

Pick a topic, any topic: Using improvisational comedy to make feminist pedagogy work for library instruction

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My name is Amy McLay Paterson, and I am the Assessment and User Experience Librarian at Thompson Rivers University. I'm also the liaison librarian to the English department, where I do quite a bit of instruction. While my classes have regularly included feminist content, it wasn't until last year that I started experimenting with feminist methods as well.

Feminist Pedagogy in 5 minutes

- Similar to and companionable with critical pedagogy
- Focuses on multi-directional learning and quality of teacher-student interaction
- Views knowledge and authority as socially constructed
- Decenters existing power structures, in favour of empowering individual voices and experiences
- Builds knowledge collaboratively
- Resists traditional classroom hierarchies, with the goal of collectively developing course content and focus

“At its simplest level, feminist pedagogy is concerned with gender justice and overcoming oppressions” (Shrewsbury 7).

I want to make it clear that I am not positioning myself as an expert in this topic. I consider myself very much a learner in this area, so I want to offer you my experience as someone who has had the chance to try some things and has repeatedly found myself drawing upon an unexpected part of my background to make it work.

So that is to say that while I don't want to convert this session into Intro to Feminist Pedagogy 101, I want to make sure that everyone here at least has a basic understanding of what it is. If you'd like to learn more about Feminist and/or Critical Pedagogy, I have some recommended further reading at the end of the presentation.

From Accardi: “The feminist classroom is designed to be inherently democratic and collaborative, is a place where all voices are valued, and is also a site where students and teachers partner to create a respectful learning community” (Accardi 40)

You may also be noticing that this is fairly compatible with the ACRL Framework: Authority is Constructed and Contextual, Scholarship as conversation, Information creation as a process

What's feminist about that?

- Um...all of it?
- Feminism is more than girl power
- BUT it is specifically concerned with the quest for gender justice
- Critical pedagogy concerned with overcoming oppression in a general sense

"I am a feminist; therefore, I am a feminist teacher" (Accardi 57)

I've included this slide because I recently presented a very similar version of this talk, and at the very end when I asked for questions, one audience member put up their hand and asked: "So what's feminist about that?" And so I want to clarify: all of it.

I think that one of the most prominent misconceptions about feminism is that its primary goal is to usurp men's place at the top of the pyramid and put women there instead; so, maintaining all the old orders and hierarchies and just shuffling groups' places in them. When what feminism actually wants is a new order, without demographic hierarchy, focused on dialogue, caring, collaboration, and learning from each other's unique experiences.

The other way to interpret that question would be as an inquiry further into the differences between feminist and critical pedagogical schools. And yes, these are very similar to the point that I could likely do a find/replace of the word feminist for critical in this presentation and still deliver it without missing a beat. But it comes back to the Maria Accardi quote I have on the slide; I am a feminist, and these values are going to permeate my work.

I also want to give you a taste of what bell hooks says about Friere, which illustrates both the importance of critical pedagogy as a whole and the need for a distinctly feminist

pedagogical school

bell hooks on Friere: “He constructs a phallogentric paradigm of liberation—wherein freedom and the experience of patriarchal manhood are always linked as though they are one and the same. For me this is always a source of anguish for it represents a blind spot in the vision of men who have profound insight.”

And: “Friere’s own model of critical pedagogy invites a critical interrogation of this flow in his work. But critical interrogation is not the same as dismissal.” (49)

My Context: Library Instruction

- Typically one-shot instruction sessions
- Mostly first-year students
- Introductory academic writing courses
- Variety of backgrounds, interests, topics
- Little to no research experience

One-shots: The upside—You only have to do 1 class. The downside—you only have one class!!

So...why improv?

When I was in high school, I was part of our improv troupe. We were called SNICKER (it stood for something, I forget what), and there were about 10 of us. We would play a lot of the games you might see on *Whose Line is it Anyway*, but where things really got intense was when we were practicing for competitions, when we would have to work out the framework of a scene and then practice it over and over again with different elements thrown in each time to make sure it would reach our outcome (which was of course to make people laugh). I wasn't the best at it, because I'm not very physical—or maybe just not very funny—but I wasn't the worst either.

Two important things I want to get across though:

- 1) Improv doesn't mean you are flying by the seat of your pants. There is intense work and preparation that goes into it. It's just that instead of memorizing or working off a fairly set script or procedure, you're building a solid framework, internalizing that framework, and testing how it responds to myriad variables. So, do not switch to progressive pedagogy because you think it will be less work. It is not.
- 2) You don't have to be naturally talented to employ these methods. I definitely wasn't great at improv, and after I graduated, I didn't think about it again until I started to examine what was going on in my classes and realized that's what I was drawing on.

If you google "rules of improv" you'll get tons of sources, and there will never be universal

agreement on what or how many they are, but today I'm going to touch on 4 of them: Establishing the Scene, Making Statements, Embracing the Unexpected, and Saying "Yes, and"

Establishing the Scene

- Provides a frame for the thinking
- Be active and explicit about encouraging questions and participation
- Benefits facilitators and students
- Establishes your persona

“Teaching is a performative act. And it is that aspect of our work that offers the space for change, invention, spontaneous shifts, that can serve as a catalyst drawing out the unique elements in each classroom.” (hooks 11)

I think that most of us can agree that teaching is a type of performance, and if you don't find that's true for you, I hope you'll accept that there are many who do approach the job that way, and I am one of them. Regular Amy is not actually super enthusiastic that you have a really probing question about the authority of the peer review process, but Teacher Amy loves that! Teacher Amy is very very interested to know why you did or didn't click on the Wikipedia article that came up in your preliminary search; Regular Amy doesn't care....well maybe a little bit.

