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On Learning and Teaching

Teaching about Domestic Violence: Strategies for Empowerment

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The burgeoning literature on feminist pedagogy has led many of us to examine critically not only what we teach in our courses, but how we teach.¹ Struggling to create a learning environment that empowers all students, feminist faculty have been particularly concerned with the structure and dynamics of the classroom, the personal and emotional impact of course materials, and the development of teaching methods that facilitate personal and social change.² While such concerns are certainly germane to any feminist classroom, I believe they are particularly salient in courses that center on sensitive topics such as domestic violence.³ The emotional intensity of the subject, the strong sense of powerlessness many students feel, and the high proportion of survivors who enroll in such courses, all produce a unique set of challenges to those teaching in this field.⁴ For example, how do we talk about domestic violence without revictimizing members of the class who have experienced it? How can we counteract feelings of hopelessness and despair, which intensify as we explore one form of domestic violence after another?

Given the nature of traditional academic training, many of us are not prepared to answer such questions or even to anticipate them. To help bridge this gap, I would like to share my experiences teaching domestic-violence courses over the past six years. While there is obviously no single “right way” to organize or teach any course, we can learn from each other’s mistakes and successes and it is in this spirit that I offer the following overview of my course. In addition to highlighting the types of problems and issues that frequently emerged in my classes, I discuss specific

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teaching strategies developed to mitigate them. I also present a detailed description of my current syllabus as well as discuss how course requirements have changed over time, and why.

I first taught the course described here, "Domestic Violence and Social Structure," in 1985. It is an upper-level sociology course as well as an approved elective in the Peace Studies and Women's Studies programs on campus. The course presents a feminist analysis of various forms of domestic violence (e.g., wife beating, physical violence against children, incest, lesbian battering, etc.) and critically examines how the patriarchal structure and ideology of society function to create and perpetuate violent behavior. The course is offered every three semesters and enrollment is limited to forty.

While the class attracts students from a wide variety of majors, the fields of education and social work are often overrepresented. The majority of students are middle-class and nearly all students are white. Students' ages typically range from eighteen to fifty-five, but the majority are under twenty-three years old. My classes also tend to be disproportionately female. Since I have taught the course, only thirty out of a total of 144 students have been male.

Of all my courses, domestic violence is among the hardest to teach and it certainly is the most emotionally draining. This is due, in part, to the subject matter of the course, but another key factor is the high proportion of students in the class who have experienced physical and/or sexual violence during childhood or as adults. Typically, about one-third of those who enroll in the course "know" they are survivors and another third come to this realization about midway through the semester. Although these figures are relatively high, they are not unusual. Others who have taught domestic violence or related courses, such as Janet Lee (543–44) and Brenda D. Phillips (289), report similar patterns. Thus, for many students, the course either opens up old wounds or triggers an awareness of past experiences with violence that have been buried for years.⁵ For those who have not directly experienced violence, the course is also a struggle since it directly challenges their taken-for-granted and, oftentimes, idealized conception of the family. Most initially respond to this challenge by either doubting the prevalence of domestic violence or by blaming the victim for such behavior. Although these patterns of resistance begin to disappear by the third or fourth week of the semester, frustration and depression often take their place.

For those teaching courses on domestic violence, especially for the first time, these responses to the course can create a great deal of personal anguish. I remember, for example, seriously questioning whether it was even appropriate to teach a course that focused on such an emotionally volatile and sensitive topic. Were the costs to myself, and to the students,

just too high? I also remember feeling confused about my ethical responsibilities, particularly in relation to survivors in the class. As I struggled with these issues, I sought the advice of others, including colleagues, members of the class, representatives of a local battered women's project, and personal friends who were survivors. All offered valuable suggestions for how I could reduce the personal trauma experienced by survivors in the class as well as minimize the resistance and fatalism so common among the other students. These early discussions allayed my anxieties about the course and, perhaps more important, they provided the impetus for many of the curricular changes and teaching strategies outlined in this article.

The issues and concerns that emerged during my first semester of teaching about domestic violence dramatically increased my awareness of what I call the "politics of syllabus construction." I am referring here to the notion that every syllabus we create is more than just a map of the course; it is a highly political document. Each of its components, ranging from the texts we choose to the particular topics we cover, conveys very specific messages to the student about our values and priorities. And, given the painful histories of many students enrolled in domestic-violence courses, these messages take on a heightened significance. As a result, those of us who teach such courses need to construct our syllabi with great care.

In terms of texts and readings, I believe it is important to choose materials that provide a strong conceptual framework for analyzing domestic violence yet, at the same time, do not objectify those who have experienced it. In this regard, I have found that qualitative studies work best. Two that I use and highly recommend are: *Violence against Wives* by Emerson Dobash and Russell Dobash and *Father-Daughter Incest* by Judith Herman. I have also taught the course using more quantitative texts, but stopped doing so for several reasons. First, I found that such texts did little to increase students' understanding of the dynamics or social context of violent behavior, and this was especially true for those who had not directly experienced violence. As a result, it was much easier for such students to maintain their "us versus them" mentality, often expressed in comments such as "I'd never stay in an abusive situation" or "There must be something wrong with these people." As Phillips notes, such remarks are quite common among nonsurvivors and, for those who have experienced violence, they are quite painful (291). In my classes, this situation frequently produced hostile interactions between survivors and nonsurvivors, with neither group being "heard" by the other. Secondly, quantitative texts elicited consistent negative feedback from survivors in the class. Most viewed such texts as yet another form of victimization; many reported feeling objectified, "unreal," and lifeless. Or, in the words of one survivor, "Rather than illuminating my experiences or those of other survivors, page after page of charts and tables just seemed to erase it."

