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Teaching Women's Studies to Engineers: Male-Bashing Feminist or Concerned Mother?

Barbara Bonnekessen

New Mexico Institute of Mining and Technology, US

ABSTRACT
The STEM disciplines (sciences, technology, engineering, mathematics) remain male-dominated fields of study and professional careers. Teaching at a university that specializes in these fields means to teach at a white male-dominated institution which did not add women's and gender studies courses to its curriculum until the arrival of the author, a feminist anthropologist. Following the advice of Paulo Freire to construct teaching as a political process and to introduce knowledge meaningful to the student, the male-dominated women's and gender studies classroom becomes an extraordinary space where it is not the oppressed majority which might collaborate with the instructor to access and create knowledge, but those (unwitting?) representatives of the powerful sex/gender and racial group.

KEYWORDS
Feminism; Pedagogy; STEM and gender.

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Paulo Freire explains that the struggle for humanization includes the 'affirmation of men as persons' (Freire, 1986:28). Although the false generic 'men' 'constructs a phallocentric paradigm of liberation' (hooks, 1994:49), Freire did recognize men's responsibility in women's struggle for humanization, '… if the women must have the main responsibility in their struggle they have to know that their struggle also belongs to us, that is, to those men who don't accept the machista position in the world' (hooks, 1994:57). Consequently, any teaching of women's issues must embrace the emancipation of men to become generic 'humans,' and a meaningful analysis of gender must allow for the possibility that men are people, too.

This seemingly facetious pronouncement becomes an important focus of Women's and Gender Studies (WGS) courses on a campus where about 70% of the students are male and mostly white[1], while the faculty is almost 90% male and mostly white. We are a STEM institution where the primary degrees offered are in the (natural) sciences, technology, engineering, and mathematics. As a feminist anthropologist, I am the only tenure-track social scientist on the 1,900 student residential campus and my fields, Cultural Anthropology and WGS did not exist here before the school began searching for a faculty member for 'cultural studies' and we happily found each other some years ago.

This paper discusses my version of a women's and gender studies curriculum (as of now, without a degree) that must exemplify the breadth of the field and its inclusion of masculinities, all sexualities, racial and ethnic variations, as well as global cultural variations that are especially salient in a border area and with many international students and faculty on campus. All this needs to be achieved without losing sight of women, their diversity and pressing issues, foremost among them male structural and physical violence.

The materials used in my women's and gender studies courses (syllabi, reading assignments, and videos) are not fundamentally different than those used in an integrated classroom or even a female-dominated one; the divergence lies more in emphasis and additions, than in differences. Invariably, since these materials discuss abuse and other forms of violence against women, the mere naming of the offenders' sex is interpreted as 'male-bashing,' a hetero-patriarchal tactic that constantly needs to be exposed and critiqued. Second, the paper will allow the author to become her own participant observer, highlighting selective terminologies and other teaching 'tricks of the trade.' As a middle-aged woman, I am as old or older than my students' mothers; an undisputable fact of which I tend to take advantage. Lastly, I will reflect on the possibility that I teach human students who, among multiple identities, also may define themselves as female or

male, whatever that might mean to them. In my balancing act between the caricatures of male-bashing feminist and concerned maternal marginal faculty, I remain committed to the last option; encouraging my students to consider their humanity first forces them to respect mine and the significance of my fields. Politically speaking, this may open gender doors to them they had not considered before.

First, in the established feminist scholarly tradition, the author must introduce herself. I appear to the unwary as "yet another boring middle-aged white woman" (a tongue-in-cheek description I use in my classes), but I identify as a radical feminist, with strong leanings toward queer, multi-cultural and global, Marxist/socialist, and standpoint feminism. As a cultural anthropologist, I am the professional outsider, a role I occupy socio-culturally and politically as a non-American, as well. I am also, as noted above, the only social sciences faculty member, housed in a humanities department, on a campus where 'sciences' is short for 'natural' sciences only. Neither students nor many faculty understand the rigor of social science methodologies and theory construction. By all counts, adding my fields, and, maybe, me, to this campus was a challenge, which my students seem to have accepted enthusiastically.

