

## How I spent my second semester

*(or how my feminism caused me to stumble on to a different way of teaching).*

SYLVIA ESTRADA-CLAUDIO

Isang kwento tungkol sa dalawang semestre ng pagtuturo ng kursong “WD 225: *Gender, Culture and Ideology*” ng *Women and Development Program* ng UP College of Social Work and Community Development. Upang masiyasat ang paggana ng kapag-yarinan sa isang institusyon, sinubukan ng mga mag-aaral at guro na baguhin ang mga istruktura at pamamaraan na karaniwang umiiral sa silid-aralan. Nagkaroon ng negosasyon tungkol sa mga pamamaraan at istruktura na susundin. Halimbawa, hinayaan ang mga estudyante na mag-desisyon kung ano ang aaralin at kung anong paraan ang gagamitin upang aralin ito. Tinanggap naman ng guro na magbigay ng pang-unang “syllabus” at pumailalim sa pagtatasa ng mga estudyante sa katapusan ng semestre. Pumayag din ang guro at mag-aaral na sundin ang *grading system* ng U.P. sa palagay ng may-akda, maraming matututunan sa pagsubok ng ganitong paraan ng pagtuturo. Tinalakay din ng papel ang batayan ng ganitong pagsisikap na “idekonstrukt ang silid-aralan” sa mga teorya ng *postmodern* at peminista.

I WAS ONCE TOLD, "NEVER BEGIN A ... WITH AN APOLOGY." Nevertheless, I will begin with one. I shall beg the reader's indulgence because I intend to break a few academic rules. It is my purpose to write in a rather un-scholarly way about a course I really did not teach.

There are several reasons for my wanting to write differently.

First, it is consistent with the praxis of the course that I have not really been teaching. I wish to share the story of this with you.

There is another reason for my being deliberately loose with canon and convention. At certain times of the year, I feel less like a human being and more like a paper-writing machine. I was excited and honored by the request to present a paper. Yet, academic writing with its bibliographical notations, its careful formulations and its deadlines can be alienating.

Intellectual work can indeed become alienated and commodified. All of us know how to make a commodity of our thoughts. We write thoughts down on paper, properly titled and by-lined. We punctuate properly. We check and re-check grammar. We cite other scholars for every idea put into writing (at least as far as human limitation allows citation, as there are really very few original ideas left). We use language that sounds scholarly and intellectual. Better yet, we use language that only a few other brilliant scholars understand. Hopefully, when we have done all this, we have a paper that is worthy of an honorarium, publication and citation.

Academic paper-writing is part of the culture of our academe. Our curriculum vitae are the mark of the brotherhood of Cain. We have had to kill for our academic credentials. We guard closely against those who would wield the power of the intellectual when they have not gone through the rigors of our fraternity's initiation. (I use the male metaphors with full intent. Men have more time to read scholarly works and do bibliographic references than I. As I write my two youngest children interrupt me constantly to blow balloons and make them popcorn. If I were a man and not a woman, my wife would have kept the children away while I work. At least that is what wives of men are supposed to do. But, I digress.)

The down-side of this commodification is that like any proletariat, the fruits of our intellectual activities get turned against us. Writing our ideas becomes difficult. Reading the ideas of others can be likewise laborious.

I do not think that feminists should allow this. We fight against the commodification of our bodies in sexual and reproductive work. We fight against the alienation by patriarchy of the children our bodies bear and nurture. We fight against consumerism and materialism. I should think we should fight too against the alienation of our intellectual work.

The last reason that I am trying not to write too conventionally, is that I do not want to bore the reader. I am NOT implying that any of the others are or will be boring. But professional conventions (no wonder they use the term, "conventions") can be so deathly grim after the third or fourth paper, no matter how brilliant the paper is and how well-delivered. I do not think Lorena Barros or Gregoria de Jesus would have had as much revolutionary energy if they had to attend as many seminars and conventions as we do.

But before I go any further, I shall attempt some form of re-assurance for those who may need it. I am aware that my paper should be about the pedagogy of women's studies. Hopefully I have been dealing with this issue all along. The post-modernist thinkers like Helene Cixous, Julia Kristeva and Luce Irigaray have pointed out that language the basic stuff of academia, engenders human beings in ways that empower and give life to patriarchy. These writers insist that we stop using language and writing in this conventionally engendering way. They believe we should disrupt conventional language if we wish to see the end of patriarchy and move beyond the construction of human beings as gendered. If I have understood them correctly, I have a sense that they would think my attempts at throwing academic writing out the window have not gone far enough. (My first bibliographical note here is that there are very few writings of theirs in English that can be found in our under-funded libraries. So I will mention only names and not books.)

