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CYBERFEMINIST POTENTIAL FOR DIALOGUE AND VOICE ON THE CLASS BLOG

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CYBERFEMINIST POTENTIAL FOR DIALOGUE AND VOICE ON THE CLASS BLOG

by

Kate Gramlich

B.A., Southern Illinois University, 2009

A Research Report

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the
Master of Arts Degree

Department of Speech Communication
in the Graduate School
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RESEARCH PAPER APPROVAL

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Approved by:

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Graduate School
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AN ABSTRACT OF THE RESEARCH REPORT OF

KATE GRAMLICH for the Master of Arts degree in Speech Communications, presented on 27 June 2012, at Southern Illinois University Carbondale.

TITLE: Cyberfeminist Potential for Dialogue and Voice on the Class Blog

MAJOR PROFESSOR: Dr. Ross Singer

This study addresses blogging as a pedagogical tool within the feminist classroom in order to provide fellow pedagogues with insight for their own exploration. Drawing upon cyberfeminist theory, feminist pedagogy, and new media studies, this piece declares four major benefits of incorporating blogging into classroom activities, specifically focusing on student collaboration, dialogue, and voice.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

<u>CHAPTER</u>	<u>PAGE</u>
ABSTRACT	i
CHAPTER 1 – Logging On	1
Situating Feminism	2
Introducing Blogs	4
General Functions of Blogs	7
Classroom Blogs: Three Potential Models	9
CHAPTER 2 – Toward a Cyber-Feminist Pedagogy	13
Cyberfeminist Components	14
Feminist Pedagogy in Practice	19
CHAPTER 3 – Classroom Blogging Benefits	22
Connecting with Web- and Media-Savvy Students	22
Fostering Sense of Community and Connection	26
Allowing Opportunities for Hesitant and Marginalized Voices	29
Encouraging Dialogue and Power Sharing	35
CHAPTER 4 – Logging Off	39
Potential Limitations of Blogging in the Classroom	39
Conclusion	43
WORKS CITED	47
VITA	53

“It wasn’t until I started writing in my own blog... that I realized what a powerful space for radical transformation, critical and creative expression, and community-building it is”
-- Sara Puotinen (Puotinen and Creel Falcón, 72).

CHAPTER 1 – LOGGING ON

In this study, I begin by briefly and broadly exploring blogs as a media form and the incorporation of blogs within the classroom as implemented by instructors from various academic backgrounds. With this background of the medium established, I turn to principles laid out by cyber-feminists as well as critical feminist pedagogues in order to establish the basis for a potential cyber-feminist pedagogy using testimonies put forth by feminist instructors. In its essence, cyberfeminism takes the very basic feminist goals of social, economic, and political equality of all genders and turns its critical eye on the World Wide Web as a space of connection, tension, and a location for cultural beliefs. Critical feminist pedagogy also draws upon a feminist lens of gender equality and focuses on power (im)balances, identity, and voice within the classroom setting. I am interested in how these two relating feminist spheres overlap.

From here, I take these theoretical frameworks and apply them to blogs, laying out four specific benefits to the incorporation of blogging in the feminist classroom. These benefits address issues of voice, dialogue, and power when connecting to a generation of incoming students often already immersed in web culture. After exploring these benefits in detail, using my own personal experience as an instructor as well as further testimonies provided by fellow feminist pedagogues, I then conclude the research report by addressing several concerns and challenges related to classroom blogging. The goals of this project are to add to the ongoing discussion surrounding

feminist pedagogy *and* blogging in classrooms in an attempt to further solidify the connection between these two areas of feminist study.

Situating Feminism

Before delving further into cyberfeminism, feminist pedagogical practices, and the blog as a feminist tool, I would like to briefly situate the broader ideas of feminism that I have drawn upon when moving through the world as a self-proclaimed “feminist” and gender studies instructor. At its most basic level, feminism challenges Androcentrism (male-centeredness) and patriarchy by striving for the social, economic, and political equality between the genders. Cyberfeminism directs this lens toward technology and online culture, and feminist pedagogy focuses on the classroom.

In 1998, Rosemarie Putnam Tong compiled an incredibly useful and accessible primer called *Feminist Thought*, which outlines several other subcategories of feminist theory. With branches called “liberal,” “radical,” “psychoanalytic,” “Marxist,” “postmodern,” “multicultural,” “ecological,” etc., it is easy to become both comforted and overwhelmed by the complexity of feminism. Tong argues that the labels themselves will shift and change as society itself shifts, but currently they are still useful:

They signal to the broader public that feminism is not a monolithic ideology, that all feminists do not think alike, and that, like other time-honored modes of thinking, feminist thought has a past as well as a present and a future. (1)

With so many subcategories, it seems as though there is a focus for every feminist or, if there is not, one can be created. An individual can seek out – or establish – a conversation focusing on sexualities, body image, gender in developing nations, women

in science and technology, religion, disabilities, gender portrayal in video games... the list continues. The variety of feminist conversations that one can participate in is constantly growing as we explore how gender impacts (and is impacted by) society.

Multicultural feminism, gaining strength within the so-called third wave of larger feminist activism, has been particularly influential in my own feminist upbringing. Calling attention to, and *listening* to, our differences – based not only on sex and gender, but sexuality, race, ethnicity, religion, class, ability, size, age, and a range of other subjectivities – rather than ignoring those differences, is crucial to multicultural feminism (Tong 212-13). These “interlocking systems of domination,” as bell hooks calls them, must be acknowledged in order to understand the “diversity and complexity of female experience, of our relationship to power and domination” (1989, 21). Another highly influential call put forward by hooks is what she calls “the challenge to love,” which she explains in the following way:

Not enough feminist work has focused on documenting and sharing ways individuals confront differences constructively and successfully. Women and men need to know what is on the other side of the pain experienced in politicization. We need detailed accounts of the ways our lives are fuller and richer as we change and grow politically, as we learn to live each moment as committed feminists, as comrades working to end domination... As we work to be loving, to create a culture that celebrates life, that makes love possible, we move against dehumanization, against domination. (hooks 1989, 26).

hooks goes on to discuss Pablo Freire's influence in her thoughts on feminism and love, which later expanded into her feminist pedagogical writings. Overall, the almost palpable sense of desperation in hooks' words constantly moves me to consider how my own form of feminism incorporates difference, understanding, and love. Her call for documentation and sharing between individuals for the benefit of feminism and humanity overall is powerful even decades later.

Since this call was written, advances have been made in communication through various different media forms, and I am interested in how we can apply hooks' words to cyber spaces of sharing and documentation. The "detailed accounts" she calls for can be found in reflective and reflexive online writing – including classroom blogging – and I wish to link these two using my own experience as well as the experience of other feminist scholars interested in pedagogy and cyberspace. As I will point out later in this essay, the ability to find one's voice in an online environment such as a blog can be extremely powerful and productive to feminist conversations that may not otherwise occur.

Introducing Blogs

Blogs have become a stable fixture in our increasingly technologized world. A term that is short for "weblogs" coined by Jorn Barger in December 1997, the word 'blog' is used to describe a "website format containing periodic time-stamped posts on a common Web page" (Tobias 11). When pared down to the essential qualities, blogs are online websites that contain a series of entries – or *posts* – that are frequently updated by one or several "bloggers" and may be visited by essentially anyone who has access to the Internet. On a blog, posts are listed reverse-chronologically, with newest on top. Like online news archives, this experience gives visitors the most up-to-date information

first, creating a potential sense of going “back through time” as a reader scrolls through the pages (Elccessor 1). These posts can be solely text-based or can incorporate images, sound, and video.