So far, the WGS courses I have offered are *Introduction to Gender Studies* (a historical survey of gender ideas in the U.S. at First Year level), *Introduction to Women's Studies* (a topical survey of primary WGS themes and areas of research at Third Year level), and *Anthropology of Sex and Gender* (a cross-culturally comparative course at Third Year level). *Introduction to Social Thought* (at First Year level) spent several weeks on postmodern and social justice theories, including feminist theories. Although the courses do attract female students at a higher percentage than their campus presence, the majority of students are male, mostly white or Hispanic, and college-aged. Some identify as straight, some as gay or lesbian, but a large part never discloses. Campus lore maintains that while we have an undercurrent of sexism against women, gay men can be safely 'out.' It will become important that a majority of our students are self-described 'nerds' and 'geeks' (terms mostly reserved for males, but appropriated by females, too), and that we do not have an athletic option (there are no athletic scholarships and only recreational, but no competitive, sports).

Teaching Strategies

My primary strategy is simple: I teach a science, more specifically, a social science. Headed towards a STEM education, many of my students either avoided social sciences in their primary and secondary education altogether or they were treated to 'Social Studies'; an amalgam for various fields which does little to explain to students either the sciences involved or the knowledge they create. Consequently, my students arrive convinced that human behavior should either not be studied at all ('since the beginning of time' is a favorite way to generalize and make one's own preferences a human 'normal'); or it should be limited to biology (either clear socio-biology,

evolutionary psychology, or just women's reproductive organs); or religious dogma (rare at a STEM school, but still of primary importance to religious students). I find myself explaining the 'science' in social science at the beginning of every semester and, as my students realize that their papers for me must live up to the same standards as those they write for my natural scientist colleagues, they begin to understand the difference between opinion ("Don't you want to know what I think?") and knowledge ("Not unless you can support it with reviewed literature"). Making students look at their primary gender assumptions with a critical eye can only be done with data, especially when potentially privileged students (in this framework, male) must face the consequences of their privilege for others and should find their path away from the pressure to fulfill stereotypes to becoming and acting like full human beings.

One of those privileges is the consumption of women's bodies. Students are familiar with the depiction of women in the music industry, but, before I screen 'Dreamworlds 2' (Jhally, 1995; for *Introduction to Women's Studies*), many female students dismiss these images as inconsequential, while male students tend to smirk their privileged consumer position. The hour-long onslaught of repetitive 'women-bashing' leaves the students in my class aghast and even men who had shrugged off any importance of the topic before the screening, tend to express shock and apprehension. 'Fabulous! The Story of Queer Cinema' (Ades & Klainberg, 2006; for *Introduction to Gender Studies*) is even more uncomfortable. While male/male sex is hidden in mainstream media, and its depiction in cinema makes my straight male students uncomfortable, it is the depiction of lesbian sex and intimacy for women rather than camera-focused 'girl-on-girl action', that shatters straight male voyeuristic privilege. The gay/lesbian students in my class enjoyed the documentary, by the way, and took notes of the films they had not seen yet. While I tend to deconstruct heterosexual privilege quite often, this was one of the few times where homosexual sexuality was openly and positively celebrated.

Such a data-driven strategy is also exemplified in the texts I assign. The historical texts (Hoffert, 2002 for equal distribution of female and male histories and Kimmel, 2005, solely focused on men, for *Introduction to Gender Studies*) provide the students with a detailed analysis of the various gender ideas constructed, dismissed, retained, and reinvented through the late 20th century. Students do tolerate a change in the behavior of women over time, although they expect some agreement with the cultural pretense of a 'traditional' femininity. The cultural pliancy of masculinities is more surprising to a beginning student in gender studies, regardless if they are male or female, although male students tend to react both with more resistance to this information, as well as relief. Current images of masculinity pretend to a 'traditional' and almost timeless content, where white masculinity should be privileged, while black and Latino masculinities, though similar, are color-coded as 'wrong'. Conversely, such dogmatic masculinities

are frequently uncomfortable to bear for male students and many enjoy the readings about diverse ways of 'being a man'.