But I do have some theoretical differences with the post-modernist women I have mentioned. This is why I believe that they would not think me a true daughter of their thinking and writing. I have less disagreements with Priscelina Patajo-Legasto who insists that postmodern studies also be post-colonial. Like her, I believe that it is possible to integrate a structural analysis of class and gender into a postmodern analytical framework. (Patajo-Legasto walks hereabouts. You might wish to go see her at the University of the Philippines in Diliman. Her works are both accessible and worthwhile. I beg her forgiveness for continuing to refuse to make a proper bibliographical note.)

In terms of the issues relating to post-coloniality, I have long wondered whether these standard methods of writing papers and teaching do not tie us to the colonialist traditions of the western academe.

## WD 225

Now I shall tell you about a class called, "WD 225: Gender, Culture and Ideology". This is a seminar course offered in our Women and Development Program of the College of Social Work and Community Development, University of the Philippines, Diliman. It is also a class that is usually taken by students who have finished with our core courses.

I did not quite understand what a seminar course meant when I first began teaching. Also, I couldn't quite grasp the title of the course. I guess the woman who was coordinating the program at the time I first began teaching, realized that I needed some guidance. So she told me that a seminar course is something that the students are supposed to run for themselves. She told me that all I had to do was to give the parameters of the field of study, and then let the students do papers within those parameters.

I was intrigued at the idea that students could run a course for themselves. I thought this contrary to the premises that most schools and universities uphold about teaching. I decided therefore to try to help the students learn for themselves by deconstructing the classroom. In so doing, I was hoping to work out some of the ideas proposed by Michel Foucault regarding knowledge and power as it is applied to universities and academic disciplines<sup>1</sup>.

Foucault contends that the academe exercises power when it delineates areas (or academic disciplines) that are supposed to be coherent and valuable arenas for studying truth, reality and human nature. There is, however, no logic behind these delineations. Rather, the decision as to which areas or types of knowledge are important, has more to do with the exercise of power.

In turn, each academic discipline imposes certain premises, practices and institutional arrangements that are congruent with and bolster the exercise of the knowledge-power of the academe. My sense of this is that the way we teach courses, write papers, hold conventions and confer academic degrees are exercises of a power based on a particular ideology.

The way we structure programs, departments and universities also reflects this ideology. My further contention is that this ideology is patriarchal and capitalist.

I hope it is noted that I have again approached the question of gender and the academe. I have also related it (again!) to why I am trying to write more casually and why I decided not to teach WD 225 conventionally. I make no apologies about my circularity. Another convention regarding academic papers (and courses) is that one is supposed to present a set of discrete ideas arranged in a hierarchical order of premises and logical conclusions. As I have repeatedly noted in the previous paragraphs, I believe that such conventions should also be looked at critically. Circularity, ambiguity and repetition are also a part of life. Women have most often done the work of repetition—changing a thousand diapers, cooking a million times, washing a million pieces of laundry. We do this all in spaces of ambiguity between the loving of our children, the false and hopeless ideals of motherhood and the exploitation of our nurturing. There is some knowledge that a thousand diaper changes brings only to the one who has done it. It is this “other wisdom” that I wished to explore. This wisdom which is barred from the academe by the power of its ideologies.

For the past two semesters that I have been teaching WD 225 I have tried to explore those ways of knowing and kinds of knowledge which are marginalized. My main cue was to attempt, as much as possible, to reverse the power dynamics in the class room.

Concretely this meant, that I tried not to impose any learning schedule or outline on the class. I did give them a syllabus, mainly because the University requires it. Also, I thought that there were very few practices which actually give the student some control over the learning situation. I think the syllabus is one such practice. So I decided not to do way with it.

I entitled my syllabus: “No teacher, No text”. It was merely a short essay about why I believed the classroom should be deconstructed. The essay contained essentially the same arguments I have been making so far. I gave a lecture about these considerations on the first day of class. After threshing out questions and clarifications I declared that from then on, I would relinquish the power of the teacher.

I then asked the students to decide what to do with the rest of the semester. The first class chose to do life stories and then to see the cross-

cutting themes in their lives: cultural icons, sexuality, romance, family, empowerment. The second class chose to discuss topics: pornography, pleasure, gossip and ethics.

