

Feminist Group Process in Seminar Classes: Possibilities and Challenges

Betty J. Barrett
University of Windsor

In this essay, I describe my experience applying the principles of feminist group process in a senior level social science course. I begin by providing an overview of feminist pedagogy as an approach to teaching and learning and discuss the relevance of feminist group process within this model. I then highlight the core components of feminist group process, outlined by Chinn (2004), that I integrated into my classroom. I conclude with a discussion of recommendations for curriculum development based on my own praxis.

Introduction

The use of group work has been noted as an important pedagogical tool for promoting the development of social skills, student engagement with course material, peer directed learning, self reflection, and critical thinking (Biggs, 2003). Because of its perceived intellectual, academic, and social benefits, group work is increasingly used in a myriad of classroom settings. Although the incorporation of group work into university courses is growing in popularity, the process of how to actually *do* group work is rarely taught to students. Group work assignments tend to be content rather than process focused, with the implicit assumption being that students will learn the necessary skills for working effectively in groups experien-

tially through engaging with others in task-oriented assignments. Students are rarely encouraged or required to critically self reflect on their interpersonal dynamics when engaging in group activities, with group work assignments traditionally being marked on the final product (content) rather than the mechanisms through which the product was collectively created (process). As such, students engage in knowledge-based learning through group-oriented exercises, but rarely achieve the level of interpersonal skill development that such exercises are purported to elicit.

Recognizing the need to approach group work in an innovative way to maximize its potential learning benefits for students, I experimented with

the implementation of feminist group process in a senior level social science seminar course. In this essay, I briefly describe the core principles and theoretical underpinnings of this approach as well as the specific strategies I implemented in my classroom. I conclude with recommendations for educators for the successful implementation of this process based on my own praxis.

Feminist Pedagogy

As a social work and women's studies educator, my approach to teaching and learning is heavily influenced by the principles of feminist pedagogy. Feminist pedagogy has been defined as a collection of classroom practices, educational strategies, and relational approaches informed by critical pedagogy and feminist theories (Crabtree & Sapp, 2003). Feminist pedagogy promotes transformative learning by replacing the "banking model" of education, in which students are viewed as passive receptacles of information, with a "partnership model" which constructs students as co-producers of knowledge (Stake, 2006). Educators informed by feminist pedagogy strive for the integration of action with reflection within the classroom as well as the empowerment of students as active agents of learning. By legitimizing individual experiences as an appropriate point of entry for inquiry and encouraging a theoretical analysis of these experiences as valid scholarly activity, feminist pedagogy seeks to engage students as mutual participants in the learning process. Through participatory learning, self reflection, and consciousness-raising, feminist pedagogy seeks to both intellectually and emotionally engage students as dynamic learners. Through this process, feminist pedagogy strives to cultivate both the personal and political empowerment of students to become catalysts for social change (Carillo, 2007; Crabtree & Sapp, 2003; Larson, 2005; Stake 2006).

Feminist Group Process

The application of feminist group process in the classroom is one practical strategy for implementing

the theoretical principles of feminist pedagogy (Banister & Schrieber, 1999). This approach constructs the classroom as a unified group rather than a collection of individuals, and contends that attention to process is just as integral to learning as is attention to instructional content. Feminist group process therefore strives to demystify and make explicit all of the processes, structures, and interpersonal dynamics that often go unnamed and unchallenged in traditional group settings. Through making these processes explicit, individuals are then able to engage in skill building by challenging unproductive communication patterns, engaging in group decision making, and transforming group conflict (Chin, 2004). The "peace and power" principles, outlined by Chin (2004) and briefly summarized below, provide concrete strategies for promoting shared responsibility for learning, developing collaborative leadership skills in students, and connecting feminist theory and praxis in the classroom.