The global and/or current texts (Bonvillain, 2007, more focused on women, Nanda, 2000, with both male and female coverage for *Anthropology of Sex and Gender*; and Burn, 2005 and Grewal & Kaplan, 2006, both strongly female-focused, for *Introduction to Women's Studies*) show a wide variety of cultural adaptations that decentralize current American gender ideas as 'normal,' while allowing for an analysis of such ideas within economic and political contexts. Having learned about gender as a 'natural given', students can now locate gender in culture, not nature, which allows for the possibility to perform gender not as proof of 'natural' manhood or womanhood, but considers it a mere socialized adaptation. My female students are living a resistance to 'natural' womanhood already; comparative studies of men and women open this path of reflection and possibility to male students, as well.

My second strategy is in intentional resistance to the loudest media voices opining upon educational practices. A favorite topic of neo-conservative/religious-right organizations is the presumption that men and women must be taught differently (see, for example, Crouse, 2009) and, in their favorite case scenario, segregated. As the historical fact that the 'sit down and study' approach to academic learning has been successfully used by male students for several centuries escapes such organizations, they insist that boys are disadvantaged in the classroom because they cannot possibly 'sit down and study' as their male predecessors have done for so long. Being a traditionalist where useful, I refuse to let my male students run wild.

A male-dominated classroom does, however, invite different questions than a female-only or female-dominated WGS class. While I have always discouraged the blanket 'white male' condemnations even when none of them were present (a quick reminder of the discrimination suffered by gay or homeless white men usually suffices), I have now added a question that most of my students do not expect: "How is this harmful to men?" Obviously, I do not encourage personal anecdotes, but when asked this question in relation to standards of heteronormative masculinity, the answer is quickly offered when male students realize the results of male-on-male violence (physical) and the psychological price to be paid for anger, distrust, masculine competition, and fear of failure. Students find it more difficult to see the problem for men, specifically straight men, when considering societal pressures on straight females to occupy mainly domestic and economic service jobs, since female subservience seems such a desirable privilege for men. After the *Introduction to Gender Studies* class watches the original 'Stepford Wives' (Levin, Ross, Prentiss, & Forbes, 1974), they are asked to consider how even straight men, who would initially approve of such obedient and servile women, might quickly yearn for a fully human partner. Several students who had seen, or then saw, the recent remake, critically remarked that men were shown much more positively in the 2004 version. The male commentators did not see this as an improvement; rather, they realized how

current images of masculinity seem to forestall any critique of masculine privilege and, having seen the original in class, the contemporary absence of male culpability in the domestication of women struck them as a negative development.

Teaching men requires a delicate balancing act between confronting men with the consequences of sexism and misogyny for women and girls, and exposing the 'male-bashing' accusation as yet another misogynist fraud. Many men try to ward off acknowledging women's reality by claiming an over-abundance of 'victim stories'. Many of my young male students - living in a cocoon of violent video games, a consumer-oriented use of young women's bodies in commercials and to masculinize Spike Television, a few powerful female politicians, and a deafening silence surrounding the many variations of women's real lives - have rarely been encouraged to analyze or even just recognize that male privilege that may accrue to them. Having a recent high-school past as 'geeks' or 'nerds', many were never celebrated in the current teenage idol, the high-school athlete. Their masculinity is cerebral, focused on participation in the STEM fields, an area of intellectual work pretended to be masculine and male-reserved (Lukas, 2008) that is, however, also open to and engaged in by women students and faculty. For them, 'masculine' may have a different meaning than the over-muscled, beer-swilling, anti-intellectual, rapist image sold in public, and they react very defensively when confronted with this image. This reaction is useful, because it demonstrates to these young men that public expectations of hyper-masculinity are not very appealing to their own self-image as highly-achieving students and, potentially, future scientists. I am therefore free to 'bash' (actually, critique) harmful masculinity freely in class, and since I point out that both men and women can engage in it (or, as I tend to put it "man, woman, or cat"), the behavior becomes the problem, not the person potentially capable of it.

