

Effective Instructional Practices:

Facilitating Feminist Praxis

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Praxis has a deep history in the communication studies literature, particularly within communication and instruction scholarship. Traditionally, scholars have defined praxis as the relationship between thought and action (Weiner, 1994), informed action (Quinlan, 2012), or reflective practice (Raelin, 2007). However, the critical turn in communication and instruction troubles traditional notions of praxis as the mere combination of theory and practice by instead situating it as a political and moral project for liberation. Praxis in critical communication pedagogy (CCP) embeds a consciousness of constraint for students and instructors by simultaneously demanding they reflect on structures of systemic oppression while finding emancipatory mechanisms to work within and through such structures (Fassett & Warren, 2007; Freire, 1971). As such, praxis foregrounds an analysis of the “dialectical interplay between the way in which history and culture make people even while people are making that very history and culture” (Glass, 2001, p. 16).

Feminist praxis adopts CCP by situating educational spaces as sites of communicative exchanges where instructors and students explore how communication, mediums, and culture constitute reality and, importantly, how to intervene into the process of creation. Informed by feminist thought, feminist praxis troubles theory and practice as dichotomous, instead situating action within the classroom as always already theoretically grounded. The classroom becomes the practiced space where theory *is* action (Bignell, 1996). Working to operationalize feminist praxis, Weiner (1994)

identified five features: derived from experience, continually subject to revision, accessible and open to change, explicitly political and value laden, and grounded in a multiplicity of perspectives. Case (2017) more explicitly situates intersectionality and social justice as central to accomplishing feminist praxis. Thus, partially reliant on Freire's (1971) view of praxis as reflection and action to transform the world, feminist praxis views interdisciplinary, intersectional, and experiential thought as epistemologically foundational to educational processes.

Facilitating feminist praxis offers students three benefits. First, praxis supports students in becoming critical and creative thinkers. Reflection as a core component of praxis mandates that knowledge be investigated, and students are supported in asking questions about normative processes. Adema (2013) noted that a critically-oriented praxis prevents "simply repeating established practices without critically analysing the assumptions upon which they are based" (p. 492). Praxis, thus, equips students to become critical and creative problem-solvers by foregrounding analyses of assumptions and taken-for-granted values. Second, facilitating feminist praxis occurs by displaying communication and theory as lived and constitutive, whereby praxis becomes how "theory becomes embodied in our practices" (Adema, p. 495). Students learn the central role that communicating plays in interpersonal, organizational, and intercultural communication contexts, which allows students to become reflexive of their own actions and role in those contexts. Third, integrating feminist praxis enables students to become global citizens with a deep appreciation for social justice. Freire's (1971) focus on transforming of the world becomes a core pedagogical tactic to praxis, whereby praxis situates students as world actors capable of adjusting communicative patterns to make

the world better.

However, several barriers exist in accomplishing praxis. One barrier is that pedagogues struggle to operationalize praxis. As Howard (2004) argued, “while many educators find that critical pedagogy appeals ideologically, many have found the transition from ideology to praxis difficult” (p. 218); thus, constructing curriculum around “praxis” lends itself to confusion. Another barrier is that higher education institutions regularly define “good” education as practical steps that successfully situate students to enter the neoliberal marketplace (see Glass, 2001, p. 15), viewing critical thinking and praxis either as afterthoughts (at best) or as threatening to the status quo (at worst). When students do enter classrooms where praxis is valued, those skill sets often are not integrated into their other courses; thus, students lack repetitive engagement with praxis.

Facilitating Feminist Praxis in the Classroom

1. An intersectional focus should be central to classroom practice--that is, attention should be paid to multiple overlapping and, at times, contradictory identity categories (see Crenshaw, 1991). Because an intersectional focus requires an acknowledgement that “we embody a simultaneous oppressor-oppressed identity” (LeMaster, 2015, p. i), this focus remains imperative for communication pedagogues interested in responding to privilege and oppression in our current historic moment. Case (2016) contextualized intersectional theory within educational spaces, arguing that “without intersectional theory . . . educational spaces serve to both perpetuate invisible privilege by focusing on personal oppression and construct only mythical norms as worthy of earning valuable real estate within course materials and broader curricular

designs” (p. 1). As communication pedagogues, a vigilant commitment to intersectionality questions how narratives--both within the classroom and through concepts taught in the discipline--perpetuate and/or romanticize overlapping privilege and oppression are maintained, dually mapping avenues of transformation within those very systems.

2. Instructors should incorporate experiential perspectives and learning objectives. Because critical communication pedagogy troubles traditional teaching techniques that center instructors as the origin of knowledge, instructors should reframe classrooms as co-constitutive spaces where instructors and students work together to create meaning. Kahl (2010), for example, argued that instructors should have students write an autoethnographic narrative, which can assist them in reflecting on course concepts and communication’s role in society writ large. Feminist praxis situated within this tradition places value on student-based experiences and perspectives as valid and necessary contributions. In fact, Bignell (1996) suggested that feminist praxis should begin with and be grounded in students’ classroom experiences, giving them authenticity and welcoming their perspectives. Incorporating reflection prompts or presentation assignments that integrate student experiences allow instructors to gain depth and texture into their students’ values, background, and goals.

3. Instructors who wish to facilitate praxis should continuously review, reflect upon, and revise course content to ensure that all aspects of their course provide opportunities for students to build narratives toward empowerment. Reflexivity and revision--core components of feminist praxis--are important processes for pedagogues to adopt as they continually address shifting priorities as the semester unfolds and

account for mundane patterns, intersectional sensibilities, and power dynamics (Linabary et al., 2017; Weiner, 1994). Because communication can change and contest gender identity roles and relations (Buzzanell, Meisenbach, Remke, Sterk, & Turner, 2009), feminist praxis means reflecting and reviewing classroom communication, inviting student assessment of instruction, and practicing reflexivity as instructors.

Assessing Feminist Praxis in the Classroom

Feminist praxis resists formulaic assessment mechanisms and instead aims to “break down barriers, to overcome obstacles, to open doors, minds, and possibilities. [It] aims at something deeper and richer than simply imbibing and accepting existing codes and conventions” (Ayers, 2010, p. 185). Although assessment is not abandoned when evaluating feminist praxis, Shor (1992) argued that “the instruments used to test and measure students should be based on student centered, co-operative curriculum” (p. 144), which relies on instructor feedback and dialogic grading. Administering anonymous feedback surveys throughout the semester can supplement these instruments, enabling instructors to evaluate feminist praxis through ongoing investigation (e.g., asking how classroom conversations have changed throughout the life cycle of a course). Because feminist praxis requires instructor-based assessment and reflexivity, gaining student feedback on instructor facilitation becomes equally paramount to assess praxis.

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