

## Feminist Classics and the Burden of Authority

In a traditional in-translation Classics course, 'factual' knowledge about the ancient world was imparted from instructor to student, and students became responsible for remembering and perhaps analyzing the imparted knowledge. The instructor was traditionally male and white, and the narrative of history was traditionally focused on the privileged male perspective. In a postmodern liberal arts Classics classroom, several of these elements get thrown out of the window: interest in non-dominant narratives of history necessitated the questioning the veracity of ancient and modern sources, resulting in a history which is no longer 'fact', but constructed and contestable. The learning goals of the course move toward analysis, 'skill-building' and learning ways of thinking, and students may or may not be expected to remember 'trivial' facts about the ancient world. Finally, the social position of the instructor's identity (e.g., non-male, non-white) might from the outset compel less respect and authority from students. This paper reflects on the experiences of teaching traditional and non-traditional historical narratives as a non-traditional and non-authoritative instructor, and offers some solutions for overcoming the paradox of student-teacher hierarchy when teaching alternate narratives of history in a "soft" discipline.

I see the paradox as such: if the questioning of authority is intrinsic to the postmodern liberal arts experience and the study of subaltern history and culture, where does this leave the instructor, who now cannot claim to have 'knowledge' about their subject, and whose every assertion can be questioned by their novice students? And where does this leave students, who expect a knowledge-holder at the front of the room, who dislike feeling confused, and who might lose the motivation to prepare for class when the narrative of history is, at worst, muddled, or, at best, highly caveated and contextualized? Furthermore, the postmodern turn in historiography

has opened up space for the questioning and rejection of instructor authority precisely at a time when academia, which sometimes seems like it trades in clear, coherent, and declarative truths, has begun to call our disciplinary credibility into question. In a non-traditional and non-authoritative body, representing a "soft" discipline seems to require, if anything, an increased display of truth-wielding expertise among colleagues as well as students.

Perhaps feminist scholarship must bear some of the blame for destabilizing instructors' authority, but this paper argues, first, that a feminist pedagogy offers the best way to deal with the ensuing paradigm shift in classroom dynamics and student expectations of the instructor and the course material. I offer some pedagogical strategies for creating a classroom space where 1) what we have traditionally defined as 'knowledge building' still happens, 2) students build skills and learn ways of thinking (specifically ways of nuancing and contextualising claims about antiquity and today), 3) students are motivated to prepare for class, and 4) students report a high degree of transferability of the course material. I explain how to incorporate feminist pedagogical strategies which counteract the traditional student-teacher dynamic by simultaneously decentralizing authority in the classroom and engaging students in the production of responsible (by which I mean well-informed and evidence-based) scholarship. More specifically, this paper addresses the ideas of student-led syllabus creation, anonymous-but-public self, peer, and instructor evaluations, peer assessment, and student-centered project-based learning. This paper concludes by looking at the professional aspects of being a non-authoritative body, teaching non-traditional histories, and attempting to seem "authoritative" among colleagues across various disciplines and programs at a liberal arts college - do faculty treat each other like students, and might the same solutions apply outside the classroom as well?