Although feminist group process is attentive to the collective experience, the group is also a site for individual learning and transformation. As such, feminist group process seeks to humanize the classroom experience for students. Every session begins with a brief 'check in' – each student is asked to share with the group any circumstances that might influence his or her ability to be an active participant in the discussion that day (for example, "I am distracted tonight because I have a big exam in another class tomorrow that I am worried about, but I want to hear the discussion and participate as much as possible"), and to share any expectations, hopes, or concerns about the session. By focusing individualized time on each student at the beginning of every class, the group context becomes personalized. This not only honors each individual's holistic identity and recognizes that students have other identities, roles, and responsibilities outside of the classroom that may impact their ability to be entirely present in the classroom, but it also encourages the development of empathy and community among students (Chin, 2004).

Central to feminist group process is shared leadership among group members. One way this is done is through a rotating 'convener.' The primary

responsibility of the convener is to facilitate the content of group discussions and monitor and guide the group process through dismantling unproductive interpersonal dynamics. This position is rotated every week to ensure that each student is able to develop leadership and communication skills. The convener is responsible for guiding the content of the discussion through the establishment of a mutually agreed upon 'agenda' for the session in consultation with the whole class. The convener is also responsible for initiating and structuring the discussion by preparing a SOPHIA (Speak Out, Play, Havoc, Imagine, Alternatives), which he or she shares at the beginning of the session outlining his or her initial thoughts and questions in response to the agenda topic. The convener guides group process through actively listening to the discussion and facilitating any necessary changes to keep the group focused on its purpose. For example, if it appears that a particular student is engaging in a monologue or two students are interacting only with one another in a dialogue, the convener may attempt to shift this dynamic to an 'every-logue' through the use of circling or sparking. In circling, the convener halts the group discussion and engages every participant in a 'round robin' forum in which each person is asked to contribute. In sparking, the convener poses a particular question or specific issue and allows everyone to spontaneously generate response in a continuous free flowing fashion. As the convener role rotates throughout the group, every individual is able to strengthen their collaborative leadership skills (Chin, 2004).

A primary responsibility of the convener is to facilitate the use of value based decision making in the group. Through this process, all decisions in a group are made by weighing the degree to which each possible outcome reflects the core values of the group. At the beginning of the semester, the class brainstorms a list of values that they would like to define their classroom experience. Whenever a decision must be made, the group returns to the list of values to ensure that every choice reflects these guiding values. In this way, the process of group decision making is not based on a 'majority rules' approach but rather on the core values that were collectively pre-determined by the group. When a decision must

be made, the question is posed to the group, who then brainstorms all of the possible options as well as the potential consequences of each option. The group then works together to narrow down the options based on those that best reflect the core values defined at the beginning of the class through the process of consensus. In this way, the process of group decision making is made explicit to all participants, strengthening each individual's problem solving, communication, conflict resolution, and social skills (Chin, 2004).

The Senior Seminar Experience

The *Women's Studies Seminar* is a small (8-student), semester-long course dedicated to the in-depth examination of a key issue in feminist scholarship, activism, or discourse. In the winter 2008 semester, I dedicated the focus of this course to the study of feminist group process. The class met once a week in a three hour time slot for a total of thirteen weeks. The three hour class was divided into two core components: during the first half, the class met as a whole to discuss an assigned reading and a pre-determined topic; during the second half, the class was divided into two smaller groups that were engaged in a semester long group research project. In preparation for every session, students were asked to read an assigned article and complete a weekly journal entry addressing questions posed in their syllabus. The final mark for the course was evenly divided, with approximately 50% of the final mark determined by their journal entries and participation in the seminar discussion and the other 50% allocated to their group project.

To familiarize students with the principles of feminist group process, the first two sessions of the class were devoted to reading and discussing selections from Chin's (2004) book *Peace and Power: Creative Leadership for Community Building*. During these sessions, we brainstormed our class list of values to be the basis for our decision making throughout the semester. The students compiled a list of 20 mutually agreed upon values, including academic success, equality in ownership, constructive criticism,

respect for individual comfort levels, and the right to abstain from participating. I served as the class convener for the first two sessions, after which students rotated convener responsibilities for the remainder of the semester.

