

Transformational Feminist Pedagogy: A Journey from Classroom to Life Lessons

Bijayalaxmi Nanda

Abstract

The pedagogy of teaching and learning is entrenched in the epistemological foundation of the discipline. It is usually prescriptive. Feminist pedagogy, on the other hand, defines itself against the grain. There are as many variants of feminist pedagogy as there are feminist schools of thought. The understanding about the significance of feminist pedagogy in bringing about transformation has to be mediated by the experience of the teacher and the taught. In this paper, the author reflects on her forays into Feminist pedagogy and how the experience transformed her as a teacher. She shares the impact it has on her students and concludes that feminist pedagogy/ pedagogies need to be recognised as a foundational tool for all fields of knowledge.

Author Profile

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"This class changed me. It made me feel heard. It made me see. But it was not easy. Change never is."

- A student from a class on Feminist Theory and Practice

Introduction

Everyone has to discover the joys and sorrows of teaching for themselves. The goals of teaching and engaging with the transaction of knowledge is about numerous things and not all of them are concerned about transformation. The pedagogy of teaching and learning is entrenched in the epistemological foundation of the discipline. It is usually prescriptive. Feminist pedagogy, on the other hand, defines itself against the grain. There are as many variants of feminist pedagogy as there are feminist schools of thought. The understanding about the significance of feminist pedagogy in bringing about transformation has to be mediated by the experience of the teacher and the taught. The extrication of the layers of what changes and how, requires an examination of the life beyond the classroom. Feminist pedagogy does not profess to either prescribe or transform. The purpose of feminist pedagogy is an exploration about the complex nuances of the inclusion and exclusion of women.

The liberatory potential of the pedagogy/pedagogies is the central focus of this paper. It argues for an in-depth examination of the symbiotic relationship between the teacher and the taught in the classroom space in the context of feminist learning. It draws from my personal experiences in the classroom as a teacher and my recent experience in academic administration. While striving to bring out the contestations and conflicts that exist in this terrain, the paper makes a claim about the need for feminist pedagogy/pedagogies to be recognised as a foundational tool for all fields of knowledge.

The Liberatory Potential of Feminist Pedagogy

Is there truly a liberatory potential in Feminist pedagogy? Who sets the parameters of the pedagogy and how does it get translated into classroom transactions? Why does it have a cathartic impact on the students, especially those located at the very end of the spectrum of gender hierarchies? These are the questions that one can attempt to unravel here. My trajectory into feminist teaching was an unusual one compared with my peers. I had not been exposed to any formal training or learning on feminist studies. I was thrown into the teaching of it because of a disinclination of my other colleagues to teach it. It was an optional course offered in the third and the final year of an undergraduate honours degree program in political science. The other optional course offered was very popular amongst students and not many students were drawn by the feminist studies paper offered by me. A very few traipsed into my class. They were the so called misfits, I noted. Some shy, some diffident and some who just wanted

to escape the exemplary discipline set by the other class. None of them joined my course because they wanted to or were passionate or curious about the subject. It was a class low on motivation and impassive. I also had stumbled upon by accident in teaching the class.

However, what I lacked in my formal training or background of the subject, I more than made up by my zeal to learn. I began with reading feminist theories and found the variants of feminism speaking to me. While delving into the subject, I found many of my unresolved questions on patriarchy answered. The answers did not appear from nowhere. It was the variants of feminism, the fact that there could be so many stories disagreeing with each other and yet interwoven within the same perspective, provided me with the much needed clarity. It made me question my own privileges as a teacher, as a person who was “upper caste” and “upper middle class”. It humbled me in many ways. The classroom thus became less hierarchical. Equal conversations about the adverse impact of patriarchy in their lives, the relationship between theory and practice and the need for gender equality became our regular classroom discussions. Those familiar with teaching feminism in classrooms may already know that every person in the feminist class room has a story about the oppressive role patriarchy plays in their lives. It is the starting point of negotiating stories, cathartic experiences, disagreements and sometimes even silences to understand the liberatory potential of the subject. The pedagogy appears in the classroom. It is mapped out by collective consensus. It is a quiet democracy at play.

The feminist pedagogy therefore – in the true sense of the term – by its emphasis on experience and narratives, opens up a window of possibilities to understand how democracy can play itself out when given a chance. Donna Haraway (1991) has famously explained that feminist pedagogy is born out of experience sharing in women’s groups during the women’s liberation movements. This, however, is not the only explanation about how feminist pedagogy appeared as a distinctive category. Others have identified feminist pedagogy as emerging out of retrieving of women’s history, or reading about their struggles for suffrage rights or oppression. Critical theories of learning have influenced the formation of feminist pedagogy. Paulo Freire’s *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (2005) is a case in point. However, feminist pedagogies created a distinctive small ripple in the big river of pedagogies. It presented strategies and tools of critical thinking by introducing a gender lens and asking the learner to cross over, as a manner of speaking, into the unfamiliar waters. It was by breaking or questioning entrenched thinking or stereotypes. While a Beauvoir became oft quoted and agreed upon, a Butler unsettled them.