Most importantly, I locate the behavior away from my students by pretending that the 'bad' people are outside the classroom and that nobody inside would ever dream of engaging in racism, sexism, homophobia, xenophobia, and so forth. My students are, of course, all enlightened, tolerant, reasonable, cosmopolitan experts in and fans of human diversity in all its shapes and forms and cultures (this enthusiastic assertion often brings sheepish smiles). Being thus free from concerns about hurt feelings and sullen defensiveness, I can proceed to clearly name groups and behaviors that inflict structural and physical damage on targets of discrimination. Students who do, indeed, find themselves described in such accusations may deal with that realization in the privacy of their own minds; none are singled out by the wagging finger and the command "you will be nice to your fellow creatures!"

'Hermaphrodites Speak' (Chase, 2006; used in *Anthropology of Sex and Gender*) pushes the understanding of such 'fellows' to unexpected areas. Scheduled during the second half of the semester, the readings and lectures about intersex persons leave students with the leeway of distance; a possibly

self-protective strategy used especially by male students who wish to perform hyper-masculinity. Listening to the stories of a group of very charming, articulate, and 'girl/guy-next-door' looking intersex people sharing their experiences of genital mutilation, discrimination, and both physical and psychological suffering caused by such treatment, never fails to elicit sympathy and, sometimes, subtly, self-doubt, mostly in male students. Being a 'real' man is important to many; that the physical basis for that exalted status might be not as unambiguous as one assumes can lead to uncertainty. Although I have never encountered a student who admitted to arranging for a medical check-up after this session, male students are often unwilling to end the in-class discussion about diagnostic symptoms.

In a very real sense, in my current classrooms, we are back in the 1970s and 1980s, when women's studies and concepts of gender appeared, and women as scientists broke into the academy again after the almost 40 year hiatus since the 1940s. Male and female students come with a general educational background that still does not include women's history or women's present, and while my female students live some of that 'present,' my male students, to a large degree, do not have to know. This does not mean that some of them are not very well aware, but knowledge of sex/gender discrimination is often second-hand, especially for straight males. But in contrast to the work done by my predecessors in the 1970s and 1980s, my classroom is not filled with young women, capable of being gender activists for women; my classroom is filled with, well, not the enemy, but with representatives of a class of people who have the cultural potential to inflict damage, but also carry the promise of dismissing such privilege and to exemplify the success of the egalitarian human who happens to be male.

Teaching Students

Throughout my career, I have taught students who represented all versions of diversity: my students' ages ranged from 18 to over 60; they represented all American 'racial' and ethnic groups and combinations thereof, plus a refreshing addition of international students from each continent; they claimed the full human expanse of gender, sex, and sexual varieties; had different physical and mental abilities, political opinions, and religious prejudices; and, were at different levels of academic preparedness. According to some contemporary voices already mentioned, each 'sub-group' should have a different learning style and I should therefore teach to each group differently. I, however, teach university students, a politically incorrect statement in an era of increased infantilization of young adults, but a useful one. Making the prejudicial assumption that students are different/should be treated differently based on real or imaginary physical diversities may be politically desirable, but makes for very bad pedagogy. This does not mean that individual needs should not be addressed and accommodated, it means that as the professor, I cannot possibly defend looking over my classroom and deciding that visible physical diversity should mean that I have to address each 'group' differently.

Teaching women's and gender studies to men is therefore not fundamentally different than teaching it to a women-only or an integrated classroom, when done in the social sciences. My colleagues in the humanities may feel differently; many encourage students to share instances and patterns of male violence and argue that such sharing cannot be done with representatives of the accused group sitting nearby, as Mary Daly did so famously at Boston College. Although students must contemplate their own role and participation in the gender system, especially as it works through race, sexualities, and class, the primary goal is to teach them that the social sciences are not about individual anecdotes. It is about the structure and effect of the whole culture on peoples' quality of life and how to study, analyze, and, possibly, rectify that. As each semester progresses, students do share personal experiences; it happens frequently that one of the men will react dismissively to a lecture and that angers one or more of the women who then 'tell him off.' Hearing that my abstract data have a real-life example just a few chairs over, often makes a deeper impact on that young man than lectures. And, conversely, a young man may point to a painful experience in his life, which can cause sympathetic nods from other men, as well as a surprising common-ground realization by a female student. At this point both male and female students learn that although something may not have happened to them or, visibly, around them, does not negate its reality. And it is much more difficult to dismiss a person than a number on a slide.

