



Learning with Women

Dr. Steven Van Zoost

So there I was taking a course to become a doula and learning with women. I wasn't surprised that I was the only man in the class and while I was welcomed by the women, I did not blend in. I have been the only man in a group of women many times in my life and it is often an insider-outsider experience; I am part of the group and part not-of-the-group.

I know that I'm not alone in this experience. I have seen many schools with one male staff member and I have seen many classes with one male student.

In Mongolia, I was told that I was the "first male teacher." At the time, teaching was understood to be women's work and administrating was the work of men. I was leading a group of women to write national curriculum and I reported to a male supervisor. I found myself as a "middle man" who bridged the interests and ideas of the female teachers with the expectations of the male leadership. This placed me in a position that called upon my skills to find common ground from diverse perspectives about pedagogical issues. I am not suggesting that curricular debates can be polarized into gender positions, but rather that multiple gender positions can allow us to see curricular issues differently. And this, gentle reader, is the benefit of an insider-outsider perspective: we can begin to think about the interests of others differently.

Perhaps this is why I have been drawn to the study of postmodern feminist literature, feminist poststructuralist theory and postmodern feminist educational research. Feminist discourses, like all

good theories, allow me to use alternative lenses to explore the world. Importantly, very importantly, I must acknowledge that feminist theory is intentionally not a congruent field of study. Feminist theorists do not automatically agree with one another and may indeed oppose each other. I mention this because there are dangers in assuming that one voice can represent a group of people or a particular stance. Put another way, when I claim to be learning with "women," I use the term to suggest that I am learning from a range of women.

In my "learning with women" experiences, I have delighted in how authoritative knowledge has been challenged or abandoned and sometimes replaced with storytelling, emotional learning, and listening with the intent of seeking multiple perspectives. In my doula course, for example, a student's account of what her sister had told her was valued as much as the experienced instructor's knowledge about childbirth. The instructor's agenda for our discussion was fluid and responded to the emerging interests and changing needs of the class. Several students – myself included – cried at different and

unexpected points during the course. There is plenty of research about this sort of thing: research into the epistemology and constructivist value of narrative inquiries including storytelling, hearsay, gossip and humour, and research into the connections among gender, learning preferences and schooling. There is also research about power, identities, histories and discourses. But this is not a literature review of feminist educational research; it is more of a testimony about how learning with women has shaped my teaching.

I once had a professor who began her course by expounding that she was a postmodern feminist. There was a “pedagogical fallout” from such a statement: voices that were often silenced in mainstream society were valued in the class; our texts examined issues that I had not spent a lot of time thinking about before, and that is not to mention the fact that I was apparently the first male who had even been in her class. While my own research methodologies have ascribed to postmodern feminist stances, I cannot make the same claim about my teaching practices with consistency. I know that there are plenty of other discourses that also permeate my classroom thinking.

And this is what I have learned from women: there are plenty of voices, perspectives and agendas to consider when making curricular decisions in my classroom. Can my students see themselves reflected in the texts that I choose? In the way I organize their learning experiences? In the language choices that I make? Do I provide sufficient insider-outsider experiences that stretch my students’ personal learning?

My experiences of learning with women have disrupted my thinking and therefore have disrupted my teaching practices. These disruptions usually occur in the form of questions. In the experiences of being an insider-outsider, I benefit from the opportunity to practice thinking about those whose voices are not expressed and to consider why

not? In my classroom, what dominant forms of understanding gender are prevalent, reinforced or challenged? What alternative perspectives are available to students? Who else has a story or a different experience about what we are discussing in class? How can these stories best be shared in the classroom? What is my role as a traditional authority of knowledge? What is my role as an authority of postmodern knowledge construction?

I should note that these same deconstructive experiences also offer me constructive ways of thinking about the world. I use a very basic mental habit that allows me to continue my learning from various women. (The practice is so simple that I’m a little embarrassed to share it with you.) It involves testing out several different courses of action before I make a decision. When faced with a dilemma, small or large, I simply ask myself: “What would Rhonda do? What would Jan do? What would Claire do? What would Kathy do? What would Tunga do? What would my mum do?” I use a variety of stances from influential women in my life to think through a situation. For example, if I notice that a student in my class doesn’t have a warm enough winter jacket, or is struggling with homework, or can’t understand iambic pentameter, I use these women as touchstones for thinking about diverse approaches to the problem. To me, these women are among my internalized experts in different and overlapping fields of pedagogy, critical thinking, problem solving and care.

“
I use a variety of stances from influential women in my life to think through a situation
”

Dr. Steven Van Zoost teaches at Avon View High School, Annapolis Valley Regional School Board.