Before it was shortened to its current monosyllabic slang form in the late 1990s, the term *weblog* was pronounced as both “web-log” and “we-blog,” signifying a simultaneous purpose of recording and community-building. While there may be some disagreement as to exactly *why* the very first blogs came into existence, the general purpose of recording one’s thoughts and opinions for an audience has been traced electronically to previous online communities such as email listservs and electronic bulletin boards (Tobias 11). Blogs have been with us for a short period of time, yet they have had an explosive history. In the late 1990s, Jesse James Garrett and Cameron Barrett (of the now-defunct Infosift and Camworld sites, respectively) compiled and published an online list of the only blogs that were “known to be in existence at the beginning of 1999” (Blood, n.p.). There were twenty-three blogs on the list. Ten years later, at the State of the Blogosphere (SOTB) conference in 2009, Technorati – the most pervasive blog search engine and directory – estimated that 200 million blogs were in existence, and that number has increased (perhaps doubled or more) in the two years since (“Technorati’s State of the Blogosphere,” n.p.).

A blog researcher and blogger herself, Rebecca Blood gives a brief historical account of the phenomenon, citing that the introduction of free blogging software and websites (the first being Pitas, followed by Blogger and Groksoup, and later Wordpress, TypePad, etc.) caused an explosion of activity on the web (Blood, n.p.). She states that an important shift occurred within blogging at this time:

[In the beginning] weblogs could only be created by people who already knew how to make a website. A weblog editor had either taught herself to code HTML for fun, or, after working all day creating commercial websites, spent several off-work hours every day surfing the web and posting to her site. These were web enthusiasts (Blood, n.p.).

With the increasing availability of blog creation and editing tools at the turn of the twenty-first century, however, the ability to join the blogosphere became slightly more widespread. The onset of these tools made blogging (as well as social networking sites such as Facebook, Myspace, and Twitter) more of a participatory form of media, separating it from other outlets such as television and print journals, which has been seen as a powerful move from 'audience' to 'public':

Media is a corporate possession...You cannot participate in the media. Bringing that into the foreground is the first step. The second step is to define the difference between public and audience. An audience is passive; a public is participatory. We need a definition of media that is public in its orientation (Ruggiero qtd. in Blood, n.p.).

Within blogging itself, rather than the very upper echelons of "web enthusiasts" (programmers and designers) controlling the content, publishing was becoming increasingly available to anyone with access to the Internet (which, at the turn of the century and still today, encompasses an elite group of people). Though *total* access and availability may be impossible, the onset of free blog publishing tools has assisted at least partially in expanding the possibility for more individuals to participate in blogging. Blogs have become "tools for telling stories and creating networks" and have placed

some creative power into the hands of the general public, as opposed to seeing readers as passive media consumers (Cohen 162). People who participate in blogs may write their own posts, read others' posts, and engage in dialogue on one another's blogs through comment features. This can be put in contrast with other forms of media (television, movies, music videos) where entertainers perform for audiences without much interaction between the two.

Additionally, rather than seeing one's self within a character of a story that is already written out from someone else's perspective, bloggers share their own stories and write themselves as the characters. Blogs can be situated within multiple histories of story telling and network creating: "We could go further and trace a media genealogy (through zines, broadsides, etc.), a social genealogy (through Internet forums, book clubs, tea rooms), and a technological genealogy (through homepages, ham radio, letters)" (Cohen 162). Framing the phenomenon in this way is helpful in that it locates some of the functional intersectionality surrounding blogging. It must be noted that social networking sites such as Facebook, MySpace, Twitter, and YouTube may also provide these levels of interaction and identity development. Though it is not the subject of this essay, much valuable research has been done on incorporating social networking tools into classroom activities (for more information, see Aragon 2007; Jolly 2006; Kirkup 2005; Molyneaux et al 2008; Sample 2009).

General Functions of Blogs

Given these ways of potentially situating the phenomenon, how do we describe what services blogs actually provide to users? Although there are many ways (perhaps as many as there are blogs and bloggers themselves) to discuss functionality, I am

interested in the ways blogs have been theorized to provide productive intersections between the individual and the community, looking specifically at classroom communities. According to Farmer, et al., the act of writing and reading blogs can offer a sense of evolving online discussion and interconnectedness:

Blogs typically make central use of the hypertextual facilities of online communication: linking internally between posts, providing links to other web content, and/or linking to other users' blogs. Collectively, blogs and their multiple links are referred to as the 'blogosphere', a term coined by analogy with the concept of the 'public sphere', a space for the exercise of public communication and individual free speech (124).

Following this line of argument about simultaneous personal/communal space-making, Miller and Shepherd argued that the purpose of blogs is twofold. Essentially, blogs exist as avenues for both self-expression and for community development, revolving around intrinsic and extrinsic self-disclosure. They continue, arguing that this disclosure "should not be understood as the simple unveiling of a pre-existent or perdurable self, but rather as a constitutive effort" (10). Disclosure, in this sense, is a process. Blogs can function as sites of potentially vulnerable exploration of the self and one's surroundings, both of which are constantly in flux as one moves throughout the world. Farmer, et al. state that blogs exist and are viewed as "transformational communicative technologies that allow users to connect and become part of an active social corpus, while exercising and legitimating their personal expressive spaces" (124). In this view, the blending of public and private is seen as transformative in nature, allowing for a less rigid separation between the personal and the public. The importance of such blending is relevant within

blogging in general, but I am specifically interested in applying it to classroom settings, as I will continue to explore.

Classroom Blogs: Three Potential Models

Through its navigation of the public and private spheres, blogging provides an interesting new outlet for academic conversation and educational exploration. Farmer, et al. state “blogging is a useful practice for the development of higher order learning skills, active, learner centered pedagogy, authentic learning, associative thinking, and interactive learning communities” (123). This is due in part to the simultaneous personal/public nature of the posts as well as the commentary and cross-linking features available on blogging platforms.

So, what can blogging in the classroom look like? There are several blogging platforms, or websites that host blog spaces and provide users with the program and utilities necessary for creating and updating posts (popular platforms include Wordpress.com and Blogger.com because they are free and relatively user-friendly). When using blogs in a class, there are a few options for how posting and interaction can go between instructor(s) and students: an instructor-driven blog with comment interaction, separate solo student blogs, and a multi-blogger collaborative blog. The first option presents one class blog that is maintained and updated solely by the instructor with potential for student interactions within the comment feature on individual posts and pages. I personally used this strategy during the first semester in which I incorporated blogging into my women’s studies classroom, and, while it is possibly the most convenient to maintain, it is also problematic from a critical perspective when addressing the balance of power. Although students share their own opinions and

media in response to posts and can converse with one another through these responses, the instructor has complete authorship over the actual posts and pages that are displayed. In essence, this space becomes the instructor's blog *for* the class and students are allowed to interact with that material but are not given other opportunities to make their own posts.

On the opposite end of the spectrum is the implementation of individual solo blogs for each of the students. According to proponents of this format, this grants more agency and control to each student, as she is responsible for posting on and maintaining her own blog and the comments it receives. Caroline Smith, an assistant professor of writing at George Washington University, incorporated the use of blogs and online journals as a way of teaching personal narrative, arguing that this exercise showed students "how personal writing can be an effective means of public — and often feminist — communication" (18). One drawback of this individualized blogging method, however, is a potential for lack of connection between students because there is not one central "hub" for information; rather, students would have to link to and visit one another's blogs, which is certainly possible if comparably less convenient (see Puotinen 2009; Smith 2006; Chick 2009).

