
Practical Tips for Feminist Pedagogy in Classics

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These tips were compiled during *Classics and Feminist Pedagogy: Practical Tips for Teaching*, hosted by the Women's Classical Committee UK at the University of Birmingham on July 29th, 2016, and generously supported by CUCD. To see the full context and original sources of the tips in this document, there is a comprehensive [Storify of tweets from the day](#), and a report of the day is published alongside this document.

Teaching Materials

- Aim to include a multiplicity of voices, approaches, and materials in subject matter. Be aware of your classes' needs and ensure the accessibility of your teaching materials, including PowerPoints, handouts, and websites associated with the class. (Many of the points in the [Best Practices for Accessible Conferences](#) guide published by Classics and Social Justice can apply equally to classrooms.)
- Consider using lecture capture or other technological tools to support students who cannot attend sessions.
- Try and include translations written by women for set texts, or alongside those texts. Engage students with these materials by encouraging students to read different translations and compare them (either alone, or as a class activity).
- Think about your citation practice. Are you including works by female scholars in your own materials (and research)? Can you foreground these further by thinking about the order in which you name individuals?
- To be more inclusive (especially where traditional material by women, for example, is not available), think about where you can use alternative material – e.g. performances, reviews or articles in different types of journals.
- Be aware that Wikipedia is often biased against including women.

- Go back over bibliographies and reading lists to check that you have included works by female scholars, LGBT writers, etc. – don't just reuse your own lists, or those of others.
- Be aware of gendered language or biases in reviews – is this affecting how particular works are perceived? Ensure students are aware of the issues surrounding gendered language and bias.
- Include scholars' first names on bibliographies so that their genders can be recognised.
- Think about language used in the materials as well as by you – e.g. choices made by a translator, use of gendered pronouns in class. It matters! Think of ways to show the students that it matters.
- Consider marking potentially tricky topics on class materials (e.g. syllabi) with neutral language (e.g. 'content labels') to mark material without preloading it with emotion.
- Make clear what topics will arise in module descriptions, and give a clear syllabus outline on Blackboard or Moodle, or in paper form for students who require accessible documents. These should ideally include content notes on sessions, set readings, and a glossary of terms.

Preparation

- There is a wide range of approaches to feminist pedagogy – there is no size which fits all disciplines, all classes (including varying levels of control over material), or all teachers. Take some time to explore these, and see what fits you best.
- It is particularly important to be aware of your own limits and red lines – both regarding stepping outside your comfort zone and in making sure that you don't end up overworking.
- Build a community – especially around traditionally isolating practices such as student writing.
- Explore the various 'models' available for teaching, but allow for adaptation – nothing fits neatly into a perfect model, and not all subjects will suit the same models.
- Be particularly aware that these approaches may be challenging for students coming from the more tightly-focused A-level style of study – consider how to best manage that transition successfully.
- As you progress, look backwards – reflect on what you've done as well as what you're doing. What's worked? What hasn't? As part of this, think about how you can use challenges as teachable moments – try not to pre-empt student responses and therefore steer away from difficult sources or topics.
- Remember that sensitive subjects are often context dependent – culture, personal experience, background, etc. can all make unanticipated subjects sensitive.
- The process of learning at an undergraduate level itself involves critical thinking, challenging previously held beliefs, etc. – it is therefore often sensitive!
- Preparation for teaching sensitive subjects:
 - Get advice from experienced colleagues – what topics have previously raised issues? How did they handle them?
 - Consider the possible impact of modern comparisons.

- Provide contact details for support services (at every stage, in advance of and during teaching).
- Start with more straightforward debates so that students can warm up to more controversial topics.
- Set good, clear ground rules for discussions.
- Be prepared for unexpected difficult areas!
- Work out your techniques in advance for avoiding heated debates, avoiding putting people on the spot, and diffusing situations if necessary:
 - For diffusing: Depersonalise the situation.
 - Refocus on the ground rules.
 - Ask – what is a counter argument? Why do those who disagree do so? What is the evidence for this viewpoint?
 - Include a range of viewpoints around difficult topics.
 - After class talk to students concerned in heated debates.
- Take holidays! Being a whole person with an identity beyond the academic makes your teaching better!
- Get involved with the WCC Wikipedia editing initiatives to create the Wikipedia resources you'd like to use.