It is interesting that the students picked-up on what I hoped for very quickly. On the very first day, I got questions like: "What is it that you think can be achieved by this class? Will it change the way the University really teaches students?" A variation of the question, while being less confrontational, sometimes strikes me as naïve: "Is there anyway we can share whatever recommendations we can come up with regarding pedagogy to University authorities?"

Both classes have agreed that what we did had very limited potential. In the end, everyone knew that I would give grades. The students wanted grades because they needed to finish their studies. I gave grades because I am not quite ready to get thrown out of the University. We realized that our boldness could easily be accommodated by the system. We realized that our contestation for a more woman-friendly academic space could only go so far. We felt at the outset, the power of academic culture. We knew we could contradict this culture it only at some personal cost.

But I must say that no one (least of all I) had suggested that we use this little experiment to turn the University upside-down. For me it has been sufficient that we explore the resistances and resiliences afforded us in the restricted space called "academic freedom." I was also mindful of the studies of Belenky, *et.al.*<sup>2</sup> who have found that women are most comfortable when the learning situation is structured without being harsh or adversarial. I have gone a step further by attempting to allow women to negotiate the structures of the class.<sup>3</sup>

Another student asked me whether I deserved my salary if I wasn't going to teach the class anyway. I said I was quite willing to share with them whatever part of my salary would be left over after they paid me for convening the class, making a syllabus, computing their grades and submitting these. I also said that I wanted to be paid for the risk of teaching the class differently. This question and my answer got us into the question of how work and expertise can be quantified or valued. This brought us further to the realization that the determination of salaries for teachers and other service workers is based on certain ideological premises. Indeed, how does society view personal service especially when it is rendered by a woman? (Some of you may be pleased to

know that I kept my salary. I hope that those who have been longer at teaching than I, approve of my verbal agility in the face of this assault on the welfare of academic workers)

I cannot document here, the varied ideas and concepts that these two groups of graduate students came up with when they dissected issues of gender, culture and ideology

I will try to share with you only as much as will keep this session pleasant.

### THE NORM THE OF THE PATRIARCHAL FAMILY

One of the more interesting discussions I remember arose out of the class that worked with life stories. The discussion was about families. We took the norm to be a core, the nuclear family (father, mother, children), surrounded by the extended family. Extended family members have a right to our aid and love, but there is a primacy to be given to the nuclear set. It is the nuclear family that has a prior claim to the loyalty of its members. It is the nuclear family's needs which are to be prioritized over that of the extended family.

We specified the norm of family further. In the nuclear family, the mother and father love each other and work together for the welfare of their children. Fathers are supposed to provide for the material needs of their families. This means that they work outside the home at jobs that gives them a salary sufficient for their families' needs. The mother, on the other hand, works at home taking care of her children and the maintenance of the house. She is supposed to be more nurturant. Children obey both parents but fathers are the final decision-makers. We understood the norm to mean that this ideal of a family is both what is prescribed as ideal and what is normal—i.e. that most people strive for, and have, such families.

We then looked at our own families and realized that this norm was spurious. None of our families we had grown up in fit this mold to any significant degree. In several families, husbands and wives shared equal decision-making power. In one or two of our families, husbands and wives shared reproductive roles, productive roles and decision-making equally. Many of our families were marred by violence. The violence came from abusive fathers and brothers but also from mothers and other women relatives. Some of us did not have nurturing mothers. One mother was described as emotionally distant and cold. Another mother had died young. Several were raised by their grandmothers.

In a number of families our mothers had to do all the roles—breadwinner, nurturer to children. Some mothers did this because they were separated from their husbands by death or some other circumstance. A few remember the pain of growing up with a father who was absentee, a philanderer and/or an alcoholic and generally useless.

Yet we remember also somehow growing and finding nurturance. Sometimes from a grandmother, an aunt or a sister. Some of us managed to get nurturance from the very mothers who abused us. We realized that we found love not within the norm of the patriarchal family, but in the in-between-spaces of it. Some of us have renewed our commitment to our own mothers. Some of us have learned to love even our abusive mothers. For those of us who have placed emphasis on this relationship, we have done so out of our appreciation that we are freer to truly love now that we have become feminists.

For example, those of us who now have children have come to understand our mothers more. We realize how difficult it is to be burdened with young children within the disempowered role of woman. We learned why so many of us had traumas with or rebelled against our mothers, even if on hindsight they were not particularly abusive. This is so because our mothers were there for us in the unglamorous, nitty-gritty of everyday existence. We saw their all-too-human flaws coming at us through all the days, the weeks and the years. Many of us learned to love our distant, but occasionally loving, fathers because we did not have to live with their faults, their angst, their disempowerment. In the end we saw that this was the most fatal of the patriarchal betrayals hidden within the ideal nuclear family—that a mother should end up being disliked because of having to fulfill her nurturing role.