There were a few takeaways for the teacher. The classroom was to be recognised as a safe and equal space. Disagreements were welcomed and every perspective respected. Stories of sexual abuse and rape in the texts led to triggers and/or experience sharing. Sometimes it was a part of the process of healing and sometimes it led to spirals of anxiety and outrage. All of it however connected us in a form of sisterly solidarity. Any sharing on exploitation or sexual harassment was with the consent of the persons concerned, who were given access to both legal and counselling support systems. Some students spoke at home with their parents about inequalities amongst siblings that were practiced because of gender and some stood up for their mothers against the violence meted by their fathers. Some of it, to great success, transforming the lives of their mothers and sometimes even reforming their fathers. They were, as I was, armed with a new vocabulary. For me it gave wings to my activism.

Feminist pedagogy makes an interesting natural connection between academics and activism. My forays into activism were with raising questions against trafficking of young girls for commercial sexual exploitation and then a campaign against pre-birth elimination of females, i.e. the phenomenon of sex-selective abortion in India because of intense son preference in the country. This activism, in turn, led me to pursuing a Ph. D on the subject, albeit a very late one for someone in my field. So, does feminist pedagogy have a liberatory potential? My answer is in the affirmative.

Some of the students who offered to take the optional course went on to researching in women studies, working in NGOs (non-governmental organizations or not-for-profit organizations) or being invested in the subject on their own. It did transform their lives. It also transformed my life as a teacher. It taught me the importance of maintaining an equal classroom with free-flowing conversations, deep dialogues and an empathetic stance for all. So breaking of hierarchies, experience sharing, evolving consensus through democratic means and the importance of each voice became part of my pedagogy in all classrooms. The feminist pedagogy/pedagogies therefore was no longer confined to my classroom of feminist studies. It became my critical pedagogy for all the classes I taught. I had made the transition to being a feminist teacher, and I was much the better for it. The feminist educator Carolyn Shrewsbury (1997) has aptly said, “feminist pedagogy is a vision of what education might be like but frequently is not.”

Towards a Conclusion

The focus on solidarity, dialogue, equality, dignity, empathy and community combined with an ‘epistemic humility’ did provide us an understanding of feminist pedagogy’s emancipatory potential but it was not without its limitations. It required a certain purity of purpose where the gender lens had to be used everywhere. One had to have a certain rigour in terms of never letting the feminist hat slip. It was a rigour one adopted willingly because it emerged from a rights-based approach. It gave wings in every sense to the idea of equality and the purpose of fighting for the equality for others. It alerted one to ideas of intersectionality attributed to Kimberle Crenshaw, the black legal feminist, and also to the notion of postcolonial or transnational feminism forwarded by Chandra Talpade Mohanty. There is something incredibly transformational in such ideas. Irrespective of the obvious contestations within the range of feminist schools of thought, feminist pedagogy was strengthened by such nuances. Reflexivity, community, reflection and critical analysis are all part of the basic principles which characterise feminist pedagogy/pedagogies.

In my present administrative role as Acting Principal of the college where I teach, I found that feminist pedagogy can be transformational in every respect. The values of feminist pedagogy were central to decision-making too. A participatory decision-making approach while emphasising on collective wisdom, empathy, equity and inclusion for all seemed to be the right road to take. It was not without its pitfalls. Many saw me as too accessible, too soft or too gentle for the role. But feminist pedagogy is transformative to the extent that one cannot be any other way. Two years into it now, I do see an unwilling acceptance of my approach by those who were doubtful. So, the feminist pedagogy also brings about reflection and learning in those on the side-lines, just by witnessing it in practice. I, therefore, make a claim for feminist pedagogy as transformational, not just within women studies classrooms, but to

permeate all education and at all levels as a foundational system of knowledge. The pedagogy can then inform all walks and walks of life where teachers are facilitators of knowledge, leaders are part of an equal community and the lines between the teacher, the taught, the leader and the led are consciously blurred. While this seems idealistic, feminist pedagogies are about creating an ideal world committed to equality, solidarity, democracy and compassion. These are the values reflected in the constitutions of democratic countries. These are the ideals we purportedly by law have to abide by.

References

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