The third option I listed, the multi-blogger group blog, is one that may provide a middle ground that grants this higher level of agency while also establishing a greater opportunity for online community development (see Puotinen 2009). As the phrase suggests, this method establishes one blog for the class to which each student is a registered member and given full posting rights (in conjunction with standard comment features, which are provided and encouraged in all three options). Mark Sample, who, in

fall 2009 had been using blogs in his classrooms for seven years (thirteen semesters), explains in his own blog his rationale for using this third method:

I've always used group blogs in my classes: one central, collaborative blog where every student posts. I prefer this format over the hub model, in which an official class site links out to individual student blogs spread across the students' own preferred blogging platforms. If nothing else, the group blog makes my job easier. I can read all the posts in one place. It also makes it more likely that students will read each other's posts, generating a sense of momentum that is so important to the students' buy-in of class blogging. ("Pedagogy and the class blog," n.p.)

This sense of momentum that Sample describes is one in which the students are both audience members and rhetors within various conversations. The students have more access to one another's words and are therefore more likely to engage with them.

Natalie Jolly of Pennsylvania State University has written multiple articles in the journal *Feminist Collections* regarding the collaborative class blog idea and reports an increase in discussion both online and in class between classmates that did not typically speak up beforehand (16).

By giving each student free range to post text and share links and/or media with the class in one centrally located online space, there is potential to simultaneously establish a sense of agency *and* community (see Jolly 2006 and 2007; Miller and Shepherd 2010). While there are inherent costs involved in each of these methods surrounding issues control, agency, ease of use, separation, and community (among others), the incorporation of one or multiple blogs within a classroom setting can also

provide various benefits, as discussed below. For the purposes of continuity within this essay, I will generally be referring to the multi-blogger group blog method because I feel that it provides the closest resemblance of a middle ground among the three.

CHAPTER 2 – TOWARD A CYBER-FEMINIST PEDAGOGY

There has been a growing body of research dedicated to utilizing blogs and social networking sites within the classroom (for ages ranging from elementary school to college and graduate school), but I am interested in expanding the conversation to more thoroughly cover how these tools can be especially helpful in feminist classrooms. I use the phrase “feminist classrooms” because it extends beyond just Women’s and/or Gender Studies classes and potentially into any other classroom. Because of the interdisciplinary nature of women’s studies as a field, scholars cited in this article come from various academic backgrounds and are using blogging methods for a variety of subject matters.

Several scholars approach the subject of blogging in the classroom from a feminist pedagogical standpoint, which I find particularly helpful (see Chick 2009; Maher and Chng 2008; Pramaggiore and Hardin 1999; Torrens and Riley 2009; Webb, et al. 2002). Simply stated, feminist pedagogies tend to adhere to existing basic feminist principles promoting “a desire to empower, struggle against oppressions, create and engage a community of learners and activists, and to expand our students’ awareness, learning capacities, and command of course materials” (Torrens and Riley 211). It is a pedagogy that “pays attention to the intersections of gender and race, class and sexuality, and history and geography” while proposing a multi-dimensional lens not strictly concerned with gender, but also race, class, and other identity markers (Gajjala, et al. 414). While these definitions provide useful points of reference, the “many strands of theoretical underpinnings” make it difficult to find and define a singular feminist pedagogy (Gajjala, et al. 412-13). bell hooks is often cited in discussion of feminist

pedagogy, specifically when referring to classrooms as potential “locations of possibility,” where students and instructors “move beyond boundaries” and are viewed *subjects* rather than objects (hooks 1994, 207; Torrens and Riley 210-11). An offshoot of critical pedagogy, this method focuses on interconnected identity markers and attempts to address traditional power relations that are involved in traditional classrooms. Torrens and Riley discuss the feminist classroom as a “site of struggle” in which authority and power are constantly reflected upon as instructors and students navigate their relationship not only to one another, but to knowledge as well (211).

Cyberfeminist Components

Given the conversations surrounding feminist pedagogy in general, how can these concepts be applied to online engagement? Feminist pedagogical themes have been linked to a branch of feminism known as *cyberfeminism*, coined in the early 1990s by Sadie Plant “as an ‘alliance’ or ‘connection’ between women and technology defined largely by online art projects and grrl sites on the Web that remake these technologies in a new feminist image” (Hocks 235). It was soon after used by the VNS Matrix (pronounced “Venus”) in their “Cyberfeminist Manifesto for the 21st Century,” from 1991 (see Plant 1996; Sajbrfem 2008). As something that has purposely avoided definition – in fact, early into the movement there was only “The 100 Anti-Theses of Cyberfeminism” – cyberfeminism *can be* many things:

Cyberfeminism can... critique equality in cyberspace / be humorous /
 playfully address feminist issues / examine technology by engaging with it
 / be fun / subtly address feminist issues / challenge established
 perceptions of cyberspace / be subversive / disrupt the perception of

technology as 'toys for boys' / embrace technology / be active/ directly address feminist issues / examine relationships between bodies and technology / be collaborative / seek to bring about change from within / examine the relationships between women and technology. (Sajbrfem, n.p.)

Overall, cyberfeminism takes the very basic feminist goals of social, economic, and political equality of all genders and turns its critical eye on the World Wide Web as a space of connection, tension, and a location for cultural beliefs. While cyberfeminism was not included in Tong's 1998 edition of *Feminist Thought*, recent years have seen an insurgence of feminism within online spaces and perhaps it will be included in a later edition.

Cyberfeminist scholars have challenged cyberspace (and, with it, the blogosphere) for at times reifying hierarchies that exist in offline spaces, particularly in terms of gender (see Blair and Takayoshi 1999; Blair, Gajjala, and Tulley 2009; Bowen 2009; Haraway 1991; Plant 1996; Torrens and Riley 2009). Indeed, Claudia Herbst wrote specifically on this topic in 2009, focusing on the gender dominance of men over women in multiple areas of computer mediated communication (135). Female identity has been marginalized and silenced in online spaces just as in offline ones, as gender binaries and patriarchal hierarchies are easily translatable regardless of medium (138). Despite this pattern, however, cyberfeminists and cyberfeminist pedagogues continue to make attempts to carve out spaces for marginalized voices online, as feminists and social activists have done in the non-virtual world for centuries. Mindful of the

challenges, feminists seek new ways to engage with the Internet as another “location of possibility” (hooks 1994, 207).

In 1999, in the blogosphere’s infancy, Pramaggiore and Hardin, a women’s studies professor and a women’s studies master’s student respectively, incorporated earlier forms of online communication in their classroom. Looking at a women’s studies listserv for the course and a “World Wide Web page” (a phrase which dates the article), Pramaggiore and Hardin study how such spaces can be utilized in a feminist classroom from a feminist pedagogical standpoint. They focused on four specific goals of an online feminist pedagogy:

- (1) decenter the traditional authority structure of the classroom, (2) encourage learner-centered learning, (3) empower students with technological skills and an understanding of technology as a gendered social process, and (4) expose students to the varied and abundant Web resources by and about women. (167)

These goals are based upon traditional feminist pedagogy, which questions teacher authority and shifts the focus to learner-centered. I find them reminiscent of the cyberfeminist tenets laid out by a cyberfeminist and blogger named Sarah Jones, known online as *Sajbrfem*. She posted an online lecture detailing “The Five Rules of Cyberfeminist Engagement,” which include:

1. Honor traditional feminist lenses (“remember the *feminism* in cyberfeminism” and strive for gender equality)
2. Engage with and participate in both technology and art (rather than critiquing it from the sidelines)

3. Hack, or “see what is there and take it and turn it into something that works for you”
4. Be playfully subversive, and
5. Conspire and collaborate

Essentially, these five tenets, and the four feminist pedagogical goals proposed by Pramaggiore and Hardin’s research, encourage the empowerment of women (whether specifically as students or in general as feminists) through the use of technology, all the while acknowledging how gender and technology interact.