But if the patriarchal nuclear family is a myth, then why does the norm continue? I believe that it is an ideological construction which suits class and gender structures. An ideology that nonetheless shapes the most intimate aspects of our lives.

Feminists have long accepted that the norm of the family upholds patriarchal power. There is no reason for two equal adults not to share equally in decision-making. The concept that the man is decisive denies woman's equal humanity and has very dire consequences on women's lives. Women are further placed in very difficult positions by their roles as reproductive workers. Because their work in the house is not paid for, they become economically dependent on men. When women seek to work outside the home, their incomes are kept low because it is argued that their earnings are but supplementary to those of



the man who is the main breadwinner. Women who are also raised to specialize in emotional work tend to live only for others, fulfilling to their detriment, the inhuman standards of self-sacrifice expected of wives and mothers. Thus, the ideal of the nuclear patriarchal family is about upholding male and class privileges.

I could go on and on about the feminist critique of the family and the ideology of domesticity. Suffice it to say that it became clear to us in a personal way that there is a need to unravel the cultural norm of the family in order to strike at the roots of gender oppression. But deconstructing is not merely a matter of convincing people that the norm must be reformulated. Reality already contradicts the norm at every turn. We need to understand that the family is one of the main sites of the reproduction of patriarchal culture and power. There is obviously a very strong investment of power in keeping the ideology of the patriarchal family alive. I wish I could tell you that our discussions resulted in a clear cut political program of action regarding the family. It did not. We moved on to other things.

### GOSSIP AND FEMINISM

One of the more amusing of discussions was about gossip. I do not know how we began on this topic. I think it began with a personal confession on my part. As someone trying to lead a feminist life, I had long wondered why I could not stop myself from being a gossip. I do not think that I am a very gossipy person. But I would not consider myself a paragon of silence either. What was bothering me most was that despite repeated promises, I could not stop myself from bad-mouthing one particular person. As it turned out, we had two people who felt that they did not engage in gossip. The rest, if I recall correctly, were like me.

As the majority of the group admitted to engaging in gossip, we felt it would help our personal integrity as feminists to try and understand the phenomenon from a gender perspective.

So, we decided to ask ourselves first, what it was that constituted "gossip" as opposed to "news". We realized that gossip pertained to personal affairs while news pertained to public events. We understood also that these areas are not clearly delineated. For example, when the president of a country has a life-threatening illness, it is a private matter that becomes "news". Similarly, public personalities like movie stars often have blind items about them in the newspapers. These take on elements of both news and gossip.

The important insight here however, is that we are dealing with the attempts by society to deal with issues regarding social relations along the lines of the public vs. private dichotomy that characterizes most liberal-democratic modern societies. This was of interest to us because feminists have problematized the public-private divide. Women's oppression in reproductive work is viewed by society as belonging to the arena of the private—an arena outside the purview of state policy and transformative political action. The feminist motto “the personal is political” relates to this. If women are to be liberated then the arena of what is traditionally private or personal must not be left to individuals. After all, individual women are disempowered by individual men within the patriarchal confines of home and family.

Typically also, women's concerns and efforts in the private arena are devalued and scorned. Thus, we began to look with more sympathy at the “female gossip”, *yaon bang mga 'manang sa mga bahay-bahay na nag chichismisan ober-dabakod.*” We were curious to know whether this stereotype, like the witch or the meddling mother-in-law, could be reconstructed to better suit the needs of feminist cultural warfare.

Our discussions brought us to another insight, that gossip is also about setting norms and ethical standards. It is another means by which culture dictates social relationships. For example, a lot of gossip is about violations of the norms of sexuality. Who is going to bed with whom, is one of the most common topics. Patriarchal standards are imposed: monogamy for women, a mixture of admiration and disapproval for the philandering man, heterosexuality for everyone.

We decided in the end, that feminists should gossip. What needs to be done is to establish what feminist norms are in the area of the personal and the private. If we do this, gossip can better suit our goals. (This is how we got into a discussion about feminist ethics. But I am afraid I shall not have the luxury of sharing that discussion with you.)

In any case, we discovered for ourselves what I have been calling the “epitome of feminist gossip”. This is the gossip about the men in our schools, communities, offices and churches who are abusive. I call this the epitome of feminist gossip because it clearly upholds feminist moral standards: i.e. men must not use their privileged positions to take advantage of co-workers, students, subordinates, relatives. Furthermore, the gossip has a protective effect for women. That is why the more far-ranging the gossip, the better.

