Special Series on Girls and Women in Education

The Everyday Classroom As Problematic: A Feminist Pedagogy

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ABSTRACT

The title of this article is borrowed and adapted from Dorothy Smith’s authoritative text, “The Everyday World as Problematic: A Feminist Sociology.” The basic premise of Smith’s work is that sociology, as a discipline, has operated largely outside women’s experiences and has, despite this, been used as a means of measuring, understanding, and articulating the experiences of women. Likewise, the “everyday classroom” has traditionally operated within patriarchal structures and used practices which have not taken up girls’ experiences as distinct and unique. Therefore, problematizing the pedagogical lens, as Smith has problematized the social sciences we have used to study human relations, leads to, in Smith’s case, new feminist research strategies in the field, and in the case of pedagogy, new classroom practices and a view of curriculum which addresses girls’ experiences in necessary ways. Conventions and strategies used in a single-sex, Grade 10 drama classroom are described in order that the propositions concerning inclusive, feminist pedagogy are grounded in classroom practice.

The title of this article is borrowed and adapted from Dorothy Smith’s authoritative text, “The Everyday World As Problematic: A Feminist Sociology.” Let us imagine for the moment, that sociology and education are parallel worlds. Smith’s premise is that sociology, as a discipline, has operated largely outside women’s experiences and has, despite this, been used as a means of measuring, understanding, and articulating the experiences of women. Similarly, the “everyday classroom” has operated within patriarchal structures and used practices that have not taken up girls’ experiences and knowledge as distinct and unique. Despite this state of affairs, educational research, like the sociology which treats women as objects of
study, continues to assess, evaluate, and report on the successes and failures
(but mostly failures) of girls in school.  

Smith has problematized the very sociology we have used to study hu-
man relations and pointed to new feminist research strategies in the field. 
In the case of education, problematizing our conceptions of curriculum 
can begin to address in necessary ways the question of the exclusion of 
girls’ diverse experiences. To this end, I would propose a view of curricu-

lum in the classroom as a “work-in-progress.”

This article shall begin with a re-visioning of pedagogy in light of Smith’s 
exemplary work in her practice of a sociology for women. From there, it 
will lead to an approach to curriculum using drama education as the 
vehicle, which necessarily engages the diversity of experience found in 
most urban classrooms. The site for observation and discussion is a single-
sex drama classroom for girls. In this case, both the “single-sexness” and 
the drama context offer a fertile setting for the study of an inclusive, 
feminist framework for education.

ACT ONE: OPENING A SPACE FOR GIRLS

One of my greatest perceptions as a feminist teacher in a single-sex school 
is that girls often seem to have a kind of “double perspective.” By this I 
mean that in a girls’ school, gender is somewhat “relaxed”; girls need 
neither assert nor disguise their “femaleness” because they are not, overtly, 
measured against a male “norm” as they often are in their homes or in their 
mixed peer groups. It becomes another question entirely, when we con-
sider whose “femaleness” is held as normative. Nonetheless, in this setting, 
“femaleness” is a given and therefore somewhat neutralized. This is not to 
say that questions of gender are unimportant, but simply that they can be 
problematized differently from the way they are problematized in co-
educational settings. Despite an often White, male Eurocentric curriculum, 
in classroom reflection and discussion girls’ diverse voices can still break 
through. It has been my experience, therefore, when gender is “relaxed,” 
that other subjectivities are foregrounded; this “single-sexness” allows dif-
fences between girls to emerge more strongly. For instance, in a cultur-
ally sensitive, feminist classroom, differences in ways of learning and indeed 
ways of knowing become more finely demarcated. The elaborate concept 
of female experience, then, is played out in a unique and intensified way 
in the single-sex classroom. Race, class, ethnicity, and sexual orientation 
become points of differentiation in single-sex settings for girls. I am sug-
gest that “difference” rather than “sameness” becomes heightened or 
magnified in an all-female environment (Gallagher, 1997). This space for 
diversity, which clearly deviates from the traditional/historical goals of 
single-sex education, in my view, is the greatest advantage of contempo-
rary, single-sex education. What these sites of potentially liberatory educa-
tion do with this advantage is the business of this section.
As I will illustrate, there is a rich body of research that points to many of the benefits of single-sex education. Structural changes alone, however, are not enough to challenge gender-power relations. While Women’s Studies curricula in the universities have come a good distance in exposing and challenging the patriarchal, racist, and class-elitist assumptions of education, much work still needs to be done in pre-university schooling. Smith (1987, 36) suggested that women have learned to set aside as irrelevant, to deny, or to obliterate our own subjectivity and experience. If, in sociology, as Smith is suggesting, women have learned to work inside a discourse that they did not have a part in making, then the same can be said of curriculum in the schools. Daily, in public education, girls are asked to locate themselves inside a canon which has constructed them as “other,” as object of study rather than subject. It has not asked girls the question: From where you stand, what does this look like? Smith (1987) proposes the difficult job of “beginning from ourselves”:

It is this essential return to the experience we ourselves have directly in our everyday worlds that has been the distinctive mode of working in the women’s movement—the repudiation of the professional, the expert, the already authoritative tones of the discipline; the science, the formal tradition, and the return to the seriously engaged and very difficult enterprise of discovering how to begin from ourselves. (p. 58)

If Smith is asking how it is that we can make ourselves the subjects of the sociological act of knowing, then in curriculum we must also begin to see the plot of the story differently. Just as Women’s Studies courses began to ask which texts ought to be studied, woman-centred curricula must re-locate women in relation to what is studied by making their “everyday world” the locus of the curriculum moment. In other words, what must follow the changing discourse and canon is an approach to curriculum which exposes the actual daily social relations between individuals and groups of individuals. Making the “everyday world our problematic” instructs us to look for the “inner” organization generating the ordinary features of that world (Smith 1987, 99). A feminist framework for curriculum can also expose the inner organization of a classroom. It will, however, call for an alternative way to think about curriculum that does not deny the subjects’ interaction with that curriculum.

Smith’s (1987) feminist methodology is interested in realizing a sociology for women that is more than an acknowledgement of a particular standpoint or perspective. It does not universalize a particular experience. It is rather, “a method that from the outset of inquiry, creates a space for an absent subject, and absent experience to be filled with the presence and spoken experience of actual women speaking of and in the actualities of their everyday worlds” (p. 107).

What might all of this mean for a woman-centred curriculum? It demands of it a way of teaching and evaluating which preserves the subject in the experience and assessment of the work of the classroom. That is to say
that doing a curriculum for young women must not revert to turning them into objects for observation. It must open up a space and provide for them the means of grasping the social constructs which shape their experiences. It is a curriculum which asks us to both fill that space with our experiences and to stand back in order to understand them.

**ACT TWO: THE PROCESS**

*We shall not cease from exploration*

*And the end of all our exploring*

*Will be to arrive where we started*

*And know the place for the first time*

T. S. Eliot

To begin, I would suggest that drama education practices hold a view of curriculum—curriculum as a “work-in-progress”—that helps us to “treat one another as authoritative speakers of our experience and concerns” (Smith 1987, 35). Drama education also offers girls a means of understanding their diverse experiences as rooted in the same matrix of relations. The first task of the drama practitioner is to allow for the richness of the particular, rather than the narrowness of the general. I am using, here, process drama (O’Neill, 1995) as a metaphor for ways in which one might begin from a pedagogy of inclusion. I choose drama because its way of working employs certain strategies which may be useful in a variety of other contexts. I could easily argue that drama is an end in itself, a worthwhile educational pursuit, but for the purposes of this paper I will attempt to extrapolate from the discipline of drama some of the key strategies that lead to engagement in the curriculum moment.

The first task many drama teachers will take up is the building of a community in the classroom and this is also the beginning of making space for diverse perspectives. This task is not to be taken lightly; a community must be created in a classroom, it does not naturally exist. The group, and not the individual, becomes the most important source of social analysis. For feminist theory, this would mean a new politics of community to accompany the rich body of knowledge of the last decade around questions of identity and pluralism. For teachers, it means beginning with the specific contexts we face. Some teachers feel strongly about including journal writing in their practice for the freedom of thought and expression it offers. Others employ physical arrangements like “the circle” for discussion, in order to move away from the more hierarchical arrangements of traditional classrooms with teachers at the head of the class and “trouble-makers” in the foreground so as to be more easily monitored by teachers. Still others employ specific “speaking out” strategies for group discussions so that the speaking is not monopolized by the more outspoken or confident voices in the room. While these tactics show a commitment to non-hierarchical, more communal configurations in the classroom, they are merely a starting place. The more onerous task of re-creating a curriculum
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of inclusion will require a much greater paradigm shift for those who "write" and those who "deliver" curriculum. To do this, we must begin with a holistic view of curriculum, its personal, social, and epistemological dimensions which explicate it as more than distinct subjects or course material to be taught.

