Feminist Strategies for Teaching about Oppression: The Importance of Process

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About the Authors

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Abstract

This paper describes the authors’ approaches to teaching courses and workshops on oppression from a feminist, process-oriented framework using racism as a case example. From the perspective of feminist theory the authors suggest that the way we teach about oppression is as important as the content itself. The process-oriented, feminist approach is discussed, and strategies and techniques for teaching about racism are offered.

Setting the Context

This paper is the product of three women who joined together in a writing group for the purpose of mutual support and colleagueship. We are all teachers and trainers and have taught classes and led workshops on oppression for many years. The academic courses we teach are the Psychology of Racism, the Psychology of Oppression, and Internalized and Externalized Oppression. We had been working together, reading, critiquing, and supporting one another’s work, when the idea developed of writing a paper together about the ways in which we teach. In putting the paper together, we talked with one another about how our various identities – African American, Jewish, Christian; heterosexual and lesbian; working and middle class – have shaped our understanding and experience of oppression. We also became increasingly aware of how much our work is shaped by feminist theory and a process orientation. In this paper, we will focus on the contributions of feminist theory to a process-oriented approach to oppression in general. Strategies and techniques for teaching about racism, in particular, will be provided as a case example. There are assuredly differences in the various types of oppression, and we would deal with different subject matter if we were teaching about heterosexism, sexism, or Jewish oppression. We believe, however, that the same basic principles of process are relevant for teaching about all forms of oppression.

Our effort was a collaborative one right from the beginning. This paper, written in a feminist voice, describes our teaching. It is grounded in our own experiences of feminist theory and practice.
**Why a Feminist Approach?**

Feminist theory provides the theoretical framework for our work. We believe that teaching and learning about oppression is a collaborative venture. We share with students our conviction that it is important to focus on our classroom interaction, the interrelationships among all participants, and we maintain that learning should be grounded in the life experiences of each participant. Honoring life experiences in a cooperative environment is fundamental because those experiences serve as a springboard for examining and understanding the dynamics of oppression. This emphasis is based on feminist ideas of connection, context, and partnership, which expand our vision of human capacity.

In her book *The Chalice and the Blade*, Riane Eisler (1988) identifies two models of human interaction. First is the dominator model, symbolized by the blade, which reflects the idea that life can be taken or ended in order to win superiority or domination. This “male” model involves ranking, and, although Eisler specifically speaks of ranking in terms of gender relations, this notion of ranking is used with any number of diverse groups in either / or fashion – white over black, straight over gay, wealthy over poor.

The second model is the partnership model, symbolized by the chalice. In this “female” model, sharing and cooperation displace notions of ranking. The focus is on the “life-generating and nurturing power of the universe” (p. xvii).

Eisler maintains that it is not men who are the problem however, but, rather, the idea, or philosophy, of domination and superiority. Her book addresses the question of how we can organize men and women to be oriented toward the whole rather than the half of humanity. She believes that a “better future is possible” for human society and sees the possibility that there can be societies in which “difference is not necessarily equated with inferiority or superiority” (p.xvii). It is this aspect of her theory which interests us as feminists who work to end all forms of oppressive domination.

For this paper, we were fortunate that one of us, JoAnne Jones (1985), had researched how whites became engaged in antiracist work and how they sustained themselves in this work. In JoAnne’s research, two main findings emerged: connections and ordinarness. JoAnne’s interviews with antiracist activists revealed that they had become keenly aware of the experience of “the Other.” For all of them, their involvement in antiracism work was inseparable from themselves. For each of them, there was a turning point in their lives which had to do with connection, with some very strong bond that they had with a person of color. To not to do something about racism meant that they would be breaking an important connection of love.