Within individual blog posts, users are also allowed and encouraged to create tags, or keywords that help to organize and categorize content. Although there are more commonly used tags (fashion, sports, politics, etc.) that feed directly into a larger directory database online, user-generated tags can literally be anything one chooses. Because of this feature, language is perhaps more malleable and terms associated with various movements or trends can evolve over time. In discussing her work with students who use various social bookmarking sites, Natalie Jolly extends this concept of user-generated tags specifically into the realm of cyberfeminism:

By tagging Web content that they find interesting and building their own pages of bookmarks, students get to become part of the cyber-feminist movement themselves. This sort of practice leads to the democratization of Web content, as students become in control of generating a Web taxonomy through the compilation of their bookmarks and tags. It also leads to the democratization of feminism more generally — students get to

tag (or name) which content they deem to be feminist, and thus they are participating in building what feminism means on the Web (2007, 47).

This web reclamation of what feminism “means” and the carving out of new spaces for activism and connection specifically draws upon some of the abovementioned tenets of cyberfeminism explained by Sajbrfem. Engaging with technology in the name of feminist pursuits and “turn[ing] it into something that works for you” as a woman online is a powerful act, especially when considering that the technology itself has traditionally been a male-dominated realm (Sajberfem n.p.).

In the context of blogging in the classroom, feminist pedagogues Torrens and Riley posit that such virtual spaces “not only encourage an openness of mind for both teachers and students, but they also create [bell] hooks’ location of possibility where both teachers and students move beyond traditional boundaries to work cooperatively to create knowledge in the classroom” (1994, 207). Mindful of – and in fact sometimes contributing to – the critiques of the cyberworld’s emancipatory potential, Torrens and Riley nevertheless propose that cyberspace can, if used carefully, be beneficial for feminist pedagogy. They argue that online classroom environments allow them, as instructors, the opportunity to “defuse the physicality of the face-to-face situation in which ‘who’ and ‘what’ the teacher is or represents can sometimes overtake the material, the student, or the classroom” (214). The students are given a more “neutral” space in which to learn on their own terms rather than being perhaps distracted by the physical presence of the instructor. They continue that online spaces function “to facilitate discussion that allows, reflects on, and theorizes the personal experiences of our students” (214). Individual students confront the material and write about their

experiences online, which allows for more time to consider and process their feelings without feeling pressured by the physical space and time constraints of a traditional classroom.

While this may seem like a very tall order for online feminist classrooms, I have found truth to these claims in my own experience and through the writing of other cyberfeminist pedagogues. Constantly making attempts to remain reflexive of the tensions inherent in the classroom – whether online or offline – plays a crucial part in exploring these spaces. The following sections break down some of these claims made by Torrens and Riley among others in order to create a clearer picture of cyberfeminist pedagogy.

Feminist Pedagogy In Practice

When talking about the use of blogging in such classroom settings, there is first a distinction between adding blogs as supplementary to face-to-face feminist learning and focusing on feminist distance education. While several feminist pedagogues personally prefer one style to the other, it is important to become aware of the similarities and differences therein. Chick and Hassel specifically discuss distance education (DE) contrasted with face-to-face (F2F) learning, citing not only statistics about the rapidly expanding frequency with which educators and institutions are embracing DE but also objections to online classrooms, countering that such critiques are typically “are not borne out by research” (Chick and Hassel 195). Research cited by Chick and Hassel illustrates that DE is not (necessarily) the intimidating and impersonal beast that it is often made out to be. In fact, authors argue that the time has come for feminist educators to embrace – rather than denounce – this new form of learning:

If we don't clearly, publicly, and repeatedly define feminist pedagogy and discuss its benefits beyond current practitioners, many of our advances will either be limited to those already doing the work or credited to advocates of the more generic modes of active learning. In these circumstances, feminist pedagogy will remain a concept understood only by feminist educators, misunderstood by our colleagues, and invisible to our students. Furthermore, failing to outline the many ways feminist pedagogy is applicable to online environments will ensure that myths and misconceptions about online teaching flourish and that only the worst versions of online pedagogy persist. (Chick and Hassel 196)

In writing about their experiences implementing feminist pedagogy into specifically online-only classrooms, Chick and Hassel describe the use of individual “home” pages or profiles set up by each student as well as discussion forums that simulate in-class and out-of-class student exchange environments. They tie this directly into an aspect of feminist pedagogy:

If, as Mary Bricker-Jenkins and Nancy Hooyman assert, diversity and inclusion are key values of the feminist classroom, then the very structure of the online classroom provides it. We all hear that more students will participate in online discussions than F2F ones as the shy students discover the relative anonymity and absence of a stage online. This more welcoming environment is an important shift in discussion dynamics, a great advantage of online discussions, and a central principle of feminist pedagogy (Chick and Hassel 200).

Online classroom sites (like blogs and forums) can and should be spaces for discussion and interaction that embraces the idea of co-constructed knowledge. Instructors can introduce discussion questions to get the conversation started, or they can encourage students to introduce their own questions. “Rather than acting as the sole source of the wisdom and guidance in the course, instructors should respond, fill in gaps, and correct misconceptions after the students have had the time, space, and expectation to do so on their own” (Chick and Hassel 204).

Building upon these principles, Maher and Chng frame class blogs as an additional space where identities are shaped and performed, much as they are in the face-to-face classroom: “The importation of web-based technologies into learning and teaching, even when they do not include a collaboration across teaching locations, means the internet is an added ‘space’ to be considered, and gender clearly shapes interactions with technology and the space of the cyberworld” (Maher and Chng 204). Here, we move away from the distance education model to which Chick and Hassel are responding, and into a blended learning style, where blogs add to – rather than replace – face-to-face interactions.

Natalie Jolly points out two specific beneficial trends when incorporating blogging into feminist classrooms, which are echoed in many other research projects dedicated to this topic. The first is potentially allowing quieter students an opportunity to be heard, and the second is an increase in responsible and respectful dialogical practices. These potential benefits work within the above-mentioned goals of feminist pedagogy laid out by Pramaggiore and Hardin, specifically because they work to empower students by locating them as sources of knowledge.

CHAPTER 3 – CLASSROOM BLOGGING BENEFITS

For the purposes of this section, I plan to synthesize previous arguments and briefly outline several ways in which blogs can be useful within undergraduate and graduate level classrooms, specifically drawing upon women's and gender studies pedagogues. Modes of utility detailed in this section include: appealing to the media-driven, 'Net-based generation of students; providing spaces of collaboration and communication among both students and extra-educational groups; potentially allowing a new option for students to voice their opinions when they do not feel comfortable doing so in other arenas; and creating new avenues of dialogue and enabling a more balanced power structure.

Connecting with Web- and Media-Savvy Students

In everyday personal, academic and social life, students make use of various social networking tools and collaborative web sources such as Facebook, Twitter and YouTube. These tools provide their members with instant access to peers and loved ones, as well as ways to share pictures, videos, and various other data. As a way to become more accessible (and, arguably, "hip"), colleges and universities in the U.S. and around the world have found ways to extend its hand to the "Net Gen" within educational settings (Aragon 45). As Gajjala, et al. state in the context of engaging new forms of critical pedagogy, "While teaching generations of 'digital natives,' it is a must that we engage Web 2.0 pedagogically and strategically" (412). Across disciplines and universities, the use of web-based course tools (notably WebCT, Blackboard, and Desire2Learn) has increased, allowing students the option to turn in assignments

electronically, download syllabi and other course materials, and potentially have space for discussion within a school-sanctioned online environment (Burgess 6).

