“Don’t Hate Me Because I’m Virtual”: Feminist Pedagogy in the Online Classroom

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“Feminist education—the feminist classroom—is and should be a place where there is a sense of struggle, where there is visible acknowledgment of the union of theory and practice, where we work together as teachers and students to overcome the estrangement and alienation that have become so much the norm in the contemporary university.”

—bell hooks

The decade-long debate about the value of distance education (DE)—specifically online teaching—may become a moot one. The Chronicle of Higher Education recently reported on a 2004 study, revealing that, “By the end of 2005, Eduventures expects more than 1.2 million students to be taking such courses, making up about 7 percent of the 17 million students enrolled at degree-granting institutions” (Carnevale, “Online”). An even more recent study by the Alfred P. Sloan Foundation reports that 89 percent of the over one thousand responding institutions offer face-to-face (F2F) instruction; 55 percent of them offer online courses (Allen and Seaman 5). Overall online enrollment increased from 1.98 million students in 2003 to 2.35 million in 2004 (Allan and Seaman 4). With numbers of such magnitude, it’s hard to ignore the fact that online teaching is becoming a reality for more and more instructors at institutions traditionally offering face-to-face instruction. In times of budget crises and calls for efficiency and expansion into new student populations, discussions of online teaching are no longer just for the pioneers in the medium, new faculty pressured into teaching DE, or the cyber-savvy. The chances are high that more and more of us across rank, discipline, campus type, and level of technical ability will venture into the virtual classroom.

As these chances increase, so do the objections about online classes: they exploit already overwhelmed faculty and adjunct instructors; they encourage a consumer model of education, with their accompanying marketing as “flexible” and “convenient”; the increased amount of reading and writing leads to instructor burnout; they are merely correspondence courses masquerading as intellectually rigorous, college-level education; online students are disengaged and even more “estranged and alienated” than hooks’s on-campus students; the courses lack the sense of community made possible by face-to-face classrooms; etc. Many of these critiques, however, are not borne out by research. For example, the Sloan Foundation study reveals that at 74 percent of public colleges, online courses are taught by core faculty, as opposed to only 61 percent for their face-to-face courses—indicating that it is permanent, not temporary, instructors who are taking
up the work of online teaching. Additionally, one of the criteria for engagement in the National Survey for Student Engagement is the amount of reading and writing students do for their courses—a gauge of engagement supported by the students’ reflections on their courses in Richard J. Light’s *Making the Most of College*. Many online classes by nature require plenty of both, in addition to the reading and writing assignments shared with their face-to-face counterparts.

Given the growth in online education and the range of courses now being offered in computer-mediated environments, it is our contention as feminist teacher-scholars that the translation of feminist pedagogy to these educational venues is critical. If we don’t clearly, publicly, and repeatedly define feminist pedagogy and discuss its benefits beyond current practitioners, many of our advances will either be limited to those already doing the work or credited to advocates of the more generic modes of active learning. In these circumstances, feminist pedagogy will remain a concept understood only by feminist educators, misunderstood by our colleagues, and invisible to our students. Furthermore, failing to outline the many ways feminist pedagogy is applicable to online environments will ensure that myths and misconceptions about online teaching flourish and that only the worst versions of online pedagogy persist. We argue here that feminist pedagogy isn’t just applicable to many different disciplines; it’s also applicable to nontraditional learning environments. We are particularly interested in how online environments can become sites of feminist pedagogy.

Informing our recommendations on feminist pedagogy in the online setting are our combined experiences in teaching English and women’s studies courses using a variety of course platforms—Desire2Learn, Blackboard, WebCT, Prometheus, and LearningSpace. Nancy even started out writing her own code for courses delivered on simple HTML pages and discussion boards without password protection or the other conveniences offered by these course management systems. She’s been teaching Introduction to Literature online every semester, including summers, since Fall 2000 and taught freshman composition online between Fall 1996 and Spring 1998. Holly has been teaching Introduction to Women’s Studies online for eleven semesters. Our shared experiences in bringing feminist pedagogy to the online setting have disabused us of the stereotypes about online courses and convinced us that feminist pedagogy and the cyber-classroom can and should be productively paired. We focus not on if but how feminist pedagogy can be applied broadly, to varying degrees, so that any course can become virtually feminist.

**Going Virtual: Feminist Pedagogy Online**

“I entered the classroom with the conviction that it was crucial for me and every other student to be an active participant, not a passive consumer . . . education as the practice of freedom . . . education that connects the will to know with the will to become. Learning is a place where paradise can be created.”

—bell hooks

If the principles of feminist pedagogy can revise classroom spaces, learning activities, and modes of communication and knowledge construction in our F2F classes, then imagine their potential for the often quiet, distant, lonely, impersonal non-
spaces of online classes, where learning too easily slips into the one-way transfer of information in virtual independent study or correspondence courses. The potential is great, particularly because online classes are often full of characteristics antithetical to our ideal feminist classroom. In our research on the limited materials that address this issue, we’ve often seen the question phrased as such: can technology “support and enhance the feminist classroom?” (Pramaggiore 164) or “How congenial are these kinds of technologies to the kind of participatory, collaborative learning that is the hallmark of the feminist classroom?” (Rose 115–16). Not only are these articles about hybrid classes or using technology to enhance F2F classes (modes very different from fully online courses), but also the basic question is quite different from ours. What’s been asked in the past is can we—and if so, how can we—use technology to enhance or “deliver” a course informed by feminist pedagogy.

Here we might hearken back to those governing metaphors for teaching. Answering this question as thus framed invites us to examine more closely the ubiquitous “delivery” metaphor used in discussions of online learning and the ways it reinforces a masculinist approach (whether to learning or to childbirth) with a “product” to be “delivered” at the end of each. If feminist pedagogy is to challenge the notion that knowledge is to be delivered like a package, it must do so in all settings—face to face or virtual. This framing of Pramaggiore’s and Rose’s questions also puts the emphasis on how to use the technology, but we don’t want the technology to dictate our pedagogy.