There is also another reason why feminist gossip should be far-ranging: it maximizes the way in which gossip whips people into compliance with the values of the ones who started the gossip.

Gossip against abusive men is also the best way to counter-act the difficulties we encounter in trying to prove cases of rape, battering, sexual harassment, non-payment of child support. It is precisely the private or personal nature of these crimes that makes proof and punishment difficult. Here, we see the importance of the gender analysis we made of the cultural phenomenon that is gossip. Because, if gossip is about setting standards in the private sphere, then it is through gossip that we must deal with the abusers.

Some of you may be concerned about wrongly accusing people through gossip. My argument would be a pragmatic one. Like everyone else, each of us must take a little wrongful gossip in our lives. We take comfort in the fact that because it is wrong, it will die down.

I shall leave you with one final detail. In the light of this analysis of gossip, I tend to view women's gossip as an activity rich in transformative potential. I believe women gossip as a means of sharing their heartaches and joys about their husbands, children and households. This is simply, in my mind, information-sharing among the oppressed. Who knows, maybe this type of gossip will evolve into the kind of news and political analysis necessary to organize women into a world-wide movement of reproductive workers.

## CONCLUSION

I promised not to stretch your patience for too long. But I thought I would end by considering whether there was some effectivity in my non-teaching. I feel a bit awkward about this because I do not want to appear unduly proud of myself. I am merely trying to finish my story.

I shall tell you that the students tell me that they enjoyed themselves as well as learned. In fact, the student ratings for the course have just come in, and they are quite high. It is obvious that such statements should be taken with extreme caution. After all, no self-respecting student in a mass education system, would be averse to flattering a teacher, given the right circumstances.

But I have other proofs that they did enjoy themselves. The class that did life stories actually scheduled what amounted to three additional sessions in order to ensure that everyone had a chance to tell their story.

In both classes, there were higher rates of attendance for each class session. Many of you probably know that attendance is a problem when you have students who have to work, study and attend to their families.

In one class we had a two observers who asked my permission to observe the class and then decided not to leave us until the end. This turned out to be a blessing as they took on the majority of documentation and photocopying tasks in order to “pay their dues”.

Of more interest to me though, is the answer to the question: is there knowledge that can be gleaned by allowing women to explore in less structured and personal ways? What kind of knowledge? I have indulged myself in sharing some of our discussions to help the reader decide whether the course met the objective of exploring issues related to gender, culture and ideology.

I hope that when I shared our insights about the family, I was able to show that large chunks of feminist theories can be grasped in a grounded and profound way by this kind of approach. After all, much of feminist theory claims its legitimacy from its grounding in the realities of women. For example, the Marxist and socialist feminist analyses of the family are difficult to grasp. But our discussions highlighted many of the elements of these analyses making these easier to understand, even familiar. Gramsci's concepts of hegemony might also have been easier to understand in the light of our realization that the norm of the patriarchal family remains strong even if very few families can comply with it.<sup>4</sup>

Our discussions about the private-public dichotomy in the framing of gossip is yet another example of how theory can be made more alive.

I also believe that the class became a working experiment in deconstruction or post-modernism—an ideology that is both difficult to teach and understand.

But I think the approach allowed us not just to animate theory but also to begin our own analyses and judgments about things that are important to us. Such things may be seemingly trivial or common events such as gossip, or profound ones such as our relationships.

At the risk of being repetitive, I shall say again that I have no intention of selling a new teaching method or making comparisons between teaching methods. This is not a paper about effective teaching methods, although I hope

it addresses some of the concerns about pedagogy that this conference wishes to examine.

I also hope, that I have shared an amusing story about one feminist's attempt to explore an alternative way of teaching a class.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> All right, already. I have read several of Foucault's books as well as things written about his works. The one I personally read that is most pertinent to my discussion is his book: *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of Human Sciences*. New York: Random House, 1970. The book is both fascinating and deadly reading. I still make no assurances that this book can be found in our under-funded libraries.

<sup>2</sup> Belenky, M.F., et al. *Women's Ways of Knowing*. New York: Basic Books, 1986. (Note that the book is more than a decade old. It is still a goodie. It was a surprise hit when it first came out.)

<sup>3</sup> I am indebted to Dr. Carol Sobrichea for this insight on negotiated structure.

<sup>4</sup> I think I will allow myself just one more bibliographic note. Gramsci, A. *The Modern Prince and Other Writings*. New York: International Publishers, 1987.