Another part of what JoAnne witnessed was the significance of ordinary events. When she asked someone what, for them, constituted a moral dilemma involving a question of race, the responses all had to do with the ordinary. They weren’t large questions such as, “Should I give my life for the cause?” Those weren’t the dilemmas. They were ordinary dilemmas such as, “What do I say to the taxi driver who tells a racist joke?” “Do I respond to every incident?” One person, for example, spoke of referring to someone as a black psychologist and asked herself why she didn’t just say psychologist, why the adjective black? Those questions are not large drumroll issues, and yet they are the kinds of daily, constant experiences which are the reality of life. They are a kind of bombardment.

The white people JoAnne interviewed had very little difficulty noticing examples of moral dilemmas because the examples were always present. When overhearing a conversation while standing at a subway stop, for example, they asked themselves, “Do I interrupt or let it go?” In the context of classroom teaching, one strategy is to ground people in what really happens every day, to help them be more aware of the extraordinary in the ordinary, to see that these are the contradictions that happen when the Other is experienced as a real human being.

**Why a Process Orientation?**

We assume that the phenomenon of oppression is permeated with fear, uncertainty and ignorance and that people bring these feelings with them into educational settings where oppression is addressed. This assumption is the primary reason why we place significant emphasis on process. For us, process means that we are asserting that how we discuss issues of oppression is as important as what we discuss. From our experience, we know that it isn’t information alone that educates people. If it were, we would already have a very different world than we do.

In our work, we pay particular attention to how the issues of oppression get discussed. Attention to relationship is fundamental to feminist thought, and,
in classroom interactions, there is always a relational element: The relationship of the content to oneself, the student-teacher relationship, and the relationship between students are key in the educational endeavor. When teaching about oppression, we must recognize the importance of acknowledging the various voices of all participants and must provide space and opportunities for those voices to emerge.

We want to differentiate constructive from destructive process. A constructive process means that we work on building: (1) an increased understanding of oppression; (2) an increased ability to combat oppression by recognizing our own biases and behaviors; and (3) an increased ability to identify the oppressive ideas and behavior of others, while at the same time being committed to their growth and development.

Process can be destructive when we lose sight of the person's potential for learning, growth, and change. Destructive process can take the form of withdrawal, attacking one another, or invalidating one another's comments. We can and do challenge oppressive thinking and interrupt oppressive behavior in the classroom, but we never attack individuals. As teachers, we must also pay attention to the destructive process, which can happen when students’ discomfort becomes too high. Often after continued confrontation without the presence of respect and empathy, students may become unresponsive, tearful, angry, or aggressive. Certainly, however, some discomfort must be present to facilitate change because change cannot occur if individuals remain quiescent and unaffected.

In our work, we recognize that the physical setting of the learning space must accommodate constructive process as well. Attention must be paid to physical comfort. The structure also needs to maximize interaction because our expectation is that participants in classes or workshops on oppression will be talking to one another, not just to the instructor. To facilitate constructive process people need to be able to see each other unobstructed by podiums, large desks, or conference tables. Chairs should be arranged accordingly. Being able to see each other also facilitates learning each other’s names.

We take the position that no education is value free and that it is important to make one’s values explicit to the group. When we teach about oppression, we always begin with a set of working assumptions and guidelines. We openly acknowledge that racism is difficult to talk about. To create safety, we begin with guidelines of confidentiality and mutual respect. We stress the importance of acknowledging our fears and anxieties and of speaking from our own experiences. We do not assign fault or blame for the existence of oppression, but this does not absolve us of the responsibility of addressing racism or other forms of oppression. Our working assumptions are that racism affects everyone and that dealing with the impact of racism is a lifelong process. Like the participants, we, as instructors, have not completed that process. We are on the way, on the road, “en la lucha.” We do not prescribe a specific outcome for our students. We present them with the questions, the issues of conflict, and some of the strategies that we have used to answer questions and resolve conflict. Again the process is our focus; when the process is good, the outcome will also be good.