Instead, we should ask how we can bring feminist pedagogy to the online environment, focusing on our teaching philosophies and values rather than on the limitations of the technology or on how we can operate under traditional and inappropriately gendered approaches to technology. Our present concern is to emphasize the importance of building the pedagogical framework and then bring the technology into that framework. Too often instructors defer to the technology and even instructional technology staff because they’re experts in the technology, but we’re the experts in both the content and the pedagogy, and a course starts there, not with the machinery. Pedagogical practices can and should drive the structure of the course, and the principles of feminist pedagogy should be present from the beginning, rather than add-ons at the end.

Important elements of course design can be deliberately structured to embed feminist values in an online learning environment. None of our strategies is unique or bound solely to the online environment, since feminist pedagogy is independent from the tools; our goal in this article is instead to demonstrate how feminist practices, values, and pedagogies in F2F environments can be translated effectively to the online environment. Because of this intent, we offer our suggestions through three overarching categories as a framework for defining and illustrating feminist pedagogy in the online environment: class dynamics and environment, definition of knowledge, and habits of mind.

Dynamics and Environment
The literature on feminist pedagogy is fairly coherent in describing the dynamics and environment of a feminist classroom, and our own definition dovetails with the prevailing conceptions. Feminist peda-
Feminist pedagogy produces a classroom environment of mutual respect where both teacher and all students take active, responsible, and shared roles in the learning process. This dynamic is achieved through classroom relationships that don’t hide or gloss over the differences in experience and perspective within a community of learners. Within this community, students care about others’ learning and well-being as well as their own, and they feel free to use their sites of authority—where they already stand and what they already know—to help contribute to the knowledge of the course.

This environment is developed through careful attention to the specific dynamics in a class, namely the roles and relationships of and between all members of a classroom community. For instance, feminist pedagogy is deliberate about how students relate to each other. Do they communicate with each other regularly? What happens if someone has a different opinion? Do they collaborate? Do they learn from each other and not just the instructor? Do students trust the instructor? Is she the absolute authority? How are high expectations communicated and upheld? How do the gender, race, and class of each student affect the class dynamics and learning? Feminist pedagogy is also deliberate about the student-instructor relationship. How does the instructor relate to the students? How does the instructor relate to the students? Is she the absolute authority? How are high expectations communicated and upheld? Do students trust the instructor? How do the gender, race, and class of the instructor affect the class dynamics and learning? How aware is everyone of these dynamics? Through attention to these relationships and roles in the classroom, feminist pedagogy spotlights how power and authority are played out in the classroom. Do students have a voice? Is power shared to some extent—even though it’s impossible to completely relinquish power when grades are involved? Do students have a sense of authority and power? Do they take leadership roles, or is the instructor the solitary leader in the classroom? Is there a sense of democracy in some activities, assignments, or projects?

Attention to these dynamics means attention to the communicative environment of the online classroom. The silences of cyberspace and the frequently solitary nature of online learning mean that in many online classes there are rarely discussions other than what’s assigned, no debates, no laughter, no groups sitting together and having heated or engaged conversations about anything. Instead, both instructor and students may log on, post an assignment, and log off—a virtual commuter campus at its worst. Despite these worst expectations and uses, however, we see the potential for something better.

One seemingly small element of the online environment that can support the dynamics of feminist pedagogy is the use of student home pages. Most course management systems provide built-in pages for such profiles, or they can be used to link to web pages students create on their own. Using either or both tools in the course can dispel the impression of virtual learning as cold, impersonal, distant, and even intimidating. First, home pages can help students feel a part of the class and connected to each other. Rather than celebrate the anonymity of being online, we encourage instructors to go beyond the résumé-style request for name, major, job, location (always interesting in online courses), and hobbies. Asking students to upload a picture, for example, obviously puts a face with the name, but it can also vividly illustrate the diversity of
the classroom in terms of age, gender, race, and ethnicity. Students who feel uncomfortable displaying a self-portrait, however, can substitute any picture that reveals something about themselves. Our students have posted pictures of a flower, a beloved boat, a newborn baby, a favorite outdoor location, a cartoon, and other images from popular media. Although these pictures don’t show what the students look like, they do give an impression of the students beyond words. Also, requesting a passage entitled “About Me” provides an open-ended invitation for comfortable levels of self-identification. This passage can even be an audio file from students with digital audio recorders, adding another layer of specificity to their identities. As the course progresses, instructors can then provide examples, analogies, and activities that are relevant to students’ specific backgrounds and interests, increasing their sense of belonging in the course and their connection to the content and each other, while also highlighting similarities and differences in experience in the classroom.

During the first week, assigning students the task of reading their peers’ home pages can serve as the icebreaker and class introduction standard in F2F instruction and begin to build community. The activity can be simple: students can identify the most interesting fact about each classmate, one way each home page helped humanize the classmate, and/or what they would like to ask the classmate based on the materials on the home page. Then, posting or emailing this brief list of evaluations to the entire class shows the students that their classmates are getting to know them. Later, as students work with others in groups, instructors can remind them to revisit the home pages of their groupmates. Often, online students learn more about their classmates than those in F2F classes, and we’ve also found that we get to know many of our OL students more than our F2F ones. By requiring students to browse through the home pages periodically, we remind our students that they are involved with students from diverse regional, social, ethnic, ideological, personal, and cultural backgrounds. The more attention students pay to the specific identities of their classmates, the more they resist normalizing the identities of their classmates under invisible assumptions of whiteness, maleness, and other identities that may be challenged online. Once our students start to recognize and remember their classmates’ commonalities and differences, a sense of specific, situated community is underway.

In addition to connecting students to each other, home pages can also be used to take early assessments of their preconceptions and expectations. Asking questions such as “What do you think is the role of the instructor in this course?”, “What do you think is your role in this course?”, “What do you think is the role of your classmates in this course?”, and “What is your ideal classroom activity?” can tell instructors much about students’ classroom experiences and provide a starting point for practicing and discussing feminist pedagogy. If they’re appropriate to the content of the course, questions such as “Are you or is anyone in your family a feminist? Why or why not?” and “What is a feminist?” provide important information about students’ attitudes. Later in the semester, having students revisit these responses can highlight the popular perceptions about gender issues and show them how far they’ve come since the first day. They can also introduce
a level of metacognition in the course from the beginning, so that students are thinking about what they’re learning, how they’re learning, and with whom they’re learning.

