

1

Introduction

. . . women's studies opens up with questions, and so . . . that clicked for me. . . That's really the biggest difference in women's studies and any other courses I've taken. . . You question all the time, all the time.

—Paludi & Tronto

As this woman's account suggests, one goal of the women's studies courses, including the psychology of women course, is to help students to learn to think critically. This ability is empowering for students, especially for re-entry women students who may have been silenced in their life experiences as well as in other courses. Critical thinking skills permit women students to see themselves as capable of critical analysis, to incorporate statistical methodologies in their analyses, to possess sufficient knowledge and perspective to engage in substantive critical analyses.

In addition, critical thinking requires an opportunity for students, especially for women students, to talk in the first person; to place faith and value in their opinions and analyses. It also permits the instructor of the psychology of women course to surrender the role of sole expert. Critical thinking thus instills in students confidence and positive sense of self—two important outcomes that should be expected in the psychology of women course.

Encouraging critical thinking in the psychology of women course requires support and patience on the part of the faculty member. This newly acquired skill may not be welcomed, let alone invited, in other courses in the psychology major. When I have taught the psychology of women course in terms of a challenge to each course in the psychology curriculum, classes have become tense because of the problems students experienced with other faculty members who did not want to discuss issues such as lesbian relationships, nonsexist research methodologies, feminist revisions of Freudian theory, or androcentric biases in theories of moral reasoning and career development.

Students may become very discouraged that they cannot express themselves in other courses; a tension often results between exercising

their critical skills in the psychology of women course and repressing them elsewhere. As one woman who participated in a women's studies grant with me stated:

taking women's studies courses has a good effect and a bad effect for me . . . the good effect is bringing this awareness of diversity to you. . . . The bad effect is the resultant critique that you bring to your other classes. . . . You're almost forced to put these blinders on, you know, when you start looking at other materials . . . where you're expected to look at it in a traditional way, so . . . I find myself having two personalities here you know, the kind of analysis and freedom I have in women's studies courses and then the more narrow view I'm expected to take and I'm graded on in other courses. (Paludi & Tronto, 1992, p. 145)

I suggest that faculty deal up front with this tension students experience. Inviting students to share their experiences as well as solutions can be most empowering for the students. For men in the course, such discussions will be enlightening in that they may for the first time hear about women being silenced in the academy and how their newly acquired voice from participating in the psychology of women course gets them labeled as aggressive, nasty, militant, etc. These discussions provide an opportunity for discussing how differential evaluations are made about women and men behaving similarly.

I recommend sharing this important goal or aspect of the course, i.e., critical thinking of psychological research and theories, with faculty colleagues. They may be more tolerant of the students in their class who are questioning traditional psychological research that is presented to them. It may also be helpful to invite women's studies faculty—yourself included—to your class to share their own techniques for handling this tension. This is an excellent area for positive role models! Inviting students in your class to participate in a women's studies club will be beneficial; such participation will put them into contact with many students who can be a support system for dealing with tensions arising from opportunities to engage in critical thinking.

I have included the following pedagogical techniques for faculty to use in guiding students' critical thinking skills: discussion/essay questions, experiential exercises, analyzing popularly written books on women's lives, guest speakers, audio-visual material, and women's centers. Also included in this section are references for providing students with foundations for restructuring the psychology courses in their major. All of these pedagogical techniques are vehicles through which students in

the psychology of women course can develop and refine skills in critical thinking. These techniques require integration of theories, research studies, and practical experience from several sources that necessitates a critical reflection of ideas. These techniques also provide students with an opportunity to reflect a broad range of knowledge and the need to define, to qualify, and to dispute commonly heard overgeneralizations about women's lives and behavior.

The development and encouragement of critical thinking skills also has another benefit: attracting students to pursue a future in research in the psychology of women.

Reference

- Paludi, M. A., & Tronto, J. (1992). "Feminist education." In C. McTighe Musil (Ed.). *The Courage to Question: Women's Studies and Student Learning*. Washington, DC: Association of American Colleges.