Both of these problems were alleviated when I switched to qualitative texts that offered a more subjective and contextual analysis of violence.

Given the numerous myths and stereotypes associated with domestic violence, I believe it is also important to include materials that highlight the theme of cultural diversity. In my course, I address this concern in several ways. First, in my presentations to the class, I pay particular attention to how differences in race, sexual identity, socioeconomic status, and age affect the various types of domestic violence covered in the course.⁶ Secondly, I assign several reserve readings that address how the dynamics of battering are affected by sexual identity and by race (i.e., Uzzell and Peebles-Wilkins 131–38 and Hart 173–89).

The course also includes several optional books, such as *Voices in the Night*, edited by Toni McNaron and Yarrow Morgan, and *I Never Told Anyone*, edited by Ellen Bass and Louise Thornton. These texts are mainly first-person accounts of violence written by survivors. As such, they serve to validate and affirm the experiences of students with similar histories and, in particular, those just beginning to explore their past. These experiential readings also help others in the class gain a deeper understanding of what it means to be victimized by people you love and trust. Despite these advantages, I believe such texts work best as optional rather than required reading. Given the graphic descriptions of violence discussed by the authors and what this might, in turn, trigger for the reader, I feel each student should have complete freedom of choice regarding if and when to read this material.

I also think it is important for the syllabus to include the names and phone numbers of local resources and services (e.g., crisis centers, battered women's shelters, counseling centers, etc.). In my course, I discuss this list on the first day of class as well as my rationale for including it. As part of this discussion, I talk about the types of students who typically take the course and how important it is for those who experience difficulty with the class to seek assistance. Like Phillips, I find that this type of discussion increases peer sensitivity to survivors' experiences and, as a result, helps to create a more positive learning environment (291). I also remind students of the resource list throughout the semester and make a special effort to do so whenever we begin to discuss a new topic such as incest, battering, etc.

Since most students are quite anxious about taking the course, and this is particularly true for survivors, it is helpful if the syllabus is very explicit about what issues will be discussed within each topic area of the course and when. In my experience, such information reduces student anxiety stemming from "fear of the unknown" and, in addition, it helps students with violent histories to make an informed choice about whether to attend class on a specific day. Although I view class attendance as important, I also know that some topics may trigger intense emotional pain as well as

flashbacks for some students. Thus, I do not require attendance as I do in all other courses I teach. At the beginning of the semester, I inform students that they may miss class, and do so without penalty, whenever they feel this choice is emotionally necessary. I also suggest that they get notes from a classmate or meet with me privately to discuss the material covered in class during their absence.

In terms of deciding what to discuss and when, I typically use the first few weeks of the semester to highlight conceptual and theoretical issues central to the course. Aside from introducing students to the analytical framework we will be using throughout the semester, this type of discussion creates a relatively nonthreatening environment within which the class can begin to develop a sense of community and trust. It has been my experience that the feeling of safety engendered by such a classroom atmosphere clearly facilitates later discussions of more experiential course materials. Also, when discussing each form of domestic violence, I have found that creating a balance between analytical and experiential approaches to the topic works best. Shifting back and forth between these frameworks helps to ensure that students do not get too lost in abstractions nor become too emotionally drained. Over the years, students have frequently commented that the more theoretical discussions provided an important “emotional time out” for them, and I should add, for myself as well.

Another way to offset the gloom that can paralyze a class is to add what I call a “Social Response” section after each form of violence discussed. Here the emphasis is on social action and, in particular, current programs and services aimed at reducing the various types of domestic violence. To highlight this theme, I schedule a variety of guest speakers throughout the semester. Among those I typically include are: police officers, a victim-witness advocate from the DA’s office, representatives from Parents Anonymous, local therapists who specialize in the area of domestic violence, caseworkers from the Department of Human Services, and staff from a local battered women’s shelter. In addition to these professionals, several incest survivors and formerly battered women speak with the class. Based on student feedback, these presentations are clearly viewed as the most significant of the semester. Some students note, for example, how the speakers’ personal stories made many of the concepts and issues of the course “come to life”; others describe how the presentations enabled them to stop “blaming the victim”; and comments from survivors in the class typically highlight the importance of such speakers as role models.

With regard to specific assignments, I have had the most success with those that encourage cooperative and collaborative learning. Two I highly recommend are in-class discussion groups and student-initiated social-change projects. Both activities help to create a sense of community within the classroom and they also provide time for students to talk with each

other about their thoughts, feelings, reactions to the course, and so forth. The in-class discussion groups are formed at the beginning of the semester and they meet about every two weeks. Students are randomly assigned to these groups and, each time they meet, one member serves as discussion leader. This person is responsible for preparing a presentation on a topic or issue relevant to the course and for leading the group discussion. Fulfillment of this assignment is worth fifteen percent of the student's final grade.