Freire challenged us to teach peoples' reality and to bring knowledge to all. Living masculine privilege means not to have to see and consider the consequences of one's words and actions on others, a privilege also held by whiteness, heterosexuality, Protestant Christianity, and middle-class self-ascribed 'normality.' Men and women are encouraged by powerful voices to maintain that privilege of blindness, to feel a sense of desperation when other voices do intrude on one's consciousness, and to reconstruct and protect that privilege as their 'right.' Coming into a women's and gender studies classroom takes courage, especially for straight men, for here the uncomfortable voices rule. But moving from a women-dominated women's studies program to the current male-dominated classroom, a funny thing happened: my evaluations did not change. I teach the same materials, the same books, the same videos, and I am, on occasion, as outrageously radical as usual. But most students remark on how much they have learned, how much they enjoyed the class, and how overburdened they were with the writing assignments. Interestingly enough, student evaluations sometimes mention that a student expected the class to engage in 'male-bashing' i.e., naming male offenders as men; even my most explicit courses get lauded for avoiding this taboo. Of course, there is always that one, who quite recently, complained that the course on gender focused too much on women. Since one text (Kimmel) focused exclusively on men and the other (Hoffert) balances between women and men, since I had frequently lectured focused only on men (e.g., the history and philosophy of the Boy Scouts), and since men were always part of any discussion of women's lives, I am never very impressed by such comments. I am reminded that even the slightest mention

of women outside of service roles to men and children is bothersome to some folks and that one semester of learning does not undo twenty or so years of socialization.

Robert Jensen encouraged men not to merely settle for being men, but to 'strive to be human beings' (cited in Valenti, 2009:183). Men are, indeed, human beings. More importantly, they are students, and, as such, should find free access to all the knowledge created and taught at university, even when it appears that a certain area of inquiry is not focused on them. In the future, I will probably add a Men's Studies course to the line-up, but for now, I stress that female students have studied male focused history, economics, political science, sociology, and anthropology for a long time. To claim, therefore, that the addition of women's participation in and their experience of all these areas of cultural life should be of interest only to women means to short-change male students and to limit their full intellectual potential. My male students have female relatives, may have a female spouse, and will deal with female colleagues, as well as with women's political issues as voters or maybe even future politicians. A general 'knowledge-for-knowledge's sake' argument may not impress others as it guides myself, but the blatant truism that human beings come in a variety of sexes and genders does affect everybody and my male students learn that they, too, may exhibit variation, a lesson that might be easier to learn in a space that, while nominally male and white dominated, is too small to allow for efficient segregation.

> 'Spaces […] take shape by being oriented around some bodies, more than others. We can also consider 'institutions' as orientation devices, which take the shape of 'what' resides within them. After all, institutions provide collective or public spaces. When we describe institutions as 'being ' white (institutional whiteness), we are pointing to how institutional spaces are shaped by the proximity of some bodies and not others: white bodies gather, and cohere to form the edges of such spaces' (Ahmed, 2007:157).

Spinning out this argument, we may assert that our institution is a 'male' space, since 'U.S. cultural expectations regarding technology usage converge with stereotypes concerning race and gender, resulting in a white nerd masculine identity congruent with related forms of masculinity found in computing and engineering fields,' (Kendall, 2000:271). The 'white', while dominant, is problematic here, since racial and ethnic identities play out differently in New Mexico than elsewhere. A screening of 'The New Mexico Buffalo Soldiers' (Billington & Fielder, 1992), an in-state historical production featuring the local history of black military men, is initially greeted with amazement at the disclosure of a, to many students, previously hidden part of African-American and New Mexico history. This reaction soon gives way to the realization that both black and white men's military presence in this state was to fight, subdue, and often murder the ancestors of some of my

students. The ensuing discussion becomes an exercise in the realization of multiple identities and racialized masculinities.