At the beginning of the semester, each small group was required to develop a group work plan that would guide their semester long research project. In this plan, they were required to outline the 'content' of their group meetings (e.g., timelines, tasks, and responsible parties), and how the group would successfully facilitate their 'process.' Each small group was required to devise their own list of values to guide the decision making process in their individual groups and to concretely outline how they would deal with common problems that emerge in group work (such as interpersonal conflict, poor performance of individual group members, etc.). At the end of the semester, each group was required to hand in a collective description of any changes that had been made to their original group work plan over the course of the semester, in terms of both 'content' and 'process,' as well as an individual reflection paper on the process of working collectively with their group.

As the course instructor, I had a unique role in the group. Although a primary purpose of feminist group process is to reduce hierarchy among group members and promote a shared responsibility for learning, it was not possible to ignore the fact that I held more power and responsibility in this setting than the students. Even though student conveners established weekly agendas for the course, these agendas were shaped by the guiding questions I posed for each weekly topic in the syllabus. Further, although it was the principal task of the conveners to direct group content and modify group process, it was necessary for me to step in and assist in this regard when the convener was unable to successfully re-direct unproductive group interactions or appropriately clarify content. During the second half of the class period, when students were engaged in their research projects, I acted as a consultant to both groups, providing feedback, insight, encouragement, and direction when necessary. Finally, and most importantly, it was my responsibility to assign each student a mark for the class (although a portion of the final group re-

search project grade was based on peer feedback and evaluation). In this way, even though the class was centrally focused on student-directed learning, the primary teaching responsibility remained firmly with me as the instructor.

The initial reaction from students ranged from excitement to apprehension. In their journal entries, students who identified as 'shy' and 'introverted' expressed discomfort with the level of student interaction that was required in the course. Other students wrote that they were invigorated by the class because it was primarily student facilitated and felt empowered by the opportunity to take an active role in guiding the course experience. Still, others expressed hostility at my refusal to lecture and placement of responsibility on the students for the weekly facilitation of discussions, with one student stating that I was "exploiting student labor" through expecting the student convener to be responsible for establishing an agenda for each session and to facilitate both the content and process of the discussion. Another student noted that I was "not teaching" by expecting students to learn from one another through group projects and student-facilitated dialogue rather than preparing traditional lectures for the students.

While I had envisioned that students would be energized and transformed by the non-conventional nature of the class, I discovered that many students were quite simply ill prepared to engage in meaningful group-based learning with their peers. Although almost all of the students had reported in their journals that they frequently participated in group work throughout their university education, none had ever been asked to engage so extensively with the process as well as the content of these activities. Further, group work had been treated as an 'add on' in many of their previous courses, supplementing an instructional approach that was still primarily instructor and lecture driven. When group work was moved from the margins to the center of the classroom experience, they were unable to adjust their expectations from the banking model, which had been a pervasive feature of their university educations thus far. As an instructor, I struggled to modify my own expectations for the course with the reality that although many students may have been previously

taught group work that they had not truly learned the skills of doing group work. As aptly observed by one student in her anonymous evaluation of the course:

...this course was almost idealistic and though nice in theory is not very applicable even within the classroom itself. Most students have internalized the traditional classroom within the world of academia for too much of this course to be as effective and profound as I was anticipating among fourth year women's studies students even. People are still caught up in their power hierarchies and structures and these still dominated this course even though it was against the objective.

Recommendations

The integration of group work in the classroom is important not only for knowledge acquisition but also for skill development. Despite the potential of group work to enhance problem solving, communication, conflict resolution, and social skills among students, many approaches to group work remain content rather than process focused. As such, students may enhance their knowledge of a subject area through group oriented activities but fail to develop the interpersonal skills that such activities are designed to strengthen. To maximize the benefits of group work, instructors must recognize that group work is a skill that must be learned and cannot assume that students understand how to successfully navigate interpersonal relationships simply by being asked to engage in content-driven group-oriented activities.