Another basic way to build community and encourage student authority and voice online is to create spaces where interaction is dynamic, ongoing, and student-led. We create two discussion forums at the top of the discussion page to accomplish these goals. The first is “Ask the Class,” where anyone can post questions, answers, or comments about the course, readings, or assignments. In many early online classes, a teacher-centered forum called “Raise Your Hand” replicated the dynamic of a student raising her hand and the authoritative instructor calling on her and answering the questions. We replaced that forum with “Ask the Class,” a student-centered forum in which students and instructors can pose questions, express confusion, and ask for advice or study tips, and other students are expected to respond. This forum, now more widespread in online classes, grants students the meaningful role of helping their classmates, encouraging them to relate to each other as peers and collaborators, rather than competitors. This is a small but significant step toward shared leadership in the classroom.

The second forum is “The Hallway,” a virtual environment that simulates the hallway on campus where students can talk to each other and us about anything. It facilitates the informal, personal, non-academic connections that fill the community’s need for more personal connections, for letting off steam, and for fully personalizing the learning environment. The instructor can begin the discussion by posting an ice-breaking, bonding ques-

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“demographically diverse student population,” including full-time workers, “home-bound or rural” students, and many stay-at-home mothers, who account for at least half of our online students (Rose 115). In our online program at the University of Wisconsin Colleges, 72 percent of online students are women, and this program isn’t atypical. According to a 2000 Department of Education study, single mothers, married women, and married women with children are most likely to be at the other end of the miles and wires of distance education (Carnevale, “Distance” A33). Further, the ratio of adult to traditional-age students is higher in online courses than in face-to-face classes, in some cases as high as 4 to 1. For instance, in our online program, 80 percent of online students are at least twenty-three years old. These numbers suggest that online courses often exceed the diversity of their F2F counterparts in this major goal of feminist pedagogy.

What we believe is important to acknowledge, however, is a kind of irony about the democratizing power of the online course: a large proportion of our students are women, especially women with children. Although online learning is pedagogically inclusive in terms of the current enrollment, it is the socially disempowered and often isolated groups that are availing themselves in the greatest numbers of the online learning environment. Nontraditional female students who are primarily responsible for childcare find the virtual classroom a convenient method of furthering their education while still attending to their family responsibilities.5 We believe this speaks to the empowering possibilities of virtual education: some groups who have been marginalized by educational institutions can now access a form of cultural currency that, previous to distance education, they would have been denied.

**Definition of Knowledge**

Deliberate, reflective attention to the classroom dynamics and environment is key to the cultivation of a feminist classroom, but the forms, kinds, and construction of knowledge that occupy a classroom operating under feminist pedagogy are also crucial. In addition to what occurs in the classroom, a coherent pedagogy theorizes what occurs within the learners’ minds by articulating what “knowledge” means and how it’s achieved. Feminist pedagogy operates under the assumption that knowledge is constructed. Recreating the engaged and interactive class dynamics of a F2F classroom informed by feminist pedagogy is just one part of creating the “virtually feminist” online course; translating the notion of knowledge as constructed is also essential.

In the F2F classroom, feminist educators interrogate their own assumptions about learning and knowledge: are concepts represented as black and white, or are complexity and ambiguity key characteristics? How is learning structured: do students learn individualistically, competitively, cooperatively, or collaboratively?6 Do assignments and activities encourage students merely to regurgitate information the instructor, the textbook, and other traditional authority figures, or is meaning developed through synthesizing authority, peer input, and one’s own experiences? Are students challenged to be uncomfortable and explore something new? Is course content connected to students’ lives and the world outside the textbook and the classroom? Are students expected
to think outside the classroom walls? Are students encouraged to make their own meanings and connections? 

The conception of knowledge and learning under feminist pedagogy contrasts sharply with more traditional modes of education. The apparently solitary quality of online learning can lead to a disengaged group of students—or, more precisely, a bunch of discrete, disconnected students who expect the learning to be one way at a time, as the common “delivery” metaphor for online learning illustrates: the textbook and the instructor deliver information to them in lectures and assigned readings, then the students deliver information back to the instructor through an exam or essay, and then the instructor delivers a grade to them. Then it starts over again. That sounds to us like a correspondence course modeled after the banking/pouring/information-processing metaphors of education, and that’s not what we’re looking for in online learning and certainly not in feminist pedagogy.

Among the most familiar are the metaphors of passivity suggesting that students are “empty vessels, sponges, and raw materials” and educators are containers full of liquid knowledge, ready to be poured, as “the “Japanese word for teacher means roughly ‘he who pours’” (Solomon and Solomon 19). Other, more romantic metaphors compare teachers to sculptors, miners, and other creators who penetrate with pick ax, drill, chisel, rasp, file, and other sharp, phallic tools that forge knowledge for students. These metaphors leave out the sense of wisdom, knowledge, and understanding that go beyond processing data—an omission that feminist pedagogy and some of the more recent movements in teaching and learning have sought to correct, including active learning, collaborative learning, and “backwards” course design (Barkley, Cross, and Major; Wiggins and McTighe; Fink). Additionally, these metaphors omit the importance of student experience, authority, and interaction so central to feminist educators. Of course, in the last twenty years, other pedagogies have also challenged the traditional definitions of knowledge and learning, most notably Paulo Freire’s liberation pedagogy. His work, The Pedagogy of the Oppressed, calls for “Knowledge [that] emerges only through invention and re-invention, through the restless, impatient, continuing, hopeful inquiry human beings pursue in the world, with the world, and with each other” (53), a vision that—like a more feminist model—recognizes the interplay among knowledge, experience, and collaboration. In doing so, he argues against what he calls the “banking” model of learning in which “knowledge is a gift bestowed by those who consider themselves knowledgeable upon those whom they consider to know nothing” (53). In
this metaphor, students are empty bank accounts, broke, impoverished, powerless, and ready to be filled by the teacher’s money, generosity, “gifts” of knowledge.9