Process drama, also known as educational or creative drama, employs this kind of holistic curriculum which I refer to as a “work-in-progress.” This does not mean that the curriculum is unstructured and without purpose. On the contrary, the teacher’s task is highly structured for she must continually be preserving the centrality of the students and their questions in the development of the story. Clar Doyle (1993, p. 6) reminds us that who is learning precedes what is learned. The story, however, is not the imitation of some actual or invented story, but is more like making a quilt, to borrow again from Dorothy Smith. In process drama, the substance of the curriculum is constantly re-invented precisely because it is built up from the particular “points d’appui” (Smith, 1987) of the players in the game. You are not “modifying” (to use the current terminology) to integrate or fit the students in, but are, rather, operating from a position of inclusion which inexorably produces a different quilt each time. As Smith’s feminist research has an open-ended quality, so too does process drama because what is included in the weaving is different in each new context.

Curriculum, like sociology, is never neutral. It must begin from a particular point of view. In drama, the starting place, important as it is, is continually challenged by other perspectives in the room. It is the teacher’s job to stimulate reflection and talk by connecting the generation of ideas to real human activity. As modern technology continues to remove our world from actual and into abstracted or “virtual” realities, teachers must expose more explicitly the relationships between created or imagined experience and real experience. In Smith’s research methods for women, she aims to construct perspective as a methodological procedure. Curriculum may also have a perspective, fluid in nature, when the questions are not pre-determined by the teacher, but rather, come from the inquiry of the students. The searching and the reflection matter as much as the “answers” to the questions. Like artists manipulating a medium, students uncover their questions and challenge the course of the curriculum.

How can curriculum proceed without a script? The teacher first must find an imperative, a focus for her community. The curriculum often begins with what Cecily O’Neill (1995, p. 19) calls a pre-text. The source itself might be historical or topical, fictional or factual. Most subject disciplines begin with a source which explores in some way the “material” the teacher wishes to teach, but when this source becomes a pre-text it is no longer an end in itself, but a springboard into the particular concerns of the group. The students are not passive consumers of the material, but active creators of knowledge. The motion of the exploration is forward-moving but non-sequential. It is not about moving from point A to point B, and re-playing all the episodes in between, but is instead about drawing out, peering inside, and manipulating from a variety of vantage points. I
am reminded here of the esteemed Canadian playwright and journalist Rick Salutin (1997), who in an article in the Globe and Mail challenged our seemingly perverse preoccupation with conclusions as if the “getting there” really didn’t matter much at all. The process, he claims, is democratic if it is marked by reasoning together, not just having your say at the end. He writes:

It’s like the way the experience of a life tends to be superior to any particular outcomes it may have, especially if those are defined in terms of “success”—which is almost always less satisfying than was anticipated (p. D1).

AN ILLUSTRATIVE CLASSROOM EPISODE

I shall now try to illuminate (without becoming too specialized and inaccessible) these principles by referring to a particular process drama I was involved in with my own students in order to make concrete some of the strategies I am referring to. Let me begin with Smith’s (1987, p. 188) simple notion that seeing the “everyday world as problematic” is seeing that social relations external to it are present in its organization. The following pre-text is taken from an editorial story in a British teen magazine. It describes a fifteen-year-old girl, Kelly Turner, who learns from her boyfriend of a violent, racial attack on a south-east Asian boy in which he and his friends were involved. While this may sound like a story which is meant to teach a moral lesson, it is moreso a pre-text that will allow students to explore the “relations of ruling” or the social constructs of their realities. Process drama often begins with such a dilemma: a choice to be made, a decision to take, a side to stand on. The teacher’s task begins with pulling different perspectives into focus by employing certain conventions which freeze a problem in time in order to explore it from all vantage points. The teacher acts something like the sociologist here in that she has special skills that help students to shift the lens through which they are focusing in order to see the dilemma from a variety of perspectives and begin to see plainly the ways in which our “perspective” is shaped by the social constructs organizing that perspective. The “drama” aspect of this lesson affords students the possibility of living, however briefly, inside the walls of the dilemma: should Kerry tell what she knows and risk her own safety. The reflection (both written and oral) aspect of the lesson affords students the possibility of standing outside the dilemma and questioning.