Educators must approach group work as a skill building activity not simply as a conduit for knowledge-based learning. This can be accomplished through the integration of group work in introductory courses to provide a foundation for the further development of group work skills both vertically and horizontally across the curriculum. This must include the integration of course lectures and readings to assist students in differentiating between group content and process. Further, group work must include

a self reflection component, which encourages students to critically analyze their group experiences to strengthen students' abilities to effectively challenge dynamics that impede positive group process.

Wlodkowski (1986) notes the potential utility of Johnson and Johnson's (1982) Cohesion Behavior Inventory to assist instructors in self evaluating their effectiveness at creating a learning environment that maximizes student engagement, motivation, inclusion, and cohesion in group based learning activities. This short, likert scale can also be modified for completion by students to encourage self reflection about their own experiences in group learning activities. Items on this survey include: "I disclose my ideas, feelings, and reactions to what is currently taking place in group," "I am influenced by group members during instruction with respect to their specific needs and opinions," and "I express acceptance and support when other members disclose their ideas, feelings, and reactions to what is currently taking place in the group" (Wlodkowski, 1986, p. 201). The administration of this scale throughout the semester not only provides instructors an ongoing opportunity to determine if students are successfully enacting the principles of group work (and, thus, evaluate the effectiveness of their pedagogy), but also facilitates students' self reflection on their experiences in the classroom. As a central goal of feminist pedagogy is to honor student experiences as an entry point for inquiry and to engage students as active participants in the learning process, the use of structured self assessment measures, such as the Cohesion Behavior Checklist, may be a valuable tool for achieving these goals.

Finally, marks for group work must encompass an assessment of both content and process. This can be achieved through requiring students to develop a written plan for their process at the onset of the project, which may include distribution of responsibilities among group members, initial timelines for completion of tasks, and protocols for how the group will address common problems in group work (such as poor performance among members, unequal distribution of labor, etc.). Students can then be asked as part of their final project mark to turn in a critical self reflection discussing their group's implementa-

tion of this protocol throughout the duration of the project. One possible strategy for fairly assessing students' group process is to determine a small portion of each student's mark based on peer feedback. Students can be asked to develop a mutually agreed upon peer grading rubric as part of their initial group work plan, which can serve as the basis for this portion of the mark. Empowering students in the group to provide feedback on one another's performance which will be considered in assigning a process mark for the assignment may be a viable tool for enhancing mutual responsibility for learning in a group context.

Only through transforming the way that group work is taught can group work truly become a transformative learning tool for students.

References

- Banister, E. & Schreiber, R. (1999). Teaching feminist group process within a nursing curriculum. *Journal of Nursing Education, 38*(2), 72-76.
- Biggs, J. (2003). *Teaching for quality learning at university* (2nd ed.). New York: The Society for Research into Higher Education and Open University Press.
- Carillo, E.C. (2007). "Feminist" teaching/teaching "feminism." *Feminist Teacher, 18*(1), 28-40.
- Chin, P. (2004). *Peace and power: Creative leadership for community building*. Toronto: Jones and Bartlett.
- Crabtree, R.D. & Sapp, D.A. (2003). Theoretical, political, and pedagogical challenges in the feminist classroom: Our struggles to walk the walk. *College Teaching, 51*(4), 131-140.
- Johnson, D.W. & Johnson, F.P. (1982). *Joining together: Group theory and group skills* (2nd ed.). Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall.
- Larson, L. (2005). The necessity of feminist pedagogy in a climate of political backlash. *Equality and Excellence in Education, 38*, 135-144.
- Stake, J. (2006). Pedagogy and student change in the women's and gender studies classroom. *Gender and Education, 18*(2), 199-212.
- Wlodkowski, R.J. (1986). *Enhancing adult motivation to learn*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass Publishers.

Biography

Betty Jo Barrett is an Assistant Professor of Social Work and Women's Studies at the University of Windsor in Windsor, Ontario. Her primary research and scholarly interests include: feminist social work theory, practice, and pedagogy; violence against women and children; and motherhood in the context of welfare reform.