Perhaps these problematic metaphors of teaching and learning are why some feminist educators embrace the explicitly gendered metaphor of the midwife who facilitates the birth of what’s already growing inside. The vessel in the student is not empty and awaiting the teacher; instead, it’s generative, already developing, coming from a prior experience. The relationship between the midwife and the birthing mother is not hierarchical, and the metaphor affords agency to both participants, perhaps even more to the mother since she is the one who births, the one who holds the knowledge that needs to be guided out. That knowledge is also not static; it is growing, forming, evolving, unfolding, and will continue to do so after the work of the midwife is done and the relationship has ended. Finally, the process of learning is like the birthing process, hard work borne of sweat and discomfort—labor, sometimes as painful as it is illuminating and powerful. (The “delivery” of the midwife metaphor is thus very different from the “delivery” of the mail metaphor.) As these metaphors reveal, what “knowledge” means to an educator and to a pedagogical paradigm has an impact on everything else: the teacher’s role, the students’ roles, how learning happens, what occurs in the classroom, and the goals for the end of the course.

Thus, recreating the engaged and interactive class dynamics of a F2F classroom informed by feminist pedagogy is just one part of creating the “virtually feminist” online course; translating this notion of knowledge as constructed is also essential. Establishing early and ongoing presence and activity in the “Ask the Class” and “Hallway” discussion areas as a key mode of exchange (both personal and intellectual) sets the stage for subsequent governing pedagogical values, including shared authority and communal construction of knowledge. Susan Stanford Freidman argued early in scholarly discussion of feminist pedagogy that “we must reaffirm our commitment to dissolving the kind of authority that leads to students’ passivity and lack of independent thought” (208). For many classes, regular discussions are prime areas for infusing feminist pedagogical practices and cultivating student agency and participation in this collaborative construction of knowledge. In many traditional classrooms and even “traditional” online classes, the absence of feminist pedagogy is perhaps most obvious through the linear mode of information transfer, from expert instructor to novice student. Some online instructors spend hours writing or recording their online lectures well before the semester even begins, sometimes a requirement for the technology gurus in charge of the course management platform. Although lecturing in and of itself in the classroom is not pedagogically unsound, the typical lecture does not enact feminist pedagogy; reliance on lectures recreates online a dynamic of the teacher as the center of knowledge and the students as absorbers of that knowledge. Instead, we can empower our students as learners and instill in them a sense of responsibility to their classmates as well. Rather than “monopol[izing]” the class as “the single authoritative source,” we propose that instructors should “subvert the technological imperative to lecture” as often as is appropriate, rely on the textbook or other websites to introduce the key concepts, and count on discussion among
the students to be the primary constructor of knowledge in the course (Rose 118; Pramaggiore 168).

Clarifying the roles of student and instructor can prevent the discussion from becoming a series of dialogues between the instructor and individual students or a modified lecture. We see discussion as a collaborative activity with students at the center and the instructor as part of that discussion—sometimes guiding, most often listening (or reading)—while students work together to make meaning. Shrewsbury’s clarification that “Empowering pedagogy does not dissolve the authority or power of the instructor” is useful here. The instructor’s role “does move from power as domination to power as creative energy,” and “the teacher’s knowledge and experience is recognized and is used with the students to increase the legitimate power of all” (11). The goal is for learning, meaning, and knowledge to emerge from the synergy created by discussion, not the instructor’s delivery of that knowledge. If the instructor is consistently present in the discussion, students will withdraw from their own sense of authority and back off from independent thinking (as in many F2F discussions) because this persistent participation suggests that they’re incapable of or not expected to do it alone.

What does such an online discussion look like? Instructors can post a discussion question and then allow students to take over, or students can even be assigned as the discussion starters themselves. Rather than acting as the sole source of the wisdom and guidance in the course, instructors should respond, fill in gaps, and correct misconceptions after the students have had the time, space, and expectation to do so on their own. Additionally, assigning students meaningful roles in discussion further motivates them in various types of authority. In smaller group discussions in which students first discuss different topics and then later report on their conversation to the entire class, the role of group reporter should rotate to share the responsibility of representing a group to the rest of the class. Moderators or facilitators can keep their groupmates on task and ask questions to keep the discussion going, while also helping maintain netiquette. When students share these leadership roles, they take on greater responsibility to the classroom community, to their own learning, and to the course.

In addition to translating traditional, small-group discussions to the online environment, other discussion strategies can be developed for or adapted to the online environment to cultivate shared leadership and authority, as well as a collaborative construction of knowledge. The fishbowl discussion, a strategy introduced briefly in a variety of sources (McKeachie; Barkley, Cross, and Major), can facilitate feminist values in the cyber-classroom. The fishbowl redefines the roles of everyone in the classroom by putting the student voice at the center, literally and figuratively. A handful of students are assigned to the discussion board (in the F2F version, they sit at the center of the room), and the comments of those students (not those of the instructor or the rest of the class) make up the entire activity, while everyone else actively observes the discussion. The discussion topic can be whatever is appropriate: a reading or readings, an assignment, a unit, or something students decide themselves. Unlike the traditional fishbowl, which is essentially a closed circle that silences observ-
ers, Nancy keeps an “empty chair” policy in the fishbowl, an entry point for observers who wish to briefly join the discussion to contribute, question, or challenge. This activity provides a space for a smaller group of students to develop connections, interpretations, assertions, questions, and opinions that haven’t come up in previous discussions or that haven’t been explored to their satisfaction.

The discussion chain is another strategy that can bring feminist pedagogy’s dynamics and definition of knowledge to the online environment. In a discussion thread initiated by the instructor or a student, students read all previous postings, look for themes and patterns in those postings, and then summarize them before responding in a new way or offering a different perspective on the conversation. This strategy simulates “a ‘real’ conversation in which people listen to each other, repeat back something important that they hear others saying, then respond to that idea by pointing out differences and by adding new details and insights” (Friederich). It also simulates the collaborative construction of knowledge in the feminist classroom as students build on everyone who came before, making connections and striving for different perspectives.