While Teaching: General

- Keep developing – continual adjustment is good.
- Intersectionality is important, but it's fine to take small steps – you don't need to tackle everything in one class!
- When moving away from a lecturer-centred style of teaching, multiple options are possible – you can go for student-centred or subject-centred.
- Assessments may be an area where flexibility is especially limited and traditional hierarchies reappear – try at least to be as transparent as possible at every stage of these, to avoid any impression of arbitrary exercises of power.
- Teaching sensitive subjects:
 - Don't be frustrated by lack of attendance as a result of warnings.
 - Include marked tutorial time among teaching hours, which is ideally suited for discussion of difficult topics.
 - Set boundaries on time allocated to sessions.
 - Be clear about what support you can provide.
 - Be knowledgeable about where you can refer students for help.
 - Do not offer confidentiality.
 - Seek out training and encourage universities/departments to offer training.
 - Work together as a team to share the load of tutorials/support for students.
 - Avoid singling out individuals, especially in front of a group.
 - Avoid enforcing groups with no option for students to switch.
 - Allowing students to choose/prepare their own assessments helps let them avoid potentially difficult topics.

- Remember that groups of students will have their own limits – they can only be challenged so far.
- Humour can be a valuable tool but is often risky. It can diffuse tension, make approaching hard topics easier, but it can also risk denigrating serious topics.

While Teaching: Exercises

- Innovative exercises (teaching through performance, experimental exercises) may lead to new insights on 'traditional' material!
- Practical/fun exercises (e.g. 'walk like a man/woman') can be used to lead students into engagement with specific material (secondary or primary).
- Consider doing a 5-10 minute 'women' section in every class as a way of making a small change which can be continuous across the course.
- Think about how feminist approaches can be involved in teaching all material, not just material involving women.
- Even in language teaching, strategies like thinking about who is doing your active verbs in grammar exercises can make a big difference.
- Think about who they're reading/what they're seeing – how is the material students are exposed to forming their view of the ancient world? Are there any gaps being created by your selections?
- The personal is political – think about how personal experiences and emotions can contribute to work in the classroom.
 - Be aware that this may be especially tricky in Classics – ancient experiences are alien, and do not easily map onto ours without erasing some of the distance which exists between us and the ancients. A reception-based approach, tracing experiences/ideologies forward to us, rather than retrojecting our ideologies/experiences, may work better.
- Consider getting students involved in producing Wikipedia content which focuses on women.
- Encourage students (and yourself!) to google-stalk scholars – try and find out their background, previous works, etc. - think about how these may affect their approach/scholarship.

What Next? Suggestions for Taking Feminist Pedagogy Forward

- The establishment of an interactive, online bibliography of women's scholarship.
- Continuing the [online bibliography of translations and editions by women](#).
- WCC UK to publish short blog posts that continue the conversation started by the Spotlight talks, to give women an opportunity to discuss and share the feminist pedagogy they employ in their own classrooms, and to promote such posts published elsewhere.
- Wikipedia editing and support (this is something that has already begun, and information will be circulated for monthly Wiki-edits).

- Proposals for follow-up events, either general or with more specific focuses (e.g. assessment) are welcome.
- A 'grassroots' support group, established on Facebook or a similar forum.

Resources [Links correct as of July 2017]

Suggested ground rules for discussions by Fiona Mchardy (from Prof McHardy's presentation at the Birmingham event; an article based on this presentation is forthcoming in *CUCD Bulletin*)

- You and students only make statements about an issue, person or group if you are prepared to make the statement directly and respectfully to a person to whom the issue is important.
- People must have evidence for what they say, and draw coherent/logical conclusions as a result.
- Cultivate 'tentativeness' among students – encourage them to explore their fixed ideas and prejudices, and have them recognise that confusion and uncertainty are stages in their development towards independent opinion.

Key Online Resources

- [Online Companion to The Worlds of Roman Women](#)
- [APA guide to non-sexist use of language](#)
- [Database of Women in Ancient History](#)
- [Making Feminist Points](#)
- [Article on Feminism and Citation Practices in Medieval Studies](#)
- [WCC-UK Resources](#) – including lists of female ancient authors, and editions/translations by women

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