So if you will follow me on this metaphorical journey, let us imagine the classroom as a scene. And the students have a certain perception of how that scene is supposed to go: the professor speaks, they listen. Perhaps questions are encouraged, perhaps they aren't. Most likely, students will not be accustomed to feminist methods, so if the scene that you want to establish is different than the one they are used to, you need to do that right away.

- Be open, transparent, and encouraging about what you'd like to accomplish and how you want the class to run
- Explicitly encourage questions
- If you primarily teach one-shots, you likely don't have a prior relationship with the students, so you need to establish yourself quickly as someone approachable and trustworthy. Regular Amy is introverted and frankly a little stand-offish. Not so for Teacher Amy.

Being explicit about expectations doesn't just benefit the student; it can be a deciding factor of whether your pedagogical model will work, and it goes a long way towards demonstrating what you have to offer. Going back to improv, coming out on stage and asking your audience for the entire scene is both bad planning and a huge, unexpected burden on the audience. You need to have that frame ready so you can ask for elements that work inside of it.

Making Statements

- Asking too many questions is pressuring and exhausting
- Standing aside means changing how you pull your weight
- Builds trust
- Sharing power means sharing responsibility...and students might not be ready for that
- Provide the building blocks for knowledge creation

The easiest way to think of Making Statements is as opposed to only Asking Questions.

This was probably the hardest principle for me to get a handle on at the beginning of my journey. Learning about feminist pedagogy means getting really enthusiastic about redistributing power in the classroom, and it took a while to really sink in that some students...don't actually want power in the classroom. At least not unexpectedly and all at once. Think about what we learned from Spiderman: "with great power..."

So in the beginning, I would expect students to provide content by throwing out question after question and they would get answered at first but then they would mostly trail off about halfway through the class, and it's because that's exhausting, and I wasn't really pulling my weight in the classroom model. Being a "guide on the side" means pointing out landmarks, it means providing direction and suggestions.

An example of this is in the beginning I wanted students to use student-provided topics as the sample topics, and this would fail either because students didn't have their topic yet or one person would have a very niche topic and no one else in the class would feel comfortable participating or they would ask me for a suggestion and then most people would use my suggestion anyway. So now, I bring a clear sample topic and it's both easier for the students to come together to build ideas around it and decide how to play with it

and easier for me because I can do more of that prep work nobody expects to be part of improv.

Embracing the Unexpected

- Otherwise known as “there are no mistakes”
- Students are truly leading when they take things where you didn’t plan
- Students are your allies
- This is where the learning happens

I can’t overemphasize this: students are only truly leading your class if they take things where you didn’t expect. And this is scary. And your instinct is probably going to be to pull it back to something you’ve done before or are more familiar with. And that’s an understandable impulse, and no one would fault you for it, but I’m here to encourage you to stay in these places of (what seem like) chaos and uncertainty because this is where the magic happens.

Saying “Yes, AND...”

- Don’t dismiss
- “No wrong answers?”
- Recognize learning opportunities
- Kill your darlings
- Build upon the feedback
- Make yourself available and accommodating

And now we come to probably the best known rule of improv. So what does it mean?

First of all, it means don’t dismiss. If a student tosses a ball into the scene, and I say “That’s not a ball, that’s an elephant!” that’s dismissive, and it demonstrates that this is ultimately my scene and not theirs.

Telling students “no wrong answers” is a commitment, and in order to maintain trust, you need to keep your promise. I actually don’t tell my students “no wrong answers;” what I tell them is “any contribution you make to this class will be valuable,” and then the commitment I’ve made is to find and display the value in each contribution.

But saying Yes is not enough. You need to say “Yes, and...” which means embracing learning opportunities and building upon student contributions.

Two of the best learning activities I’ve been a part of were “yes, and” moments: spur of the moment and student-driven. In response to a question I had thrown out, one student replied “Who cares?” So we wrote Who cares? on the board and discussed various aspects of the chosen research topic in terms of what kind of people and publications might care about them.

In another class, our sample topic was in their instructor's area of expertise. During a discussion about scholarly and authoritative sources, a class member brought out the example of their instructor's Tumblr as a point of discussion. So we improvised a 3-way comparison chart between a scholarly journal, "Linda's Tumblr," and Wikipedia.

I loved doing these activities; they worked so well. So I tried to recreate them...and they bombed. Because they didn't emerge organically out of student initiatives.

Tips for Starting Out

- Start with supportive instructors
- Break your lesson down into pieces
- Don't be too hard on yourself
- Bribe candy?
- Remember that research is messy
- Have an exit strategy

Annie Downey on “canned search terms”: “it presents an inaccurate picture of what the research process is like and does not create space for critical analysis or experiential learning” (Downey 88)

Challenges

- Existing classroom dynamics
- Instructor expectations
- No time to establish trust
- Risk-taking in someone else's classroom

“Challenges include students not recognizing feminist teaching as actual teaching, because the teacher does not assert ultimate authority and because the teacher asks more questions than she answers” (Accardi 31)

Instructor expectations: Critical librarians “want students to learn more than just basic mechanics; instead they want them to ask meaningful questions and challenge the information they find.” (Downey 112)

“Students are often woefully limited in their understanding of the political nature of information. Teachers and librarians make the problem worse when they present simplified evaluation checklists, which often imply that subscription databases are neutral or the best place to access unbiased information.” (Downey 114)

So...is it working?

"It may not be possible for students to achieve critical consciousness through information literacy one-shot instruction" (McCartin and Dineen 18).

"Feminist assessment is inherently reflective and reflection itself is a feminist act" (Accardi 76)

"Removing oneself from the position of authority can often be messy as neither learning nor research are linear processes following a set pattern" (Downey 87).

"The rewards of engaged pedagogy might not emerge during a course" (hooks 206)

Questions?

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