Discussion can also revolve around the use of a wiki or occur within a wiki itself. A wiki is a website designed for collaborative authorship as users easily add, delete, or edit content. Perhaps the most well-known version is “Wikipedia,” a collaboratively authored and edited online encyclopedia to which any registered user can contribute content. In its classroom application, students jointly develop a common document that defines a key course concept, interprets a text, applies a theory, synthesizes a variety of sources, or accomplishes any other collaborative writing task. The wiki adds the possibility of integrating links to other pages, multimedia representations in video or still images and audio files, and the editing history for the document itself. In the process of documenting their knowledge construction in the wiki and its history page, students negotiate meaning-making with their classmates. Our students have used wikis in small groups to plan their consciousness-raising projects and as an entire class to develop a definition of women’s studies.

Whatever the strategy, making complex discussions—rather than readings, solitary assignments, and exams—the centerpiece of an online course is a key way to empower students to use their own voices and practice and refine a more feminist approach to knowledge-construction. Jeannie Ludlow has identified six tenets of the feminist classroom: simultaneous collaboration and contention; situated knowledges; unresolved contradictions and simultaneous truths; intersectional understanding of identity; accountability; and interrogation of systems of power and privilege. Discussion that privileges student voices over the monolithic authority of the instructor (especially tempting in the faceless environment of an online class) is just one of the strategies that can foreground dialogue and achieve many goals of the feminist classroom. Effective, open-ended, higher-order discussion by its very nature is collaboration and contention and necessarily entails recognizing contradictions and ambiguities that resist definition, if the instructor makes this a priority in the class.

None of this is new to feminist educators, though, because it’s what we do in
the F2F classrooms. Using these principles of higher-level thinking and interaction online, though, encourages students to learn more deeply and reflect on what they’re learning more thoughtfully than many F2F classes because online students—when held to high expectations of development, clarity, and integration of examples and evidence—literally compose their thoughts as they write out their contributions before they enter discussion. The asynchronous bulletin board discussion function of many course platforms may, in some ways, be superior to the F2F setting in its ability to cultivate students’ ability to grapple with complex ideas precisely because they most compose their thoughts in writing before participating. For example, in courses with women’s studies content, the tension between perspectives must in some ways remain unresolved for students to fully grasp the concepts of tolerance, ambiguity, difference, and diversity. When we explore issues as politically and emotionally charged as same-sex marriage, abortion, racism, sexuality, and women as sexual agents, the primary goal is to foster lively, respectful, and substantive dialogue that doesn’t necessarily resolve but instead reinforce the tensions inherent in these issues. The ideal outcome of a multi-layered discussion that welcomes and holds accountable multiple perspectives in a course governed by feminist pedagogy would be recognition of the values of such multivocality and an appreciation for such complexity. In some cases, discussion does foster this outcome, such as the students who reflected on a discussion of reproductive choice: “The main thing I’ve learned from the abortion discussions is just how complex and interrelated the issues of abortion and women’s rights are. There are many moral issues on both sides of the debate but no clear simple solutions,” and “This week was the most thought-provoking for me thus far. The abortion debate really had me thinking about both sides of the issue, and from there, I established a new understanding for the opposing side of the debate, which I am very pleased about.” Although self-reporting from students about their increasing tolerance of diverse perspectives may not show whether they actually have grown in their ability to understand a debate from multiple perspectives, it does suggest that students have begun to recognize the academic and personal value of civil discourse. Further, this civil discourse was facilitated by a discussion medium that required students to engage in a multi-step process toward participation in it: students must first read, reflect, and compose before contributing, steps they may not always take in the immediacy of F2F classroom discussion. If we conceive of class discussion as a place to uncover multiple perspectives on any given subject, this goal is easily achieved in “[d]ialogue aimed not at disproving another person’s perspective, nor destroying the validity of another’s perspective, but at a mutual exploration” (Shrewsbury 9). In an online literature course, encouraging all students to offer their interpretations on works of literature, effectively supported by textual evidence and analysis, exceeds what most F2F literature discussions can achieve. In women’s studies classes, students are equally challenged to maintain a tone of mutual exploration by prompts that address intersections of identities, privilege, feminisms, and gender role socialization. As a result of this approach to understanding, students begin to recognize that knowledge.
in these courses isn’t about seeking “the right answer” (Shrewsbury 9).  

Students’ understanding of their “situatedness” in particular social class formations, ethnicities, racial and sexual identities, region, and age group, among other factors, also helps them learn about difference and the complexity of learning (Maher and Tetreault, qtd. in Rose 126). Recognition of difference can extend as far as cultivating a respect for—and awareness of—the ways that institutional and political contexts shape individual experience. Discussions of female gender role socialization, for example, caused one women’s studies student to remark, “One thing that I realized is that part of being true to ourselves is being true to a larger group. This means not harming others while you are trying to find your own way. This larger group also can contain all of human-kind, so it is important to ‘not fail’ human-hood.” This comment echoes Shrewsbury’s emphasis on mutual exploration and the “difference and the complexity of learning” addressed by Maher and Tetreault. Even as this student sets for herself the ambitious goal of commitment both to self and humanity, she recognizes the intellectual negotiation inherent in the process of education.

One danger with online discussions, however, is that the instructor may be the only person actually reading the students’ postings, which then means the discussions aren’t really discussions, and students haven’t constructed any knowledge at all. Because online discussions in larger classes can become overwhelming with so many different voices, using small discussion groups is one way to ensure that the students “hear” each other. There is an extra step we take, though, to deepen both students’ sense of the classroom as a community and their acknowledgement of multiple perspectives as they build meaning. In fact, we want students to be aware that they are learning within and because of this community of learners. Certainly, they are learning from the textbooks and from us, but most significantly, they are learning from each other, and it’s not good enough for instructors alone to recognize that. Feminist pedagogy requires that students appreciate this source of their knowledge as well.