While issues of computer/Internet access and web-literacy undoubtedly arise within these settings, the increasing demand for technology has prompted universities to pay more attention to the maintenance and update of their computer lab facilities (Burgess 14). By providing computers with various operating systems in multiple locations on campuses, some with hours extending late into the night, schools are attempting to fulfill a newly created need for students to be web-accessible, both for WebCT and similar sites as well as for social networking tools. By bringing blogging (along with social networking and online media opportunities) into the classroom, teachers can make attempts to connect further with their students and appeal to their expanding interest in – or potential obsession with – technology. As Caroline Smith writes:

Students' preoccupation with sites such as Facebook and MySpace, which encourage users to become what Emily Nussbaum in her article "My So-Called Blog" deemed "compulsive self-chroniclers," provide an easy entryway into the not-so-far-removed world of blogging. Though many students do not keep individual blogs, they immediately connect with blogging since they themselves often update their Facebook or MySpace profiles, photos, and comments on a daily basis. (17)

Seeing the connection between what students already rely on in their personal lives and online pedagogical tools, while maintaining the same sense of in-the-moment-ness, is important for instructors who are interested in developing bonds with students. In her

own students' evaluations of the incorporation of web materials, women's studies and political science scholar Janni Aragon reports a request for increased blog material, potentially because of the "short and lively" effect that blog text provides to students. The shorter bits of text may appeal to our increasing need for instant and frequently updated information, which is often fulfilled by these popular networking sites (45). While encouraging this movement toward the rapid-fire intake of media and data may be seen as counterproductive to certain educational goals, it is important to acknowledge that these trends exist and attempt to play upon this new "need" in order to establish connections with future generations of students (Miller and Shepherd 1-2).

Linking to alternate sources through class blogs also potentially increases the accessibility of information for students. On social networking sites and non-class related blogs, participants share various bits of news and information not through textual citation, but through hyperlinks that directly transport readers to the source. In my own previous work with blogs, I have created "works cited" subpages where visitors can visit or view original articles from my website and quickly see where my inspiration is coming from without laboring through online databases or physical journals (see Gramlich "Biblio/Inspiration" and "Citation"). These pages are especially helpful for incoming generations of students who are not yet aware of the vast world of scholarly publishing; simply by viewing an article on a blog, a student can have access to this new information and then further her search from the original source. By making citation interactive and "clickable," classroom and scholarly blogs can – literally – link previously unaware students to the vast amounts of research available.

As mentioned above, blog posts may consist of any combination of text, web links, pictures, sound, and video in order to convey the intended message. The ability to readily share media with blog readers and classmates has become commonplace among net-generation students. Video sharing sites like YouTube and Vimeo provide visitors with free and unlimited access to both original and copyrighted, commercial videos in clips or their entirety to watch and share with others. Within a class blog setting, both students and instructors can attach links to alternative media or, with relatively recent developments in HTML (the language used to design and code pages), embed the videos directly into the post, making the ease of access even greater. Members can post interviews, documentary clips, campaign videos, and personal videoblogs (or “vlogs”), among other things, exposing one’s readers to a variety of new information (Molyneaux, et al 2). The ease of this sharing through the blog can be particularly useful in classes that analyze the rhetorical content of pop cultural videos or conversations, for instance.

I have found these avenues personally useful within my own class’s blogging experience in that students have commented multiple times throughout this past semester with a suggested video of something that has been related to our textbook. Aside from sharing videos, instructors and their students can also easily link to various websites and/or articles that may be useful for fostering class discussion or in research projects. Another important goal of making these new forms of digital media readily accessible, according to Natalie Jolly, is political. Within her own women’s studies classrooms, Jolly reports:

By using blogs, message boards, or any other Web-based component in our courses, we are teaching our students that feminism (as a movement, a theory, and a practice) is thriving in the digital age. Gaining familiarity with new technologies is an imperative for students, and in many ways their connection to feminism depends on our ability to integrate it into their (increasingly) virtual realities. (2006, 17)

Jolly continues to describe one assignment in which students contacted pharmacies in the area about availability of the morning-after pill. They recorded these findings in a class blog, which is now being used by the local Planned Parenthood chapter as an informational database. Jolly describes this as an example of how blogging can be used “to connect individual action with the larger project of feminist activism and teach all of us about the power of grassroots (or “netroots”) mobilization” (17). With more forms of activism being located online through blogs, social networking sites, and electronic magazines (or e-zines), it is important to bring critically minded students into this arena in order to foster new ways to get involved. Sharing media with classmates is one way to further dialogue outside of the physical classroom in interesting ways.

Fostering Sense of Community and Connection

Along with this incorporation of new and potentially productive media within the class discussion, blogs are also used for establishing community among not only the specific blog’s contributors but also across the blogosphere. As a model for classroom blogging, collaborative or collective blogs typically address one central topic by incorporating viewpoints from various bloggers who bring their own experiences to the

discussion. Vicki Tobias cites several examples in her discussion of feminist collaborative blogs, including *Blog Sisters* (blogsisters.blogspot.com), described as

An active community weblog of contributions by hundreds of loosely related women bloggers who share knowledge, ideas, stories, conversation, wisdom, and the occasional dirty joke, as well as more serious deliberations related to breast cancer, divorce, body image, international women's issues, and human rights abuses (13).

This space has the potential to look like an electronic version of the transformative consciousness-raising groups of previous feminist generations, if handled with care and caution. Revolutionary second-wave feminists often gathered face-to-face for conversations on various gendered topics (housework, families, working conditions, abortion, etc.) with intent to raise consciousness of the personal and political issues they shared (Tong 45). A focus on collaboration and community helped to make many women feel less isolated in their experiences. As Tobias mentions, online spaces can provide a different sort of "active community" used for connection and dialogue between feminists (13). Online women's communities such as blogs and message boards are not inherently feminist, progressive, or even female-friendly, however; work must be done to foster such spaces. Like with any form of discussion online communities can be productive or problematic, depending upon who is involved and the participants' agendas. Likewise, it should not be assumed that all voices are heard and/or represented, despite the diversity that is often found within collaborative blogs. Issues of access, interest, and representational politics can be heavily involved in these spaces. In her students' project surrounding collective feminist blogs, Marie Thompson of James

Madison University noted the lack of certain voices within the blogs that her students studied, specifically women of color, women from the working class, and non-U.S. women (16).

It is in these ways, of course, that these spaces even further resemble consciousness-raising groups, and paying attention to these issues within a class blog setting is crucial in order to further increase the inclusivity of the blogosphere. For those who participate within a classroom blog, the comment features allowed on individual posts can provide space to establish electronic conversations that can be visited and expanded upon by any interested parties. As Tobias explains:

Two common blog features are 'blogrolls' and 'comments.' Blogrolls are lists of another blog's entries, often organized by topic, that create context for a blog by referencing similar or relevant entries... The use of feedback comment systems allows readers to comment on an individual blog entry. Some blogs have regular postings by identified commenters whose contribution may increase the blog's reputation or popularity, depending on the individual commenter and his or her relationship to the blog topic.

(2)

The exchange of ideas between students through comments and links can provide an interesting and useful way to continue (or begin) discussions outside of the classroom environment.

Feminist instructors within several disciplines have explored various uses of these discussions. For example, Carolyn Smith pairs a student within one of her writing sections with a student in another section for a blogged version of peer editing. Because

the students are not in the same classroom together, she reports that they often feel more comfortable giving constructive criticism through the mediated comments (17).

