worldviews produces useful contradictions and contributes to more complex understandings in academic writing and reading to benefit all.

Such activities create spaces in classrooms for gendered considerations of texts, of authors, of characters, of ourselves as readers and writers, and of gendered influences in the world that always affect us. Through such activities, we make more visible the invisible workings of gendered power and give students tools for change. As one of our students proclaimed, “Gender realities are the most important thing we can learn about at our age!” What better reason to transform English teaching by troubling gender?

Note

1. We emphatically do not want to neglect sexual minorities who suffer tremendously in a homophobic culture. Feminist pedagogies are ideal for making visible the gendered violence experienced and silenced by sexual minorities, especially in American middle schools and high schools. A focus on “boys” and “girls” as the two and only genders is problematic, as a transgendered high school student in one of our classes helped us recently understand. Nonetheless, the activities we suggest here help open discussion about gender socialization and its damaging effects on boys and girls, however gendered, as well as ways sexism and homophobia are not democratic ideals.

Works Cited

Alliance for Excellent Education. The Crisis in America’s High Schools. 8 Mar. 2007 <http://www.all4ed.org/whats_at_stake/crisis.html>.


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**READWRITETHINK CONNECTION**

Lisa Storm Fink, RWT

One way the authors motivate student writers is using copy-change with poetry. In “Avoiding Sexist Language by Using Gender-Fair Pronouns,” students write a response to a short prompt that includes no information about the participants’ gender. Once the writing is complete, students and teacher analyze the narratives for the use of pronouns and what the pronoun choices reveal about language use. http://www.readwritethink.org/lessons/lesson_view.asp?id=201

**EJ 75 Years Ago**

Confront Literature—and Life—Bravely

Literature, as a cross-section of life, should present no smug and comfortable interpretation of it—cannot truthfully do so. It should record, as the best literature does, true human experience, unjoyful as well as joyful. And the good teacher must present it for exactly what it is and does. Any coercion by way of the acceptance of points of view not presented, any evasiveness of issues clearly made, any avoidance of morals that are pat, any insistence upon lessons far-fetched—all are seriously culpable on the part of the teacher.


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