Focus on process also means paying attention to individual narratives. Rather than trying to negate or avoid these stories. We allow the anecdotal material. When students share their stories, we help them to explore the implications of their experiences and encourage them to take the next steps to the more encompassing, meta, level. Drawing on self in this way is often an important first step in the process of learning about oppression. In fact, it is an important part of the process to encourage the intentional use of personal stories. In the following section, we will present some illustrations of how instructors can help students use their own experiences in constructive ways.

**Practice Applications**

**Naming**

At the beginning of a course in which issues of oppression will be discussed, it is important to legitimize the voices of everyone, to focus on the here and now and on students’ interactions. We want students to have a chance to speak in the group early on. One way to do this is by asking students to talk about their names. The naming exercise, often done in groups of two or three, is designed to have participants reflect on the meaning and history of their names and to begin to share themselves in the group. The exercise asks participants to focus on components of their names that provide a source of pride for them. We find this experience an important one when teaching about oppression because one of the characteristics of oppression is that dominant groups (those with greatest social power) have
assumed the right to name the oppressed, both literally and figuratively. African-American students, for example, often talk about the slave origins of their surnames, yet express pride in the origin of their given names. For some white students, reflecting on the meaning of their names helps them to connect with their own cultural roots while also beginning to realize their white privilege.

**Early Memories**

One way to ground students’ understanding of racism in their own personal experiences is by asking them to focus on their earliest race-related memory. We believe that the earliest race-related memory helps to shape our understanding and emotional reaction to race and racism. This exercise typically demonstrates that people are starting at different points in their awareness of racism. Some students remember something from toddlerhood. For others, race and racism did not enter their consciousness until much later. The early memories exercise also allows them to gain access to the emotions that they have about race. Typically, feelings of fear, confusion, pain, and anger quickly come to the surface when people are asked to reflect on these experiences. Early experiences also underscore both how deep and tenacious the roots of racism are.

This exercise can be done in many different ways. The primary task of importance is to ask people to reflect silently on their first race-related memory and to ask them to notice what thoughts and emotions are associated with it. Usually, students are encouraged to process those memories through interpersonal sharing. It can also be useful to model the exercise for students. For example, one of us, Patricia Romney, has occasionally shared her earliest memory of race, which was of playing outside a little girl’s house when she was eight years old. After a while, the little girl decided to go inside and ask her mother for some cookies. When she came outside again, she announced, “I can’t play with you anymore.” When Pat asked why, the girl said, “Because you’re colored.” Pat said, “What’s that?” The girl answered, “I don’t know.” A beginning friendship was interrupted for a reason neither girl understood. But each understood in her own way that something was supposed to be wrong or bad about Pat.

Now let’s suppose the little white girl in this story, or a story like it, now grown up, is in a class discussion about race. On recovering her earliest memory, triggered by this exercise, she might feel regret or guilt. She might feel tremendous anxiety about talking about this experience, especially in front of people of color. A person of color telling a story similar to Pat’s would likely reexperience the painful emotions that were associated with the original event. Feelings of anger or self-doubt might now be present. The emotional responses of both white students and students of color can help all parties understand why a discussion of racism may be difficult. Allowing students to air these feelings in a safe environment removes some of the emotional barriers to understanding racism.

We do this exercise because we want students to recognize how racism and other forms of oppression affect people. The early memories exercise helps students remember and acknowledge their own experiences. As the stories are told, students’ empathy for one another increases. An empathic response to another’s story forges a connection to the “Other”. This connection lays the groundwork for further learning.

**The Constructive Use of Self**

The self is an important source of data both for the student as well as the instructor. The nature of teaching and learning about oppression requires a kind of self-disclosure which may be different from what goes on in other courses. In a process-oriented approach to teaching about oppression, instructors, in particular, are called upon to use themselves in many ways. The willingness of instructors to tell their own stories, for example, legitimizes the risks that students are asked to take in the course. In addition, these stories provide information and clarification, offer points of identification for students at different stages of development, and serve as a source of inspiration.

