Revisiting Voice, Subjectivity and Circles: Feminist Pedagogy in the 21st Century

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My first exposure to feminist ideas and practices occurred while studying in a school of theology in the mid-1980's. I had heard the word feminist but had never encountered feminist pedagogical practices that were inclusive, safe and attentive to voice. When I was asked by my theology professor to write about my personal experience or reactions to a text I was stymied. That was probably the hardest assignment I had ever been given. During the first days of class I realized the students had as much air time as the professor; I was genuinely bewildered and admittedly disappointed not to hear more from the expert! Adult education and spirituality writer Libby Tisdell (2000) writes that she too had her first exposure to feminism while studying theology, in her case in a Jesuit school (p. 159). Yet, colleagues in adult education and education generally are surprised to hear that feminism dares to rear its head in a church or mosque or synagogue since they do not see churches or religious institutions as progressive in any way. They may have a point given the difficulty in reconciling freedom and religious dogma and rules.

Yet, for all the surprise feminist teaching principles and practices—voice, subjectivity, circles, personal experience-- are used widely in religious education and theological schools. A search of journals such as *Teaching Theology and Religion,* for instance, indicates that feminist pedagogy is *au courant*, albeit in a variety of guises: "liberatory" pedagogies" (Pippin, 1998, p. 177); conversational learning (Kim, 2002, p. 169); dialogue (Chopp, 1995); "wisdom ways" (Fiorenza, 2003, p. 208); banking method rebellion (Coleman, 2007, p. 100). Journals such as *Journal of Adult Theological Education* or *Religious Education* have fewer recent articles on this topic (about 5% of RE articles from 1993-2002), though I suspect that many of us use inclusive, relational and connected knowing practices, and our research interests have shifted to other areas. Perhaps it is time now to step back and examine these benign teaching practices in light of emergent theoretical perspectives which encourage us to question the intersection of power, knowledge and discourse.

Insights from Women's Learning Theory

We have come to understand women and their learning from publications such as *In a Different Voice* (Gilligan (1982), *Women's Ways of Knowing* (Belenky et al.,1986) and from *Women as Learners* (Hayes & Flannery, 2000). These books and ways of thinking have helped many in education to shape a pedagogical practice that honors voice, subjectivity, connected knowing and relationships. In practice this has meant creating safe spaces for people to gather, using small groups to encourage participation, and fostering a reflective practice approach with journal writing and sharing so that personal experience is nurtured. From these texts we have learned a great deal about how women learn, and become aware of several key practices that are integral to women and knowing.

Those interested in an approach to women and learning that incorporates feminism(s) have moved even further to politicize the questions, asking about the implications of learning for women, and whether particular voices and texts have been included and excluded, as well as how women's oppression is deepened or mitigated by the learning. The result of all of these

approaches for religious education has been heightened sensitivity to women as caring and connected knowers. Arguably our field has done well with responding to these challenges and insights.

The Poststructuralist Theory

And here is where the tools of the social scientist, especially the poststructuralists, can be of most help. Along with postcolonialism and postmodernism, poststructuralism serves as a critique of modernity and Enlightenment and raises questions about sureties such as right ways to teach or think, core or real selves, and fixed meanings or definitions. Hemphill (2001) notes that these postfoundational theories collectively challenge universalisms such as self, motivation, rationality, and community, all used as if they applied to all people in all places, regardless of difference signifiers such as race, gender, class, and sexual orientation.

Whereas postcolonialism focused on race and difference, postmodernity is focused on challenging universalisms, and poststructuralism is oriented to knowledge (how it is produced), power (who exercises power at any one time) and discourse (multiple modes of articulation). Although there are many forms of poststructuralism such as the cultural strands (Lyotard 1984), Foucault's (Dreyfus & Rabinow, 1982) work will be used here because of its attention to the body, power, discourse and knowledge, all of which are directly relevant to religious education and learning. Foucauldian poststructuralism challenges universalisms or regimes of truth, the unwritten laws that govern or operate. For instance, within religious education there is a regime or truth that the best teaching is facilitative or participatory. Poststructuralism serves as a challenge to these universal truths (metanarratives) and upsets the notion that all people want to learn in this way. Poststructuralism helps us see how some of our foundational beliefs such as best teaching practices, women learners, and reflective assignments are only partially true and partially helpful. Not all women learn in one way.

Of particular help in this localized analysis is Foucault's basic theory of power (1977), which has four main aspects: (a) power is pervasive and is capillary or operates at the extremities; (b) power is always connected to resistance, (c) power operates through disciplinary practices or techniques that give rise to self-surveillance; and (d) power is productive (good and bad), not repressive (see Kendall & Wickham, 1999). Most tellingly, it is the self-discipline or the ways that we regulate ourselves that is of most interest to Foucault (sitting obediently in our seats, taking wrong directions from our boss, not talking back). I will use specific cases below to further explain the theory, its terminology, and its relationship to how we educate women in religious education.