We achieve this goal online through students’ weekly or unit reviews, a writing assignment in which students summarize, synthesize, and analyze an entire discussion. In preparation, students read the discussion—every posting, every reply. They then summarize the discussion, using details from their classmates to note consensus, patterns of meaning, points of disagreement, multiple perspectives, and what they learned. At the very least, these reviews make sure that students are “hearing,” reflecting upon, and synthesizing all their classmates’ comments, a comprehensive version of the discussion chain. More than just “hearing” or quickly reading them, though, paraphrasing in detail requires active “listening.” These reviews are indispensable in encouraging students to reflect upon the intellectual work they are doing. It empowers students as learners and thinkers as they gain a stronger sense of their own and their classmates’ authority. Ultimately, they recognize how their learning is being constructed, challenged, and revised by their classmates’ contributions.

Habits of Mind

The development of “habits of mind” is perhaps the most abstract and most
central teaching and learning goal of any college-level course. As Sheridan Blau has argued, key habits of mind that students develop throughout their college experience include (among others) writing confidently and non-formulaically; assessing authority of information; analyzing, synthesizing, and evaluating arguments; reading complex texts; and demonstrating initiative and ownership over one’s education (367). Because the online environment can be temptingly translated by well-meaning instructors into just another version of the sage on the cyber-stage complete with virtual lectures and multiple-choice exams, it is especially crucial that online pedagogy be crafted to offer students the opportunity to engage in complex, higher-order thinking about the content, practices, and values of the discipline.

Clearly, educators always hope students internalize disciplinary content and modes of thinking, but feminist pedagogy hopes for even more in the development of students’ habits of mind. After a course informed by feminist pedagogy, students have, ideally, developed thinking patterns that carry over into their other courses, their work, and their lives. Specifically, students become keenly aware of how gender affects everything. Like any habit, it’s cultivated during the course by examining how authors, texts, characters, facts, theories, and histories are informed by gender, as well as by race, class, and culture, as part of multiple intersecting power structures. Bricker-Jenkins and Hooyman assert that feminist educators “will not only strive to eliminate systems of oppression and exploitation, but will also affirm the need for diversity by actively reaching out to achieve it” (38), a priority we echo here. Students who have learned in a classroom informed by feminist pedagogy will take with them an awareness of intersectionality or what Shaw and Lee call the “confluence” (62) or flowing together of various identities, and how this confluence shapes our social experiences. This ability to think critically about “subject positions” is a college-level intellectual practice that feminist pedagogy cultivates.

Another habit of mind developed through feminist pedagogy is the recognition that all of the above—the class dynamics and environment, the definition of knowledge and mode of learning, and the awareness of gender and power—instill a sense of responsibility to others beyond oneself and promote engaged and informed citizenship. During the course, students are encouraged to connect generalizations, theories, histories, and fictions to the here and now, to oneself, and to others. Soon, they begin to make these connections on their own, and by the end of the course—if not within the course through consciousness-raising or community projects—they act on these connections. Maralee Mayberry and Margaret N. Rees claim that “at its core, feminist pedagogy is a commitment not only to the development of cooperative, multicultural, and interdisciplinary knowledge that makes learning inviting and meaningful to a diverse population but also to the development of a critical consciousness empowered to apply learning to social action and social transformation” (57). This action and transformation must happen in the ways we think, know, and understand, as well as in the ways we act. Put simply, feminist pedagogy is based on the values of inclusion and embracing multiple perspectives; as a result, the ideal classroom is diverse, and men—of all kinds—are as present, active, and important as women.
Part of how feminist educators help students understand and build knowledge is by having students recognize connections and make new ones. These can be connections among the units of learning, among students, between instructor and students, or between the student and the material. In this way, a feminist pedagogical approach fits in with some of most central principles of liberal education. Bill Cronon’s “‘Only Connect’ . . . The Goals of a Liberal Education” argues that “being an educated person means being able to see connections that allow one to make sense of the world and act within it in creative ways . . . [a] liberal education is about gaining the power and the wisdom, the generosity and the freedom to connect” (78). This connective thinking then becomes a habit of mind that transcends the classroom walls. An important level of connectedness is relating course content to students’ own lives, bringing the abstract, historical, or fictional out of the ivory tower and into their own backyards, thus making the content more meaningful to them. As Sheila Ruth insists, “Today’s young scholars must be encouraged to anchor their work in the world outside the classroom” (xiii). Facilitating such connections is easier in OL classes than most F2F ones, especially if students have made or linked home pages to the course website. Browsing through these home pages can provide a range of possibilities for providing examples, analogies, graphics, and links to relevant websites that somehow connect course content to the specific students in the class. For example, in addition to the frequency of nontraditional, female students in online classes, a recent pattern in our online classes emerges with the numbers of veterans or students currently enlisted in the military, a powerful source for out-of-classroom connections.

To further connect students’ personal experiences to the course content, instructors can easily encourage students to make such connections themselves. These moments can occur in formal assignments or even in low-stakes discussions. One possibility would be to begin an optional discussion that some will respond to but all will read and consider for their unit review; instructors can prompt students to write about the work of literature, scientific discovery, historical moment, social science theory, etc., that has been most meaningful to them. The students who don’t have anything to report may, while reading their classmates’ responses, become eager to find such a connection through the current course. Instructors can then offer their own answer, but only at the end of the unit, so students’ experiences and values drive the conversation. On a smaller but more consistent scale, the weekly or unit reviews can include a prompt that asks students to connect the recent lessons to their own lives.

The “distance” in “distance education” means instructors need to be deliberate about building in opportunities for students to make these connections. Virtual “field trips” to other websites make visiting relevant sites far easier than F2F classes. The possibilities are many: virtual museums, census and other government sites with a wealth of data, living wage calculators, reliable (or even unreliable) news sources, digital libraries, and countless other sites that take course material beyond the classroom can be the focus of assignments that encourage students to apply and, even more, make relevant what they’re learning in the course. Given the feminist pedagogical imperative that gender affects
everything, sending students to a website devoted to gender would accomplish multiple goals at once. Specifically connecting course content to current issues of national or local concern can make content meaningful and immediate to students' lives. Drawing connections between the content of the course and current events—a war, an election, a controversial debate, a national human interest story, all of which can be deepened through web links to news sites—grounds the subject matter in the world outside of the classroom and off the computer screen.

