

Statement of Teaching Philosophy

Sara L. Puotinen

In “Claiming an Education,” Adrienne Rich argues that students, particularly women students, need to take responsibility *towards* themselves and *for* themselves by developing and asserting their own critical voices. They need to become active learners and active and responsible citizens by claiming their education instead of merely receiving it. Her remarks, which took place at a women’s college in 1977, were directed primarily at the students. But, what does the idea of claiming an education demand of those students’ teachers? How can we, as teachers, empower our students to take responsibility for their own education?

Empowering my students to claim their own education is the central goal of my teaching. I believe that this empowerment must occur on three levels. First, students must be able to think critically about the world, to challenge assumptions and question dominant ideologies. Second, students must be able to use their questioning and critique to develop a critical voice, one that allows them to express themselves and to be active participants both inside and outside of the classroom. Third, students must be able to think about the world beyond themselves. They must use their new critical theories to reassess their relationship to and responsibility for others.

As a teacher, I am responsible for a student’s empowerment in many different ways. It is my responsibility to give students the proper tools for thinking critically. To do this, I place great emphasis within my classes on learning how to think critically. In many of my classes, I require that my students keep a critical response notebook in which they critically engage, on a weekly basis, with the texts that we are reading. In critically engaging with the texts, they are required to follow a specific three part framework in which they learn to summarize the text (appreciation), critically assess its effectiveness/ineffectiveness (critique) and reflect on its relevancy and its applicability to their own lives (construction). I collect these notebooks frequently and then devote class time to discussing how to improve their critical thinking skills.

It is my responsibility to make sure that my students are engaging with the class material. Through my teaching experiences and my observation of other teachers, I have learned that students engage with the material and express that engagement in many different ways. Therefore, I employ a variety of strategies for teaching the material, such as lectures, small and large group discussions, film screenings, and in-class writing exercises. And, I use a number of different forms of technology (online discussions groups, multi-media presentations, digital video, websites) to spark and maintain students’ interest in class material.

It is my responsibility to create an environment for my students in which they can feel safe enough to develop and express their own voices. To this end, I devote a considerable amount of time to community building among the students and myself. In addition to spending time at the beginning of each class for students to get to know each other, I frequently rely on small group work. I also try to ensure that large group discussions are inclusive *and* respectful by working to maintain the delicate balance between encouraging everyone to speak without allowing any one individual to dominate discussion. This notion of a safe space of community is especially important within the women’s studies classroom where sensitive or controversial issues, issues that frequently speak to students in personal and/or painful ways, are addressed.

It is my responsibility to provide my students with guidance and structure without stifling their own creative and critical expressions. In employing a feminist pedagogy, I strive to create a classroom environment in which I have authority without being an Authority. I carefully structure the class with specific topics of discussion and activities but choose topics and activities that allow for a variety of different approaches. For example, in my Feminist Thought and Theory class, I frequently structure our discussion of a topic or reading around Charlotte Bunch’s four part method of feminist theorizing: (1) description of the problem, (2) analysis of the problem, (3) vision for transforming the problem and (4) strategies for achieving that vision. While this approach guides our discussion, it also enables students

with different perspectives and experiences to engage with the text without forcing them to engage with it in the same exact way.

Finally, it is my responsibility to make my students aware of the world beyond themselves. I need to encourage them to understand the impact of their theories and actions on others. And I need to help them develop ways in which to translate their education into socially responsible actions both inside and outside of the classroom. I try to accomplish this by selecting a wide range of readings that provide many different perspectives and that work to decenter dominant perspectives. For example, in my Feminist Thought and Theory class, I choose readings that challenge traditional notions of theory and feminist theorizing and that force students to repeatedly ask: At whose expense was this theory created? Who does it exclude? And, who benefits from its production?