In our classes, we talk about how our identities shape our understanding and experience of oppression. In talking with each other about how we use that understanding in our teaching, we specifically asked ourselves the question, “How do you use yourself in the context of teaching about oppression?” Below are samples of what we each had to say.

BEVERLY: As an African-American woman, one of the ways in which I use myself in teaching about racism is that I am very self-disclosing, more so than I would be in other settings, about my own experiences in dealing with racism. A lot of my examples have dealt
with situations involving my children. I think that that is particularly powerful in working with students. First, because I teach a predominantly white class, this helps the students see an experience of childhood which is typically different from their own. For example, I talk about taking my son to the science museum and seeing the pictures of the NASA (National Aeronautics and Space Administration) space program, at a time in which he was thinking about being an astronaut, and being dismayed that there were no astronauts of color portrayed. Although they had female astronauts and male astronauts, none of them were astronauts of color. I talk about my frustration when I go to the library and look through books and books and books trying to find some that have children of color in them. I share those kinds of examples with my class, and that brings ideas we are talking about to a very concrete level.

One disadvantage, though, which is why it’s helpful for me to use myself but for them to use themselves as well, is that, because I am a member of a targeted group, there is a risk in students personalizing so that they might say, “Oh well, you’re black, so you’re sensitive on this topic,” or “You’re exaggerating: things aren’t that way.” And when students are given opportunities to explore these issues from their own points of view – for example, being sent to the library to look at books themselves or being asked to watch TV and pay attention to race or being asked to go out and interview somebody on these issues – they are using themselves to get information, rather than relying on me.

When a person of color teaches a course on racism, the dynamics are different then when a white person does it. It is a double-edged sword. I think I have a certain credibility in that students say, “You’ve experienced it: you can really tell us.” On the other hand, it’s also possible to deny, to say “Of course, what would you expect? People of color are sensitive or overly sensitive to these issues.” I always talk in class, however, about the fact that I do have multiple identities. So that, while I obviously have a perspective as an African American and as a woman, I am also middle class in terms of my background. I am Christian, heterosexual, able-bodied. And I also have experience in those terms of being in the dominant group. So, talking about my own understanding and experience of what it is like to be dominant in those areas I think is helpful in making that linkage so that students can recognize the ways that they are targeted and begin to look at their own multiple identities. So, whether they are targeted by race or not, they may be targeted in other areas. For students who are targeted by race, helping them to recognize that they are also dominant and have had both aspects of that experience is helpful for them in understanding the full range of oppression.

PAT: My use of self involves presenting myself both as a teacher and as a learner and telling students in a number of different ways that I am in the process of thinking about these issues – that I haven’t gotten everything totally solved; I still have questions.

I sometimes discuss my questions in class. I know that a question that I have is probably shared by someone else in the room. With regard to race specifically, I am always struggling as a teacher who is a member of a targeted racial group to understand the experiences of whites when they confront their own racism. In the last Psychology of Oppression class I taught, I shared with my students that I could not fully understand why white students found it so upsetting to be called a racist. I explained that from an African American perspective, my thinking is that, of course, white people are racist. Racism is embodied in the culture and very often taught in the home. Many people of color maintain that a person must admit (confront) her or his racism before she or he can attempt to change it. I still believe this, but, on the other hand, in working with white students, I believe I must understand their process before I can help them to change.

Both I and the students of color in class have begun to understand that the term *racism* evokes for many whites an all-or-nothing feeling. Whites often feel as if they are being told they are all bad, the incarnation of evil in some way, that they are being equated with the worst bigots in history – Hitler, Bull Connor, those who have murdered black children in churches. They think that they are being identified with beliefs and actions of which they honestly do not see themselves as capable. This realization has helped me to move all students away from name-calling of any kind directed toward people. To say “That is a racist idea” is okay. To point out
racist behavior is fine. Naming both of these is important, even essential. Naming another class member a racist is a nonproductive dead end which drives people away.