Regarding the comment exchange features, Miller and Shepherd state:

Many bloggers see blogging as a way of developing relationships, via linking back, with an online community . . . They also manage those relationships through both linking and commentary, which become forms of social control, signs of approval, acceptance, value (11).

These signs of approval and acceptance are extremely important in establishing the trust that is essential for developing any sense of community within the classroom.

Undoubtedly, this connection must also be fostered during in-class discussion as usual since an investment in the broader course itself (as well as to the instructor and fellow students to some extent) is necessary in order to foster interest in online participation.

The relationship between in-class and online conversations can be cyclical and self-perpetuating once examples of dialogue and constructive (if not always outright positive) feedback are established.

Allowing Opportunities for Hesitant and Marginalized Voices

Opening up spaces for dialogue and encouraging students – especially ones from marginalized groups such as women, students of color, and students of various non-hetero sexual identities – to find and share their voice and sense of agency is a common goal among feminist pedagogues and critical pedagogues in general (see Bryson and Bennet-Anyikwa 2003; Curtis 2007; Fassett and Warren 2006; Freire 1993). Pedagogues have used blogs as a way of seeking out voices that are not always comfortable being heard during in-class discussions. Within her own experience, Natalie

Jolly reports that online discussion formats allow students the option of carefully considering their feelings and words before contributing to a discussion, potentially resulting in “a richer, more nuanced discussion that is — surprisingly — often more respectful and responsive than the face-to-face exchanges” (16). Jolly’s experience of *increased* respect and consideration in these exchanges is at odds with a major stereotype of online communication, namely that such communication (and the relative anonymity that accompanies it) encourages hostility and harassment. While the latter can certainly be the case, respectful dialog is possible in these spaces as well. In my own experience with students, having discussions about respectful communication has positive results both in the classroom and online.

Furthermore, Jolly continues with another benefit of online classroom communication:

Encouraging students to participate in a class blog also allows quiet students who dread mandated face-to-face participation to contribute in a more comfortable environment. After weeks of silence, students often surprise both their peers and me with their insight and eloquence on the web. (16)

These statements hit upon two important factors related to the issue of contribution: preparedness and levels of extroversion. All students have individual levels of comfort when speaking in class, with varying amounts of time and preparation needed depending upon the person. These comfort levels can vary greatly based on gender, race, religion, and cultural identities. Classroom settings can evoke senses of pressure

and anxiety in students who do not typically consider themselves to be outspoken or extroverted (whether this applies solely to the classroom or in other social interactions).

Allowing a student a separate space to consider material from class and carefully craft her own opinions on her own time, without distractions or fear of saying something “wrong” on the spot, can be a liberating and much more comfortable participation experience. In addition, as Jolly points out within her classrooms, the need for time and space to think may be exaggerated when sensitive topics are introduced in class, such as privilege, abortion, welfare, and other difficult social and political (“feminist”) topics that require extensive reflection (16). Likewise, “hearing” (or reading) these voices is something that also needs to be given adequate time and space. A quiet voice – either literally or figuratively – may be spoken over during in class exchanges, especially on heated issues. On a blog, classmates instead have the option of carefully reading these quieted arguments, perhaps gaining a more nuanced understanding with increased reflection. Text-based communication, like in-class communication, can be fast paced and intensely emotionally charged of course, but even these interactions can be looked back upon and considered more deeply once the conversation has ended.

French feminist philosopher Helene Cixous’s call for an *écriture féminine* echoes here for me. As explained by Deborah Bowen in context of an “e-Criture Feminine” (a cleverly updated, electronic version of Cixous’s words – think e-mail), this newer form of “feminine writing” is difficult to define but can be applied to our web-based communication:

Women are drawing together and using the concepts of space, style, and medium as a tripartite foundation for a new online discursive tradition in

the online autobiography. *Écriture féminine* – feminine writing – embraces and embodies these ideals with polyvocality, relationality, and in the new cyberworld, hypertextuality (Bowen 310).

While Cixous and Bowen speak primarily about writing in diaries – on paper and virtual, respectively – I find “*e-criture féminine*” to be useful in students’ blog posts as well.

Finding a space (online or otherwise) to formulate thoughts, write them down, and have them “heard” (read/seen) on a webpage could be a potentially empowering experience for individuals who typically feel silenced.

In their cross-cultural study of online interactions between two groups of students in Singapore and Australia, Maher and Chng have specifically brought gender into this conversation about oft-silenced voices. In Chng’s classroom, she asks students to respond to the following statement at the beginning of each semester: “I have/don’t have a problem speaking up in class,” to which increasingly more female students indicate that they *do* have a problem (Maher and Chng 211). When asked why this is, her female students respond with reasons including:

- a. I am a naturally shy person.
- b. I find it difficult speaking up in front of other people. I am afraid of getting things wrong.
- c. I am not good at thinking on my feet. I need more time to process what is being taught and said in the classroom.
- d. I am better at expressing myself in the written medium. I will make use of the class discussion forum (on course sites) instead to voice my opinions.

- e. I don't want others to think I 'know-it-all.'
- f. Others can express the same point so much better/clearer than I can (212).

This seems to fit directly into typical standards for female behavior in many cultures, where women feel comfortable in (and are encouraged to pursue) a more reserved role. Baxter, for example, finds a strong correlation between valuing traditional standards of femininity that focus on rule-following and polite behavior and the silencing of girls within the classroom (837). As she points out, this is often due to the interactions between female and male students or peers as well as the interactions between female students and their teachers. Male students are often given attention for “steal[ing] the limelight,” (interrupting and acting out), whereas female students are rewarded for following directions and self-regulating (Baxter 838). These patterns begin in elementary school (potentially even before Kindergarten in pre-school and day-school interactions), solidifying early on that girls are to adhere to rules more strictly than boys.

Sadker and Sadker specifically address this classroom tension in context of speaking out versus raising one's hand to speak. They write about the gendered imbalance when applying the “hand-raising” rule consistently, especially when a classroom discussion becomes heated and fast-paced. They call this heated environment “an open invitation for male dominance,” where male students speak out of turn and without raising their hands significantly more frequently than their female counterparts. The situation becomes even more dangerous for young girls when instructors tolerate this environment:

Whether male comments are insightful or irrelevant, teachers respond to them. However, when girls call out, there is a fascinating occurrence: Suddenly the teacher remembers the rule about raising your hand before you talk. And then the girl, who is usually not as assertive as the male students, is deftly and swiftly put back in her place. (133)

A young female student is put “back in her place” of silence in the classroom early on, and this pattern carries throughout the education system. If we take this pattern into consideration, it is no wonder why Maher’s and Chng’s female undergraduate students hesitate to participate in classroom discussions. Certainly this is not the case with all women from and subject positions in which women’s hesitant, polite speech and reservation of knowledge are valued (see Bucholtz 1999; Fordham 1993; Sadker and Sadker 1994). However, performing feminine engagement “correctly” in the classroom largely relies on exactly this construct in our society, especially when a feminist pedagogy is not sought.

Online participation in blogs might help alleviate some of the tension that surrounds female classroom participation, in that it provides a space to engage without one’s physical body being put on the spot. Torrens and Riley discuss the concept of students (and instructors) “locating themselves” within any classroom as crucial for creating a “sense of safe space and community within cyberspace” (219). As students craft their written responses online, their identity and location within the blog are constructed without the temporal and spatial restraints associated with face-to-face classrooms. Jenny Roth speaks specifically to this connection in her experience with incorporating blogs into feminist classrooms:

As hypertext allows for fluid textuality and blogs invite comments from people outside the class, what can be said in a blog differs from what can be said in class discussions and closed web groups. This liminal nature of blogs replicates feminist discourse; they are spaces that are both inside and outside the classroom, academic and personal, personal and political, rants and research. (81)

The comment feature, as mentioned by Roth and discussed in earlier sections, remains a key part of the blogging interaction between students and provides an opportunity outside of class to continue expressing opinions that might otherwise not be heard. Again I reiterate bell hooks' call for such spaces to reflect and share our experiences with hopes "to create a culture that celebrates life" and to "move against dehumanization, against domination" (1989, 26).