When Feminism Talks to Foucault

There are as many varieties of feminism as there are feminists, and some of these feminists, especially Marxist feminists, are cautious about alliances with Foucault. One of the key complaints is that Foucault's distrust of universalisms and his commitment to multiplicity actually undermines the solidarity of feminism and its success in uniting at least some women in a critical exploration of structures and their effects on women. Yet, others such as Diamond and Quinby (1988) point out, feminism and Foucault are, in fact, kindred spirits. They are both interested in looking at how power is used in unexpected areas, at the extremities, rather than at the traditional top. Both are interested in discourse and how it includes and excludes, and how

discourse privileges male ways of thinking and knowing. My position here is that Foucault and feminism can work together to challenge unitary identities, and to help undo some taken for granted notions about women and knowing.

Using Foucault To Look At Our Practices In Religious Education
Feminist pedagogical practices that we might attend to are multiple so I am suggestive only here. They represent a way of being and knowing that is common to our communities of practice, due in part to declining enrollments and subsequent small student numbers in schools of theology and seminaries. I will take 2 cases and analyse them through the lenses of power, knowledge production, discourse and resistance.

  Case 1. Susan, a junior academic, attends a religious education conference and takes part in a roundtable with other female academics focused on feminist teaching. They share their stories about teaching, highlighting struggles and successes. Susan is silent, absorbing the culture and the conversation, working hard to understand, and to see how she relates to the conversation. She notes that the more experienced academics seem to say the most and tell the stories that garner the most interest. Then, as if reminded that others are present, these same women turn to Susan, inviting her to speak. Susan creates a story as she goes along, aware of the eyes on her, performing surveillance, the big sisters of the guild watching carefully. They give a polite nod and move on. Afterward she is bewildered by her own response and tries to understand how a group of women in a circle sharing stories could affect her in this way.

  Power: Foucault would be most interested here in how the power shifts or is traced from one person to another and back again, coursing through Susan's veins, literally through her uncomfortable squirming body, into the capillaries or extremities, as he called them. In this case the power is shifting in the room, from person to person, and is not located in any one leader, since the intent of the roundtable is participatory democracy and sharing of women's experience. Yet, the more experienced academics are taking up the air, each speaker in turn effecting self-surveillance, feeling the eyes of the other and wanting to make an acceptable contribution.

  Effects of power: As Foucault notes, it is the exercise or technology of power that produces effects, which can be negative or positive. The effect in this case is to induce fear in Susan; in another scenario it might have produced the effect of continued silence or of compliance. The resistance produced here is Susan's fabrication, her lack of willingness to enter into a trusting relationship with so-called colleagues.

  Technology of power: The key technology of power used here is the ubiquitous circle which is believed to encourage speech, and create safety and community for women. As Brookfield notes, the circle suggests intimacy yet as an exercise power it can be problematic. Women in religious education have been using circles for some time to encourage the use of voice and interaction and collaboration. Although the circle is a symbol of how people can work together to create knowledge and community, it may need to be revisited as a definitive class formation for community and sharing.

  Regime of truth: In this case, the circle and women's contributions to it produce a regime of truth (well accepted belief) that all women in theology are warm and caring. This contributes further to a normalizing discourse of nurturing church workers. This discourse ignores that we are actually different and that other discourses may apply. Yet, in producing this regime of truth, the circle serves to limit women's agency and multiple ways of being.

Case 2: In a feminist theology class the professor uses the reflective practice strategy of asking learners to keep personal learning journals in which they reflect on their past pastoral and personal experience in light of the theological reading. Jeannie is an entering student in this class, keen to learn the language and new feminist pedagogical practices, and to become familiar with the work of Yvonne Gebara, Rosemary Reuther and Elizabeth Fiorenza. When Jeannie receives her assignment she struggles with the amount of personal detail to reveal and with what the professor wants. There is much discussion in class about this course providing the opportunity for a personal learning journey and of her freedom to write as she chooses. The professor suggests Jeannie begin with an autobiographical narrative in which to situate her experience. Jeannie feels the anxiety of the assignment but needs a good grade for further graduate study, so she complies.

Confessional: This situation suggests all the ways in which the benevolent faculty member (pastoral power) who is looking out for Jeannie's best interests replaces the ogre who lectured and passed judgment on students (the sovereign power). In this case, the assignment of a personal autobiography is accompanied by the normalizing discourse of celebrating personal relevance and meaning making, both supposedly important for women's learning. The professor does not exert overt control but rather creates conditions that effect voluntary compliance and self-regulation (Howley & Hartnett, 1992; Miller & Rose, 1993). The journal and other personal writings are "confessionals" in which Jeannie (the penitent) entrusts important and sacred elements of her life to writing and to the professor. The reflective journal and autobiographical narrative are normalizing technologies used to invite voluntary compliance to a vision of what it means to be a caring member of this school and church; it helps to produce subjects who are good feminists. Like verbatims in CPE units, and personal reflections in theological field education, these reflexive texts can discipline students and leave them bare. Furthermore, they can encourage students to provide intense levels of personal information to the person who grades them.