In using myself in a constructive way, I adapt a here-and-now perspective. I talk not only about what has been hard for me in the past as I was learning about these issues but also about what’s hard for me as issues arise in class. As a black woman, I respond in an immediate way to process what’s going on in the class and inside of me. I explicitly present myself as a role model in the sense of being in process and struggling on these issues.

JOANNE: I very consciously use myself. I try to push myself to a greater self-disclosure than I engage in in other classes. I consciously use parts of myself to underscore general conceptual points that I either have made or think are important to make around oppression. I use examples from both the dominant and subordinate parts of myself. I talk about the components of internalized oppression as I have experienced them. When talking about self-doubt as one of the characteristics of internalized oppression, for example, I then talk about my own feeling of being an imposter sometimes – you know, the idea that pretty soon they will come around and ask the real professor to come in. I talk about the impact of feeling silenced in class as a student. I describe how difficult it was for me to ever speak in a group and where that came from in my own history. I talk about the privilege of being unconscious about racism as a white person. I talk about how I can be and often am unconscious of the impact of skin color. In spite of all of the work that I do, I can be unaware of white privilege. I also talk about the consequences or penalties of always being conscious of sexism as a woman.

I also describe what I call my crossover experience. I was once unaware of heterosexual privilege and assumed that the world was heterosexual. I would ask questions like, “Do you have a girlfriend or boyfriend?” assuming that everyone was interested in partners of the other sex. Now that I am in a lesbian relationship, it is very different. I am now aware of how many times in a day I am confronted with people making assumptions about me and my life, and I’m forced to constantly decide how safe it is to self-disclose.

So, I use myself and my life as examples. I am aware that the purpose of the course or workshop is not for me to have the chance to release feelings about things. I will talk more or less depending on whether I think it will be helpful. My experience is that I tend to err on the side of brevity.

**Tools for Understanding**

One conceptual tool that helps us understand the process in which students are engaged is the concept of racial identity development. If instructors provide opportunities for cognitive and affective exploration of racism, then, inevitably, students will experience changes in their perceptions of their own racial identity. These changes can be understood as part of a predictable developmental process (Tatum, 1992). It is very important for instructors to understand this process. Helms (1990) and Cross (1991) have explicitly described the stages of racial identity development that instructors might observe in a class with race-related content.

Exposure to such content often triggers a shift in one’s stage of racial identity development. For white students, this shift might mean going from being totally unaware of white privilege to becoming very self-conscious about being white, with concomitant feelings of guilt because of unearned advantage. For students of color, the developmental shift may mean newly recognizing the extent to which their own lives have been affected by racism and, consequently, struggling with the feelings of frustration and anger that may accompany that awareness. The student who is feeling victimized and angry will have little patience for the guilty tears of the privileged student. The white student overwhelmed by guilt may feel defensive and resentful at what may seem to be the misplaced anger of students of color.

Handling the emotions generated as a result of the classroom interactions of students who are at different developmental stages provides a challenge for the instructor. One task is to help all students clarify their own experiences sufficiently so that they can avoid becoming mired in debilitating feelings. Another task is to help each group understand the struggle of the other. Observing that there is not only a predictable process of development for one’s own group, but also a process of development experienced by others helps generate the empathy we seek.

Providing students with a conceptual framework for
understanding this developmental process facilitates growth and puts others’ emotional responses into perspective. There are a number of articles discussing these stages which can be made available to students (e.g., Parham, 1989). It can also be helpful to make role models available through the use of guest speakers who can talk about their own experiences in working through issues of racism.

Challenges and Rewards in Teaching about Oppression

We have discussed some of the theory which underpins our work and some of the practical techniques that we use in teaching about oppression. Teaching about oppression is in many ways similar to other kinds of teaching, but we also believe that there are particular challenges for instructors who introduce this subject matter in the classroom. Below are some of the challenges that we have confronted in our teaching.

