



The Learning Theory Podcast

Episode 3

Feminist Pedagogy

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Original Broadcast Date: 02/17/08

Introduction

Welcome to episode 3 of the Learning Theory Podcast. I'm your host, Dan Campbell, and today I will be discussing Feminist Pedagogy. Recall in episode-1, I put forth the argument that Feminist Pedagogy can be considered a conservative approach to education. Well I guess it is to me to defend that argument.

What is Feminist Pedagogy?

So what is Feminist Pedagogy? I'm glad you asked. Well you really didn't ask but you wouldn't be listening if you didn't want to know. The concept of Feminist Pedagogy came about in the late twentieth century through educational projects designed to promote knowledge and understanding of the oppression of women (Welch, 2006). Julie Kilmer (2007) describes Feminist Pedagogy as a means to promote equality in the classroom and support cooperative learning which focuses on community in the classroom by continually analyzing ways in which students can best be engaged "in critical thinking about the topics of inequality, privilege, and power" (p. 57). While having its roots in feminist studies, Feminist Pedagogy has been widely embraced by educators that teach or research other potentially politically divisive topics; such as racial studies, gay/lesbian studies, and environmentalism.

The four basic themes of Feminist Pedagogy are, knowledge construction, voice, authority, and positionality (Tisdell, 1998). These are derived from the following principles:

1. Learners are empowered by reforming the power structure between the student and teacher to a shared structure.
2. Building community by promoting co-operation and collaboration that stresses the connections between people.

3. Giving privilege to the individual voice as a way of knowing by respecting the diversity of personal experience.
4. And challenging the traditional views and practices of society (Welch).

How Does This Work?

Feminist Pedagogy relies heavily on the diverse views of the learners to construct knowledge, thus class or group discussion is the preferred instructional strategy. Forms of assessment in Feminist Pedagogy also reflect the group, or social philosophy reflected in the Feminist Pedagogy principles. Group projects and presentations, and peer assessment are common in a Feminist Pedagogy environment. In some cases the principle of learner empowerment through reforming of the power structure is carried forward into the assessment where students are given a broad array of assessment choices, or perhaps even given the opportunity to create their own assessment through drama, music, art, or even activist activities outside of the class (Welch, 2006).

A Flaw in the Theory

By now you may be asking two questions. How is this different than the basic tenets of social constructivism, and how is this conservative. Before I attempt to answer these questions, let me first disclose that I am transition from giving to an objective description of the Feminist Pedagogy theory, to giving a subjective opinion of practice. To answer the first question, how is this different I would like point out what I consider a flaw in the theory. The proponents of Feminist Pedagogy, are adamant in the belief that this philosophy is critical thinking, or critical inquiry if that is your preferred term, in its purest form. Yet the entire theory is predicated on the premise that oppression exists, so the critical inquiry is not about if something is true, but instead about revealing a truth that is already known to exist. It would seem to me that critical thinking,

or inquiry, in its purest form should not start with any premise. I consider this a flaw in the theory but I do not discount the theory because of it, as all theories have flaws. I do however; see the premise of existing oppression with the implied goal of exposing the oppression to be the line of demarcation between Feminist Pedagogy and Social Constructivism.

How is it Conservative

Now let me address my argument of Feminist Pedagogy being a conservative approach to teaching. I will admit that I am taking some liberties with the language here, but in order to make this argument I will first refer to one of the several dictionary definitions of conservative which is: “tending or disposed to maintain existing views” (Merriam-Webster Online). Now recall the Feminist Pedagogy premise that oppression exists. That premise, in the view in our dictionary definition, not only tends to be maintained but must be maintained in Feminist Pedagogy environments. To deny or even doubt the premise pulls the foundation out from under the theory.

Education or Indoctrination?

It is interesting to note that Feminist Pedagogy practitioners do not refer to their courses as courses, but instead use terminology such as emancipatory projects (Hughes, 2000). To me this suggests an agenda? So is Feminist Pedagogy an educational strategy or an indoctrination strategy? I would like to think that just like communism and Christianity, in its purest form, or should I say theoretical form, Feminist Pedagogy has a lot to offer. But also like communism and Christianity, it can be co-opted with an agenda.

The literature surrounding Feminist Pedagogy suggests that there is a significant amount of conflict and resistance in the environments where it is practiced. I would suggest that the reason for this conflict and resistance was described in a wonderful article by Christina Hughes (2000). She states:

Our concern at *learners'* resistances to the knowledge we offer rests in our belief in the legitimacy of our projects. We actually do believe we have 'better' knowledge at least some, if not most, of the time. In liberating the resistant learner, nonetheless, the danger is that we may seek to subjugate their preferred or prior ways of knowing (p. 62).

One of the key points about Hughes statement is the subjugation of preferred or prior ways of knowing. I would argue that when an educator believes that his or her way of knowing is a superior way of knowing, and attempts to subjugate a learner's way of knowing, especially a way of knowing based on religious or moral principles; we have stopped educating and started indoctrinating.

Wrap up

I hope I have treated this very controversial topic fairly. If I did not, I will probably hear about it. Actually, even if I did I think I am going to hear about it. If you disagree with me I would love to hear from you. I'll be back in two weeks with another episode that is probably a bit less controversial. If you would like to provide feedback on this episode, please visit me at www.dancampbell.us, where you can find transcripts of this and other episodes, links to learning theory resources on the web, and of course a link to my email address. Thank you for listening! See you in two weeks. Until then, go out and learn something new everyday.

References

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