The other assignment, student-initiated social-change projects, is one I introduced several years ago as an option to the more traditional term paper. A key benefit of these projects is that they offer students a way to effectively translate their anger and frustration regarding the prevalence of domestic violence into concrete social action designed to reduce it. In doing so, these projects enable students to create their *own* answers to a question that frequently dominates class discussions of domestic violence: "What can *we* do to help stop this behavior?"

Early in the semester, students who elect to work on a social-change project in lieu of a term paper are asked to submit a brief description of their ideas for possible social-change projects.⁷ Students with similar interests are placed together in groups typically consisting of four to six people. Each group is given about two weeks to prepare a preliminary proposal outlining the specific goals of their project and how they plan to achieve them. To ensure that the projects are both appropriate and ethically sound, I review the proposals and request revisions if necessary. I also serve as a resource person by linking groups to relevant campus and/or community organizations.

My evaluation of this assignment is based on two sources of information, each accounting for fifteen percent of the student's final grade. The first is a group report, written collaboratively, that describes the rationale and goals of the project, any problems the group encountered regarding the project's design and/or implementation, the outcome of the project, and what the group views as the short- and long-term impact of their project. The second required paper is an individual project report submitted by each group member. Here students are asked to describe: what they learned from working on the project, what they might have done differently and why, and their own thoughts and reactions regarding the process of creating social change.

The majority of student projects developed over the past several years have focused on creating social change within the university community. Of these, most have either attempted to increase student awareness of domestic violence or to create additional services for members of the campus community who have experienced such violence. One group, for example, organized a university-wide Incest Awareness Day which became an annual event for several years. Others presented workshops in resi-

dence halls on such topics as emotional and physical abuse, courtship violence, and incest. And, some students worked to establish campus-wide therapy and support groups for survivors of violence.

There have also been a variety of off-campus projects aimed at creating social change within the larger local community. Most of these projects were developed in consultation with the local battered women's shelter and all have focused on obtaining information designed to stimulate social change. One group, for example, organized a court watch to ascertain the circumstances under which judges were most likely to grant a protection-from-abuse order. This information was then shared with staff of the local shelter and others who provide legal services for battered women. In a related project, another group interviewed formerly battered women to assess how well current shelter and community services met their needs and to ascertain how such services could be improved. Other students interviewed local police officers regarding the strengths and weaknesses of current domestic-violence laws, problems associated with their enforcement, and ways to improve the existing statutes.

Student evaluations of the social-change assignment have been extremely positive. In fact, many have described this aspect of the course as one of the most empowering and transformative experiences of their college careers. For instance, one student wrote: "This is the first time in four years that the work I've done for a course has actually been relevant to the *real* world." Others commented more directly on the link between theory and praxis and, in particular, how it affected their emotional response to the course: "I don't feel stuck or paralyzed anymore since we were able to use our knowledge to do something positive and concrete about domestic violence. We didn't just talk; we put our education to work." Such comments clearly suggest, that in courses on sensitive topics like domestic violence, it is particularly useful for students to become actively involved in their education and this includes the process of social change. By working with others who share their concerns and by having the opportunity to design and implement projects such as those described here, students soon realize they *can* effect change; they *can* "make a difference." Thus, by incorporating assignments designed to promote social activism, faculty can help reduce the feelings of despair and powerlessness so common among students in their domestic-violence classes.

In conclusion, one of the most difficult tasks facing those of us who teach domestic violence or related courses is to create a learning environment in which students feel both safe and empowered. There are obviously countless ways to achieve this goal, and the most successful are likely to be those that take into account students' emotional as well as intellectual needs. In this regard, I hope the teaching strategies and course curriculum outlined here prove to be useful resources.

Notes

An earlier version of this paper was presented at the annual meeting of the National Women's Studies Association, June 1989, in Towson, MD.

¹For an excellent overview of this literature, see Weiler; Ryan; Culley and Portuges; and Bunch and Pollack.

²For further discussion of the dynamics of feminist teaching, see Rakow; Disch and Thompson; Lewis; Gardner et al.; and Rothenberg.

³As defined here, domestic violence includes all forms of emotional/psychological, physical, or sexual violence that occur within intimate, familial, or familylike relationships. Thus, unlike the more frequently used term "family violence," this conceptualization includes violent behavior between individuals unrelated through blood or marriage (e.g., dating violence, lesbian battering, etc.).

⁴It is important to note that these issues can emerge in any course that includes one or more class sessions on the topic of domestic violence. See, for example, Lee and Phillips.

⁵This knowledge is based on information shared with me by students via private conversations, written assignments, and course evaluations.

⁶My lectures draw on a wide variety of materials, but I have found the work of the following authors to be especially useful: Gelles and Cornell; Hooks; Gordon; Lobel; and Russell.

⁷Typically, about seventy-five percent of the class choose this option.

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