The Hierarchy Challenge

There is a lot of controversy about which of the various manifestations of oppression may be most dominant or fundamental. We avoid the pull to rank-order oppressions, neither creating or reinforcing a belief in such a hierarchy. Our approach is to discuss the interrelatedness of oppression. We make it clear to students that focusing on a given issue of oppression should not be construed as identifying that issue as most important or causal. One way of conveying this idea is by explicitly discussing the connections between the various forms of oppression.

Related to the issue of hierarchy is the concern that some students express when they feel their own oppression is underrepresented in classroom discussion. A lesbian student, for example, might feel that heterosexism is not fully addressed. A Jewish student might feel that the oppression of Jews has been neglected. On the other hand, when the other “isms” are included in a discussion of racism, students of color may feel that the discussion of racism has been shortchanged. The challenge to the educator is to make connections between forms of oppression and to provide resources and a conceptual overview that enables students to see the interrelated dynamics of oppression.

The Emotional Challenge

All process-oriented and experiential learning involves the use of one’s emotions. Emotions are an important vehicle for change, but the constancy of working at an affective level can be taxing for both student and instructor. Instructors need to monitor the energy level of the group. Are students becoming immobilized by their own responses to readings, videos, memories, or classroom discussions? A constructive learning process allows appropriate outlets for the expression of the range of emotions students may experience. Journal writing is often very useful as one such outlet.

Instructors also need to monitor their own energy level. We, as instructors, are not immune to the emotional impact of our subject matter. Students sometimes say things that are hard to hear and may reveal attitudes which are hard to accept. Students may also develop intensified emotional bonds with instructors who allow them to express their feelings on such difficult topics.

This challenge underscores the importance of the model of connection provided by a feminist perspective. It is helpful for instructors to talk with supportive colleagues who are engaged in similar kinds of work and who therefore understand the stresses associated with this kind of teaching. Avoiding isolation can help to prevent instructor burnout and can help maintain one’s emotional equilibrium and sense of perspective in the classroom.

The Action Challenge

When discussing issues of oppression in the classroom, there are two related challenges. One is to make racism real, and the other is to prevent it from overwhelming students. Students may deny the prevalence and multifaceted nature of racism. Once students begin to understand the dynamics of racism, they become overwhelmed by the all-encompassing nature of racism and may lose hope that change is possible.

When teaching about the prevalence of oppression, there is a great risk in leaving students with the sense that oppression is immutable. For many instructors, it may be a challenge to counteract student despair. We think it’s very important for instructors to recognize the need students have to feel empowered as change agents and to provide avenues to experience themselves in this way. Action is the natural antidote to both denial and despair. Helping them to understand how racism impacts on everyday life through such action-oriented projects as evaluating the multicultural content of children’s books or conducting a racism inventory of their own
student organizations can reduce denial. These projects can also be the key to helping them see where they can develop their own strategies for combating racism. Being involved in some form of action can reduce the despair that is frequently felt when addressing these issues.

**The Rewards of a Process-Oriented Approach**

In conclusion, our experience is that, when we focus on process in the teaching of oppression, learning occurs at an unusually deep level. Students are engaged at both cognitive and affective levels. For members of dominant groups, process-oriented learning reduces the guilt and fear that often reinforce oppressive behavior. Students who have been targeted by oppression gain a greater insight into their own experience and an increased sense of optimism that they have allies and change is possible. The information students gain through the experiences of connection, empathy, and identification is not readily forgotten. This learning enhances personal growth, which facilitates the development of genuine relationships among students whose social identities vary. Connections break down the barriers. It is often through the connections that are formed in the classroom that a commitment to social change is enhanced. The excitement that students experience when they discover that they can be change agents is one of the greatest rewards in teaching about oppression and far outweighs any of the challenges presented by this difficult subject matter.

**References**


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