Encouraging Dialogue and Power Sharing

A perpetual challenge for instructors throughout multiple disciplines is the issue of encouraging dialogue among students from various subject positions. Power becomes an important part of every interaction between teachers and students, as well as among students themselves. Critical pedagogy scholars frequently discuss the issues involved with both dialogue and power relationships established between students and teachers; these factors (specifically those related to the notion of power) are not the fixed, assumed structures as we are often trained to believe (Fassett and Warren 2006; Freire 1993). Within Freire's notions of critical, liberatory pedagogy, both teachers and students are subjects able to and responsible for exposing assumed and taken for granted realities, analyzing them critically, and recreating the knowledge of

those realities (69). This form of pedagogy, placed in contrast with the “banking” model of hierarchical subject/object relationships (in which teacher holds and imparts knowledge upon passive student bodies), emphasizes agency, voice, and the sharing of/dialoguing about knowledge. As Bryson and Bennet-Anyikwa explain:

In diverse classrooms, teaching technologies and methodologies must go beyond the traditional lecture style so that diverse students might locate themselves and seek their educational liberation. Teaching must allow students to bring their histories and realities into the learning environment because it is often missing in curricula or skewed through representation. (132)

These scholars explore this particular call to action through the lens of feminist pedagogy, describing this as one that “uses women’s experiences in and outside the classroom creating a cooperative, collaborative and interactive process” (133). One of the main goals is to be respectful of and responsive to the needs, realities, and experiences of the students rather than relying on traditional lecture-based, instructor-focused pedagogical strategies. In other words, special care must be given to rejecting the “banking” model of education as described above. Feminist pedagogues attempt to foster participatory environments for learning:

Instead of being the expert imparting knowledge, the feminist pedagogue becomes a facilitator and learner at the same time. Both the students and teachers are understood as embodied, lived, and situated beings who must take active responsibility for “transgressing” racial, sexual, class, and

geographical boundaries. Such an environment elicits growth of both the teachers and the students. (Gajjala, et al. 215)

Regarding the issue specific of voice or agency for students, Bryson and Bennet-Anyikwa echo the calls of Freire's liberation pedagogy – a building block for feminist pedagogy – as such:

Promoting 'voice' among students as a marginalized group within the classroom, moves both teacher and student into the position of conveyer of knowledge and accordingly subjective status... Each becomes vulnerable to the process of power sharing and interactive knowledge building as the centralized knowledge position is diminished. (134)

We can potentially see the “centralized knowledge position” being diminished through the use of the multi-blogger, interactive group model of blogging specifically because the students demonstrate full access to the posting and editing functions that would typically be reserved for the teacher or the “webmaster” (noting the interesting use of gendered language within this particular technological title). Looking broadly, each student having access to means of posting and publishing her thoughts without use of restrictions or moderation by the instructor disassembles one form of power imbalance, potentially giving her the freedom and agency to let her voice be “heard.”

Use of online pseudonyms or usernames that do not necessarily reflect the students' full names may be another way to foster a sense of safety and additional levels of comfort within posting and commenting. I think here of Sajbrfem's fifth tenet of cyberfeminism as promoting collaboration between users. Establishing a place for safe and respectful dialogue encourages collaborative exchanges about both “controversial”

and “every day” subjects, an opportunity that may not arise in the limited amount of time provided by classroom settings. Referring back to Baxter’s study of young male and female student behaviors, online interactions also provide students the ability to state their claims without interruptions, which can further promote productive dialogue.

In my own classroom experience, I made the decision early on to take a step back from student conversations on the blog as much as possible, reserving intervention for the rare occasion when I feel I can help clear up a particularly tense misunderstanding (although, even then, I prefer to let students work it out on their own.) Remaining mindful of my goal to promote our shared classroom blog as a space for collaboration and knowledge sharing between my students specifically, I try as much as possible to position myself as a passive observer. As I tell my students early on, this means I do not grade based on spelling, grammar, and language usage but rather on participation and an attempt to use the blog as each student sees fit. “Ignoring” spelling and grammar mistakes (though they do make my eyes twitch a bit) has been a popular decision among students but an occasionally unpopular one among colleagues. Rather than worrying about spelling and grammar in these personal online spaces, I strongly believe that the students should express their experiences using whatever language feels most comfortable to them. It is my hope that these practices further distance me from the role of “centralized knowledge position” and instead opens up space for conversation.

CHAPTER 4 – LOGGING OFF

Potential Limitations of Blogging in the Classroom

While the major focus of this research is to explore the benefits of blogging in feminist classrooms, I am not implying these – or any other – spaces are inherently liberating. As with any pedagogical tactic, care, consideration, and constant reflection is required in order to make spaces “work.” Furthermore, an instructor’s flexibility and willingness to adapt is also important. Radhika Gajjala, et al. discusses the ways in which her own students (using Blackboard through the university) learned with her how to make the online space work effectively for them. Gajjala, et al. declares that “the key to using these fora effectively is in developing strategies for facilitating critical engagement” (421). They explain that online spaces are both delivered and received differently than face-to-face classrooms in terms of space and time. Online spaces are asynchronous, with dialogue typically occurring back and forth with gaps in between, as opposed to rapid, synchronous conversation in “real time.” While this may offer a challenge or setback to a classroom conversation, Gajjala et al. found it to be beneficial:

This is what was used to allow for reflection and dialogue in these discussion assignments, rather than using the discussion board as a “portal” where the teacher transmits information and the students deliver the “correct” content. Thus, the process of how the discussion board was used is important. (421)

Conversations that emerge on these discussion boards, like in the face-to-face classroom, may evolve and diverge in a variety of different ways according to the individual students. “The role of professors in an active discussion space is to watch the

directions of the discussions and jump in with some comments or questions to spark more ideas” (Gajjala, et al. 421). Mediating tense and potentially harmful or destructive conversations becomes an ongoing task for instructors and their students.

Radhika Gajjala, et al. engage with critical pedagogy online from the angle of race and racial identity online in order to “examine the different venues and habits within which everyday praxis authorizes various [intersecting] forms of discrimination” (412). Gajjala and the students in her online class explored the ways online and offline worlds intersect. Because of this intersection, she writes “it is small wonder that the students found in their discussions that stereotypes were perpetuated rather than eliminated in the online space” (423). Thus, the Internet and online pedagogical spaces are neither utopian nor inherently inclusive, but rather require reflection among the participants much like offline pedagogical spaces.

Within online communications, the issue of voice is not one that should be taken for granted. In her anthology of essays on “troubling speech [and] disturbing silence” (in which *troubling* and *disturbing* are to be interpreted as both adjectives and verbs), Megan Boler encourages her fellow critical pedagogues to address this issue of silence and voice within the classroom without relying on assumptions about the separation therein. (viii). For instance, it is counterproductive to frame blogs specifically as teachers *giving* voice to students who otherwise have been mis- or underrepresented. In elaboration, I look to Freire’s *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, in which he writes that one must seek to establish “a pedagogy which must be forged *with*, not *for*, the oppressed (48). He continues, stating:

Political action on the side of the oppressed must be pedagogical action in the authentic sense of the world, and, therefore action *with* the oppressed. Those who work for liberation must not take advantage of the emotional dependence of the oppressed – dependence that is the fruit of the concrete situation of domination which surrounds them and which engendered their unauthentic view of the world. (66)

Freire's repeated calls for action *with* the oppressed rather than action in the name of, or for the sake of, the oppressed ring true when considering the attitude one takes on incorporating blogs into the classroom.