Inviting guest "speakers"—a hallmark of many feminist classrooms because these guests show that the subject matter isn't isolated to the course but instead is part of a larger community—is also easier online. Negotiating schedules and locations is no longer an issue in the online environment. Having a guest write a lecture (or record it as a digital file) to post online is an option, as is emailing some questions and posting the responses online or inviting the speaker to participate in a chat session or a threaded discussion. Given the current availability and affordability of digital audio and video equipment, it's far easier to record and post interviews or conversations with colleagues, community members, or others not in the course. Nancy and Holly used guest facilitation of a small-group discussion of feminist pedagogy itself at the end of Holly's Introduction to Women's Studies course. This technique proved especially effective in making visible principles and practices of feminist pedagogy, not only through the content of the discussion but also through the introduction of a guest facilitator and the change in the use of the technology. (The class hadn't used small-group discussion prior to this unit.) Students were asked to develop a definition of feminist pedagogy, illustrate it with examples from the current course, consider how the course had diverged from feminist pedagogical principles, and explore how the online environment affects feminist and/or traditional pedagogies. It wasn't surprising that many of the small groups immediately cited Nancy's visit as a guest facilitator because it offered a new perspective and illustrated the principle of shared leadership. In this way, the form of the discussion drew attention to and reinforced feminist pedagogy; asking students to discuss and write about it required them to provide an articulate understanding of principles of feminist pedagogy and apply that understanding to present and future learning situations.

Service-learning and action research projects also work in the world of online instruction just as well as in F2F environments. Many women's studies courses, for instance, have a capstone consciousness-raising project in which students choose one of the themes or topics from the course with the ultimate goal of raising public consciousness, especially important in cultivating students' sense of responsibility to others. In the online version, the project can take a variety of shapes: a website, wiki, blog, discussion board, survey, online petition, Facebook or MySpace page, or some other form. In Holly's course, students have produced a wide range of projects—one student conducted original research investigating the percentage of women in management positions in the transnational corporation for which he was a manager, posting the results of his study on a simple webpage; a group of students put together a more
elaborate website documenting the ways that women’s issues manifested the feminist mantra “the personal is political”; two students created an interactive “relationship check-up” discussion board; a group of students created a blog on women warriors throughout history.

Having students apply their learning to social action enacts the notion of praxis (a dialectic between theory and practice) and the values of consciousness-raising or action research, important parts of the learning students do under feminist pedagogy that are sometimes elusive in online courses. Bricker-Jenkins and Hooyman conclude in “Feminist Pedagogy in Education for Social Change,” “As consciousness-raising is at the core of feminist theory and method, it is an essential part of an evolving, often implicit, theory of social change which underpins feminist practice” (39). In the study by Stake and Hoffmann, four outcomes emerged as central to goals of the course identified by the faculty participating in the research and through examination of feminist theory: “creation of participatory classroom communities, validation of personal experience, encouragement of social understanding and activism, and development of critical thinking skills/open-mindedness” (79). As such, a final consciousness-raising project to connect students to and get them active within the virtual community seems natural and necessary, but in the ephemeral, placeless sites of the Internet, this principle may seem paradoxical. In practice, however, the action research projects are extremely effective in guiding students to discover for themselves the course’s relevance to themselves and to others and the need for them to care about it and do something about it.

Conclusions

Such strategies for connecting course content to students’ lives, the here and now, current events, and “the real world” aren’t meant to be just an intellectual activity or an end in itself. Perhaps feminist pedagogy’s highest goal is that these connections will instill in students a sense of responsibility beyond themselves and to the wider communities, and that this sense of responsibility or connectedness will lead to social action, activism, and engaged citizenship. The Association of American Colleges and Universities’ “Statement on Liberal Learning” reminds us that “Liberal learning is not confined to particular fields of study. What matters in liberal education is substantial content, rigorous methodology and an active engagement with the societal, ethical, and practical implications of our learning” (AACU). Virtually any university-level course requires that we as teachers find pedagogical ways to make those “societal, ethical, and practical implications” as central to the course as the intellectual work itself. We argue that the virtual environment holds great potential for such implications, especially when negotiated by feminist pedagogy.

Online teaching and learning are becoming part of the fabric of the mainstream public and private university system. As such, more and more feminist teachers are feeling the pressure to teach online and hybrid courses or even to integrate course management software into their F2F classes. The strategies we’ve described above illustrate just a few of the many ways we can work “to overcome the estrangement and alienation that” bell hooks identified as “so much the
norm of the contemporary university.” We share hooks’s hope that feminist education can bring about such change, even to the extent that any course can become virtually feminist. Rather than insisting on the incompatibility of feminist pedagogy with the cyber-classroom, we believe it is critical to explore the ways that technology can not only accommodate feminist teaching strategies but may be in other ways more compatible with some of the student-centered, collaborative, democratized, and action-oriented approaches that are characteristic of feminist teaching.

NOTES

1. There is ample scholarship defining feminist pedagogy. Carolyn Shrewsbury, Jayne E. Stake and Frances L. Hoffmann, Rosemarie Tong, Jeannie Ludlow, bell hooks, Maralee Mayberry and Margaret N. Rees, and many others have developed a scholarly foundation for a philosophy of teaching informed by feminist theories and values. Our discussion here brings together and builds on their groundwork and expands it into the online environment, a neglected area in the research. Although there is some work on feminist pedagogy and the hybrid use of online learning (Pramaggiore, Whitehouse) and more on feminist pedagogy in distance education courses (Rose, Hopkins), there is a gap when it comes to fully online courses, even though this mode of education is becoming more and more widespread.

2. While the term “virtually feminist” points to the use of feminist pedagogy in an online environment, we also acknowledge that the term alludes to the difficulty of achieving a 100 percent feminist environment online where some issues of authority are particularly difficult to negotiate. However, the same could also be said for the face-to-face classroom, so perhaps all feminist classrooms are in fact “virtually feminist” in this sense. We believe that expecting a feminist classroom to include no traditional or nonfeminist pedagogy emerges from black-and-white thinking and a false dichotomy of feminist vs. traditional pedagogy. Teaching that’s not specifically feminist isn’t necessarily patriarchal, antifeminist, androcentric, or masculist. Some of it is, certainly, but not all of it.