Having had the first class meeting at the very hour in which the first African-American man was sworn in as the President of the United States, we realized the socio-political importance of stressing that black men achieved and achieve in exactly the same manner as white men, but had/have to endure white male racism while doing so, and that especially military participation was, and is, used to create a primary model of masculinity and even citizenship (see, for example, Yuval-Davis, 1997:20), which, while engaged in by women, nevertheless remains a strongly contested male-dominated opportunity. At the same time, this particular case becomes a bitter-sweet moment, for it exemplified that both white and black men were willing to unite to harm Native American men, women, and children. The militarism of Native men, as they resisted white/black encroachment, did not become a celebrated mark of their equality in joined masculinity, but rather a condemnation of their 'barbarism.' And no mention was made in the movie (or in much of the literature about the Buffalo Soldiers) of Cathay Williams, the one documented black woman Buffalo Soldier, while white women appeared sporadically as owned bodies, and Latinas/os were invisible.

Still, students from this state come to university with an uneven preparation in historical facts, but compared to out-of-state students, local folks (with some white exceptions) are well aware of thousands of years of Native history and over 500 years of Hispanic presence. Anglos, while dominant in neighboring states, such as Arizona, are recognized as latecomers. The state is officially bilingual (although there is a tendency to pretend that Spanish is a 'foreign' language) and Latinos/as are highly visible, as are Native Nations and pueblos. Anecdotal evidence points to the frustration of some white men who cannot mimic the white supremacy in numbers and power they see in the media, although the Southern Poverty Law Center's Hate Map reports just two white supremacist groups in the state. Each larger metropolitan area in New Mexico has its own flavor, but in our little university town and, especially on our campus, a mixture of all, including a strong international presence, makes the town/gown divide into one of the strongest separators. For this author, the international background or her skin color, seem to be lesser identifiers; local people approvingly comment firstly and mostly on my decision to not only live in town, but also not on 'faculty hill.'

But my male students should find it difficult to perform the 'male' space, since female co-students (and female faculty) and students from non-white groups are quite visible on campus (although women of all groups and African-Americans are quite underrepresented compared to New Mexico's ratios of 50% and 3% respectively). At NMT, the badges of 'nerd' and 'geek' are worn proudly by both men and women; of course, the debate about which of these identities to claim is usually concluded with a triumphant "we're Techies!" Being joined by women who perform one strand of stereotypical masculinity quite successfully, and enrolling in courses that

focus on women and gender, both prepare my male students to consider 'questioning any universalizing claims about the category of men' (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005:831).

If '[m]asculinities are configurations of practice that are accomplished in social action and, therefore, can differ according to the gender relations in a particular setting' (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005:836), then male STEM students in a sex-integrated (albeit male dominated) space have two choices: they could react with violent attempts to remove female students (sexual harassment, rape) and, indeed, we do have events like these occurring. But they might also select the second option, accepting the comparatively few women as equal 'Techies,' or, maybe, as extraordinary women. The men I encounter in my WGS courses seem to lean towards the 'equal' solution, an assumption I base on their willingness to consider the reality of multiple ways to be a man, which might not have to include not to be a woman. After all, the world's first computer programmer was Augusta Ada King, Countess of Lovelace (1815-1852) – being in fields that rely on the pioneering work of a woman makes their masculinization a rather obvious cultural process, rather than a biological necessity.

For our students, the small campus space creates a possibility of intersectionality, which runs counter to many discussions in the literature (e.g., Brah & Phoenix, 2004 or Yuval-Davis, 2006). While the usual student groups exist (e.g., the American Indian Science and Engineering Society or study groups created around a country of origin) and students go home to sometimes segregated areas, the common suffering of Calculus courses, lab reports, and, for my own students, the experience of writing in the social sciences, creates a new bond of 'Techie', an identity forged in four to six years of undergraduate suffering (as they claim), shared across sex and ethnic lines. Other identities remain salient, of course; however, the relatively small numbers of any identified group force interactions on academic grounds which, in turn, force a recognition of commonality, not just between men of different groups, but with women as well. Initially, I was surprised that my WGS courses were successful here; the men who come to NMT, however, pride themselves more on cerebral achievements than sports or military, and, while still often unsure about how to relate to the opposite sex (a problem mostly for those who are straight), seem willing to explore masculinity as an ever-changing process, rather than a static identity. After all, as our straight female students are heard to say frequently, here "the odds are good, but the goods are odd."

ENDNOTES

[1] Plus an appreciable Native American presence and we have just reached the 25% Hispanic enrollment to qualify as a Hispanic-serving institution.

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