Capillary power. In this case, power is a bio-power, which flows through Jeannie's body, causing anxiety and fear. It has not flowed in the traditional male lines of control but rather in capillary like ways through the innocuous suggestion that she write an autobiography. The effect is a certain degree of fear, and Jeannie responds with compliance, wanting to please the professor and indicate her openness to women's ways of knowing. The tension here is created in part by the paradoxical use of feminist inclusionary practices in a hierarchical system that demands standards, grades and student compliance. Power is situated at the lowest level, in her body, and allows us to see how it effects knowledge acquisition and notions of effective feminist pedagogy.

Technology of power. In this case, the benign reflective assignment is intended to create safety in the learner and to respect her right as a woman to learn in ways that are personal and relevant. Yet, this technology (personal assignment) effects fear and compliance, and forces confessional practices on her. Like the circle, the reflective assignment is an unwitting instruments of control and masculinist knowing.

Infra-laws. In this case, the assignment of personal and experiential writing follows infra-laws (not actual legislation but policies determined by caring and feminist professors) linking power and knowledge. Growth and self-care, common themes in pastoral theology, help shape this exercise of pastoral power. In order to get a good grade, Jeannie follows the practices and assignments set down by the professor. Though she can resist by non-completion, she decides the risks are too great.

These two cases help us see how very basic feminist practices can be viewed from the lens of power, one that is not operating from the top but which is coursing through the entire pedagogical situations, infiltrating bodies and causing effects. While I am not suggesting we abandon female ways of knowing and teaching, I do address in the next section how we might become more aware of the effects of our feminist teaching practices.

Implications for Teaching and Learning
The essentialising of women as care and connected learners is a problem in that it ignores the variety of women's experiences and ways of knowing. A closer look at feminist and poststructuralist teaching practices is a key way of addressing these issues. This closer look helps us view our teaching practices more critically and see how they can accommodate difference and acknowledge the many ways power operates in our accepted discourses and practices.

    Attending to power and resistance. One of the key insights from Foucault's view of power is that it points to how pervasive power is, rearing its head in the minutiae of everyday teaching and learning. Here the theory suggests that we be attentive to the capillaries of power and trace them to the extremities, asking ourselves how our practices affect us and our students. Where are the resistances? Who refuses to follow directions and why (Chapman, 2003)? While we may still choose to use circles, small groups, and personal sharing we will want to make these optional, possible disentangling them from grades, and providing greater variety in our teaching, in order to meet all learner needs. We can use a variety of chair configurations beyond circles and also be careful of what "going around the circle" means (Brookfield, 2001; Foertsch, 2000; Plumb, 1995).

    Recognizing voice. Whereas the creators of *Women's Ways of Knowing* (Belenky et al., 1986) were strong on the need for voice for women, we need to remember that for them voice was metaphoric as was silence. Voice refers to the right to express oneself in multiple ways. As teachers we can encourage voice by providing the option to do personal reflection or to choose other assignments altogether. In encouraging multiple ways of knowing we can honor women's difference, the effects of our infra-laws, and the tyranny of normalizing discourses that want all women to be caring and feeling.

    Critically reflexive practice. Not only do we need to invite students and colleagues to critique, but we as teachers ought to engage in this kind of pedagogical practice ourselves. We need to think about how our syllabi include or exclude women, enforce gender norms, as well as reflect our own personal learning style preferences. We might consider having peer review or keeping our own teaching logs as ways to understand the effects of our own position as pedagogue. Not all learners want to sit in circles and not all learners want to write about their feelings.

    Connecting to the global. The tendency of many of us is to think that we need to keep the discussion directly connected to personal experience. In fact, we ought to think of how our experience relates to the larger global scene and international women's issues generally. We need to think beyond the personal. Moving to a more interdisciplinary approach is a way of incorporating the interlocking issues of feminism, globalization, and learning, and to race, class and gender. With a broader approach feminist pedagogy becomes one small part of the larger social issues that affect women.

Closing Remarks

There is no best way to educate women. After all the years of studying what is best the most we can come up with is that we need to attend to who they are as learners and work with that to embrace difference, voice, and multiplicity. We can and will be responsive to women as learners. We can also recognize the challenge of teaching with feminist ways in institutions that likely are not, all the while preparing them for churches that are not.. This paper challenges us to critique our practices, and reexamine them in light of new and emergent research on conflict and power, and gender theory. This paper problematizes issues of voice, circle pedagogy, consensus and self-reflection, and asks adult religious educators to rethink accepted practices in light of this research.

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