At a particular point in the drama exploration, certain exercises which asked the students to create still images representing “illustrations” of key events were used to “freeze” the frame or hold the action in order to reflect on the images and collect the questions they had. This kind of manipulation of time is often used by drama teachers in order to allow students the time to digest the ideas and recommend possible changes. Theoretically, this means that there is time to hear the thinking in the room so that positions are shaped collectively as ideas are sharpened one against the
other. The students were next asked to prepare a short scene which would re-create four different contexts in Kelly’s life: her home, her peers, her school, and the police station. The drama elements here include: a composed or prepared improvisation that sets up a context, and roles adopted by the students in that context. The teacher then moves into these various contexts, herself in the role of Kelly Turner, thereby calling on the students to improvise the action spontaneously. Moving a character through different social contexts illustrates facets of that character and key moments in a life. Learning about drama happens through engagement with the activity, not as is often suggested, through perfecting a performance technique. But it is also here in the engagement with the activity that the source, the pre-text is transformed and the curriculum is expanded as the students interact with the material. They discover that people behave very differently in different contexts and that their own thinking about the dilemma is largely shaped by the “roles” they take on.

The connections between the “dramatic elsewhere” and the context of the classroom are naturally made by the students. Courtney (1990) offered that the actual world uses enactment for externalizing imaginings in many media, while our dramatic world uses enactment to test our knowing of actuality. Change, then, can take place in the creative imagination. If, as Courtney argued, the “as if” is the way we understand life and existence, then the player may experience the dramatic world as an alternative to the actual world, but one that, beyond metaphor, is related to and can influence the actual. In short, the fictional, while presenting a particular view of truth, also challenges previous understandings of “the truth” of a situation. It is these new possibilities for students that engage them in the mental work of roleplay in drama.

In a more specialized article, one might go into much greater depth, but my purpose here is to begin a dialogue about curriculum that might include and engage students actively in their learning. Drama here is a tool or, more specifically, a dialectical approach to learning which illustrates a methodology, a parallel world, reminiscent of Dorothy Smith’s sociology for women.

**ACT THREE: THE FIELD WHERE WE LABOUR**

Feminist researchers in education are always in a process of re-thinking the institution in order to better serve the interests of girls and women. The debate between single-sex and co-educational schooling has a long and tumultuous history, with those who claim to have the best interests of girls in mind, at opposing ends of the argument. I am not proposing that single-sex education is definitively the best education for all girls, nor is it the aim of this article to recapitulate this perennial debate. It is useful nonetheless, to relate the important curriculum question of “inclusion” to the context of which it is a part in this illustration: a Catholic, single-sex
classroom for girls. Smith’s practice of “beginning from ourselves” is taken up, here, in a particular way.

Curiously, it is the notion of “segregation” in girls’ schools which most disturbs those who view co-education as the pursuit of egalitarian schooling. I am struck by the primary claim of co-education as a more “natural,” more “equal” grouping for girls, giving them greater “access” to the “preparation” for the competition and challenges they will face in the “real” world. I am struck by this thinking because co-educational schools themselves segregate boys from girls both explicitly and implicitly in their organization and in their operation. Gender discrimination is a fact of life in most co-educational settings. Separating children according to their sex is considered by many teachers to be a routine and easy means of organization. Dividing children into groups of boys and girls is often used by teachers as a controlling device (Skelton, 1993, p. 335). Schools do not deliberately set out to teach sex differences, but Sara Delamont (1990, p. 93) argues that schools are often more conservative about sex roles than either the home or the wider society. Girls now have a right to education, but Zimmerman (1988, cited by Spender, 1982, p. 123) suggests that a mixed-sex education could undermine that right by subordinating the interests of girls to those of boys under the pretence of equality.

A more serious problem still, which Gaskell (1989, p. 12) points to, can be seen in the large body of literature on sex differences which often attempts to explain what it is about girls that leads to their lack of achievement, rather than the problems with the institution or the curriculum which inhibit girls’ success. Although being in a girls’ school does not necessarily mean freedom from a sex-biased curriculum, in drama education we can begin with the complex material of the girls themselves, for they do not have to be defined and understood primarily in contrast to boys and within the reinforced framework of “sex differences.” Equity-centered teachers can also dismiss the basic assumption that it is the girls who must be changed and begin to move away from traditional divisions of boys’ and girls’ subjects.