While it is inevitable that instructors are there to grade the performance of the students, we must be careful to consider the ways in which our actions and words might cause unproductive or unnecessary harm. Assuming that because the blog format is available, students who are normally silent will flock to their computers, grateful for the chance of having their words heard is problematic. This attitude can result in a savior-esque mentality on the part of the instructor and reifies the very power structures that critical pedagogues are working to question and dismantle (Boler xiii-xiv).

Aside from the potential for instructors to inadvertently take even more power over the classroom through the blog than they had set out to do, there is also a way for students to cause more harm than good within the blog setting. As I mentioned above, the online communication arena allows for a stronger sense of disconnect and anonymity through online usernames. While this can undoubtedly create a positive atmosphere for students who need to distance their bodies from their words when sharing deeply intimate information or discussing intensely personal and political

subjects, it can also give space for problems. Students may intentionally use the protection of their screens to voice intentionally offensive and hurtful comments to one another on the blog, or engage in online harassment.

An instructor, when encountered by this intentionally offensive speech, may choose to delete the comment(s) and therefore exercise a certain level of control and authority over the blog that is granted to the teacher of a class. Alternately, the instructor may leave the speech there and choose to let students ignore or respond as they see fit, or comment directly in response in an attempt to correct the offending party (again showing a certain amount of dominance over the situation). In her essay on various pedagogical techniques, Megan Boler gave examples of teachers who may, in this case, choose any number of these strategies or create their own (6). This highly contested areas of silence, “free” speech, regulation, and authority is extremely interesting and still developing as pedagogues debate what the “best” route is for liberation pedagogy.

One other potential problem regarding blogging and the issue of voice/agency is that of access. Quite obviously, blogs and Internet-based communications are not available to everyone equally. There are very real ways in which class, location, and levels of ability, for example, may interfere with student participation. Because of these serious issues that have impact upon our students lives and bodies, instructors must be cognizant of the ways they are assuming normality while framing blogs. The issue of ability, for example, is one that must be considered when navigating the requirements for a class and when discussing the blog during class or discussing topics on the blog itself. It is crucial for instructors – especially those dedicated to liberation

(/critical/feminist/etc.) pedagogy – to be aware and remain flexible when working with each student's individual needs.

As with any method of teaching or being in the world in general, these issues and others certainly arise when considering the use of blogs in the classroom. I see a space within pedagogical dialogue and discussion of technology for the generation of new possible problems or questions in hopes to further address various circumstances with the goal of making blogging more inclusive and reflexive.

Conclusion

Having a group blog allows students a chance on their own time to discuss material related to feminism, gender, race, and other topics we cover in the classroom setting. Because of the nature of this course, there are times when taboo, personal, and/or controversial material is addressed, which not all students feel comfortable discussing on-site in front of their peers. A form of "Virtual Consciousness-Raising," (or VCR) as Tracy L. M. Kennedy, Sara Puotinen, and Kandace Creel Falcón put it, blogging "provide[s] students with a creative and critical space for crafting, reflecting on, and expressing thoughts about class discussions or readings, experiences and personal stories" (Puotinen and Creel Falcón, 74). These outlets help to foster a sense of virtual identity, both for individual students as they explore readings and communicate their opinions, and for the class as a whole when pursuing community.

Several general themes have been revealed in my exploration of how blogs operate within the feminist classroom, as I have outlined in this essay. Incoming undergraduate students are often raised within a culture of the Internet surrounded by wireless networks and encouraged to pursue online identities. Using blogs as an activity

within a course builds upon this aspect of our society and can act as a way to bridge the gap between students' academic and personal lives, potentially making it easier for them to communicate with the instructor in ways they feel comfortable (see Aragon 2007; Burgess 2003). Furthermore, blogging incorporates new media – such as videos (vlogs), images, podcasts, and animations – in a way that makes education potentially more interactive and multi-dimensional. Rather than relying solely on text to communicate ideas, visual and audio resources can expand students' perspectives on important feminist issues.

Themes of power, dialogue, community, and voice are also heavily apparent in my analysis of classroom blogs within feminist studies. This is perhaps where feminist (and critical) pedagogy most clearly intersects with cyberfeminism and new media studies on this issue. Rather than relying on traditional banking models of education, where the instructor is heralded as the sole source of information, the “centralized knowledge position,” feminist and critical pedagogues seek some sort of balance and fluidity of power (see Bryson and Bennet-Anyikwa 2003; Fassett and Warren 2006; Freire 1993). As Puotinen and Creel Falcón, among others, have argued, blogging provides an opportunity for students to be knowledge-creators, to share their experiences and subject positions with their peers as well as with instructors (87). Blogs allow for student media production and story telling, which positions them as subjects rather than objects in the learning process. These spaces not only seek to encourage power-sharing for students in general, but they also potentially open up opportunities for marginalized or simply introverted voices to be “heard” or read.

Blogs have become an important part of our ever-connected culture, a part that is relatively under-theorized in academia as a whole. As I have proposed, the intersecting fields of feminist pedagogy and new media studies (specifically cyber-feminist media studies) are in need of further conversations on the short- and long-term outcomes of blog usage in (feminist) classrooms, and I and this study offer a contribution to this body of research. As I have stated, scholars (in gender studies programs and otherwise) have begun to present the benefits of blogging within classrooms of all ages and sizes, specifically about the potential for inclusivity, group cohesion, and allowing space for otherwise quieted (or hesitant) voices (via Chick and Hassel 2009; Maher and Chng 2008; Puotinen 2009). A complicated space for voice, dialogue, embodiment, and identity-management, online pedagogical spaces must be engaged with continuously in order to explore their potentials. Gajjala, et al. provides the following as an attempt to address the complexity at hand:

Digitally mediated environments such as Blackboard can contribute to the core components of critical feminist pedagogy by creating participatory learning environments, valuing personal experience, encouraging social understanding and activism, and fostering critical thinking and open-mindedness—but only when the content and process strongly guide the discussion into such critical thinking. (424)

They continue to describe a shift in classroom dynamics from a critical and feminist perspective in which students do not simply “gain power” but rather are challenged to “express and articulate issues” from a critical, feminist lens and therefore work to reframe their own understanding of power and interaction (424).

We must continue these discussions, both with one another as teachers *and with our students* in order to explore what does and does not work effectively. The newer, student-centered style of classroom interaction that is crucial to feminist pedagogy (and critical pedagogy in general) is made more possible through the use of newer technologies that we explore with our students. In this study, I have discussed cyberfeminist and feminist pedagogical theories in order to further participate in conversations about how these two branches of feminism intersect as our society becomes more technologically focused. Furthermore, this research has outlined several of the benefits involved in classroom blogging, and how different styles of classroom blogs may achieve these benefits. I believe we need to further this research by exploring as feminists, students, instructors, and bloggers (in any combination), how we can foster feminist dialogue and community in academic cyber spaces. As the blogosphere shifts and expands, it is important to constantly reflect upon how these spaces can be used productively and from a critical, feminist standpoint rather than assuming that they will be inherently helpful or harmful. I look forward to continuing my research on these spaces, including engaging in dialogue with other cyberfeminist pedagogues in order to gain new insights into what has or has not worked effectively in feminist classrooms.

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