3. Often those online discussions aren’t really discussions at all but instead boards where individual assignments are sent into the apparent void: the instructor’s grade book.

4. There is one important exception to this praise for online technology: the gains in the inclusion of students who wouldn’t otherwise participate or even enroll in classes do not extend to and in fact can exclude blind or visually impaired students, who are “cut off from” the increasingly visual nature of the web (Kiser 30), though increasingly there is software to help visually-impaired students participate in online courses. Adjustments include special formatting, “robust image captions, and minimal use of tables and special formatting to accommodate screen readers” (Hensch).

5. The American Association of University Women’s 2001 report The Third Shift: Women Learning Online has explored in-depth the implications of this added responsibility for women, playing on sociologist Arlie Hochschild’s notion of the “second shift,” or the added responsibility of housework to working women’s lives. The availability of distance learning, especially the flexibility of online education, means increased opportunity and social mobility for those female populations who may lack other access to higher education; at the same time, as the AAUW report documents the scope of women and online learning, it recognizes the challenges of adding new responsibilities to women’s already crowded agendas (Kramarae).

6. Elizabeth F. Barkley, K. Patricia Cross, and Claire Howell Major clarify the differences between cooperative and collaborative learning: although they both emerged in response to too much competition in the classroom, cooperative learning is typically used in K-12 settings when students work together in harmony to find the right answer or solution, which the teacher knows ahead of time, whereas collaborative learning is found in universities when students and the teacher work together to find an answer,
explanation, or interpretation in a process that may involve dissent or disagreement (5–7). Additionally, they cite a report by D. W. Johnson, R. T. Johnson, and K. A. Smith further distinguishing “individualistic learning” in which “students focus only on improving their own achievement and ignore as irrelevant the efforts of others” (qtd. in Barkley, Cross, and Major 17).

7. Grant Wiggins and Jay McTighe’s Understanding by Design is helpful in its careful unpacking of the deep learning we consider so essential to feminist pedagogy. Chapter Four, “The Six Facets of Understanding,” effectively analyzes its elements or “facets.” In the feminist classroom, what Wiggins and McTighe call perspective, empathy, and self-knowledge are among the most important ways of knowing, but certainly we can see strong cases being made for the other facets as well.

8. Apparently, that’s not what students are looking for either. Aside from technology problems, this model is one reason why online courses have been plagued by high attrition rates, typically higher in distance education courses than they are in “live” classes (Moody; Morgan and Tam). Vicky Phillips, founder of a consulting agency for distance educators, puts online attrition at 35 percent, compared with the average rate of 20 percent for students traditionally enrolled (qtd. in Annetta). With approximately 8 percent (and rising) of students pursuing a college degree through online education, it seems especially important that feminist teacher-scholars learn to teach effectively (and teach students to learn effectively) in these rapidly multiplying cyber-classrooms (Carnevale, “Distance” A33).

9. Freire’s metaphor of a bank, while perhaps the best known, isn’t alone in critiquing a model of education that fails to integrate principles of feminism. However, Freire’s liberation pedagogy must be distinguished from feminist pedagogy. Because both are concerned with uneven power structures in the classroom, his work is invoked in discussions of feminist pedagogy, but Freire’s focus is on class dynamics, not gender, so connecting his work to feminist pedagogy is helpful, but limited (Tong 184).

10. We are indebted to Joel Friederich for introducing us to this wonderful strategy.

11. We are not implying that placing discussion, student voice, and multiple perspectives at the center of an online environment always produces an enlightened tolerance for difference and difficulty. Discussions of Suzanne Pharr’s trenchant essay “Homophobia: A Weapon of Sexism” often produce an enlightened understanding of the ways that gay and lesbian-baiting serve to reinforce gender norms; however, some students who bring a strong ideological—typically religious—framework to the class struggle to gain footing in these discussions. For example, one student couldn’t even grapple with the concept of homophobia as it intersected with sexism, nor could he intellectually engage with the topic or move past his understanding of gays and lesbians as sinners. His discussion contributions then made it difficult for students (and for the instructor) to find ways around his hateful rhetoric or to parlay it into a teaching and learning moment. Certainly, this was not an ideal discussion situation, but it was an extreme that illustrates that online discussions aren’t a simple panacea. In another case, a student with a diagnosed and medicated mental illness could not participate respectfully in discussion because of his tendency to personalize comments and become combative with other students, or to “flame” in online parlance; as a result, only an extended private email discussion and threats of charges of nonacademic misconduct for his disruptive behavior—and removal of his posting privileges to the course discussion board—solved the issue.

12. To illustrate, one student wrote at the end of a literature assignment, “Not only do my personal experiences change the way I view different aspects of a story, but the experiences of my classmates shape their perspectives as well. When they define their point of view, it offers me the opportunity to review the story again from their position, allowing me to learn even more!” and another wrote, “A few interesting aspects of the story that I missed while reading but noticed while reading everyone’s excellent interpretations of the story really helped me in my understanding.” Students tie these differences in interpretation to their particular experiences, validating the role of the
students’ lives but carrying it to a somewhat simplistic point, since the text is at least as significant as the students’ personal experiences in interpretation.

13. Nancy has used this assignment for years, and some students write some wonderful responses, following up with a discussion about the possible roles of literature in our busy lives. At the end of the semester, she then offers an annotated list of suggestions for further reading that might connect to a variety of experiences.

14. For example, *Women’s Voices, Feminist Visions*, by Susan Shaw and Janet Lee and *Women Across Cultures* by Shawn Meghan Burn are two introductory readers that feature “Ideas for Activism” and “Action Opportunities” for students to pursue based on each chapter.

15. We recognize that this term is problematic, especially in women’s studies courses where the lines between the course content and the community/nation/world are blurred as that larger community becomes the center of inquiry and action in the course.

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