Patricia Bauch (1989, p. 5), a researcher in single-sex schooling and girls’ education, presented a paper at the Annual General Meeting of the National Catholic Educational Association in Chicago a decade ago. In her research she was particularly concerned with the potential loss of gender-specific benefits when a single-sex school for girls becomes co-educational. This is significant research for the late twentieth-century political climate of “equal” opportunity and economic viability in Ontario, as school districts opt for co-education because of its appearance of inclusivity and its economic “sense.”

From her findings, she concludes that while boys’ schools resemble the factory model of schooling (structures, functional, economically efficient, and focused on a delivery system of education), girls’ schools resemble an ecological model of schooling: one that fosters inclusiveness, interaction, caring, values, and attention to the context of education not as a delivery system but as a way of life. She found that achievement advantages found
in Catholic schools can be attributed to single-sex Catholic schools, not Catholic schools generally. These girls’ schools resemble more a community and reflect both Catholic and Catholic values. They have a larger percentage of non-Catholic as well as minority students, place greater emphasis on the social teachings of the Church and make serious attempts to attract disadvantaged students. Further, that they demonstrate a more caring atmosphere in that teachers take time to respond to students’ needs, and principals perceive the school as creating a caring and benevolent environment. Such girls’ schools also express global concerns such as stewardship and compassion for others.

Compared to boys’ schools, girls schools were particularly strong at affirming the view that it is acceptable for women to seek careers outside the home, while boys’ schools strongly favoured traditional views regarding women and careers (p. 9). In another study, on the sustained effects of single-sex schooling, Bauch (1989) cites findings that suggest that young women who attended single-sex secondary schools held significantly less stereotypical attitudes about the role of women in the workplace compared to their counterparts who attended co-educational schools, and that women who attended girls’ schools were also likely to be more actively involved in political affairs by the end of college. They scored higher on humanitarian attitudes such as wanting freedom in making decisions, favouring a congenial work environment and desiring interesting and important work (Lee & Marks, 1988, cited by Bauch, 1989, p. 11).

In its comprehensive and critical look at single-sex education for girls, the American Association of University Women Educational Foundation’s 1998 report, “Separated by Sex,” suggests that currently in America it is not single-sex schools in general, but Catholic, single-sex schools in particular that are offering the greatest advantages to girls. They suggest that this is primarily because Catholic schools tend to be smaller and more academically focused. But most important, they offer greater social mobility to a more traditionally and historically disadvantaged (by race, class, or ethnicity) population.

Clearly the perennial debate between single-sex or co-education for girls has no facile conclusions. The case I am making here for single-sex schooling for girls is one of a temporary grouping because separatism is not a goal in itself. As I see it, single-sex schools merely begin to interrupt the cycle of oppression and allow girls the much needed space to re-articulate the multiplicitous construction of the “self” before taking on the larger and more dichotomous nature of gender relations.

**FINALE**

Giroux (1981) was asking important questions concerning the production, distribution, and evaluation of knowledge in the field of curriculum a long time ago, insisting that one purpose of curriculum is to generate possibilities for individual and social emancipation. He explains:
In other words, knowledge has to be made problematic and has to be situated in classroom social relationships that allow for debate and communication (p. 106).

Drama education problematizes knowledge because it draws on the experiential, cultural, and contextualized knowledges in the classroom. It does not work toward an objective claim to truth, nor does it support a passive view of students in the curriculum enterprise. Educational drama asks students to commit to possibilities and its use of collaborative structures invites competing elements and frames of reference. In so doing, drama exposes and challenges classroom social relationships.

As we navigate our way into a new millennium, thirteen years after the publication of Smith’s work, we are dealing with an even richer diversity of race, ethnicity, and culture in Canada within ever more conservative government policies closing in on important areas of schooling like the arts. The experience of doing classroom drama calls on the private parts of ourselves to work with the public parts and reveals the essential tension of the individual and the community. It, therefore, remains necessary to continue to engage in a dialogue about important curriculum questions like “inclusion.” The last decade of retrenchment, however, sooner had us abandon such debate in education, in favour of a return to calcified methods and patriarchal institutions. Yet, if the framework of “The Everyday Classroom As Problematic: A Feminist Pedagogy” begins to expose the social relations that construct our classroom realities, our understanding of and dissatisfaction with these realities may be the necessary antecedents for positive change.

NOTES


2. This particular source is borrowed from a drama workshop at Toronto’s Young People’s Theatre, facilitated by Jonathon Neelands and Warick Dobson.

REFERENCES


