



# *Lessons From a Gender Studies Classroom*

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**A**t the start of each new semester, the Gender Studies class begins by reading Audre Lorde's essay, "The Master's Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master's House" (1979). The now famous speech Lorde gave at the Second Sex Conference calling out discriminatory practices of feminist scholars is more than a rebuke of White western feminism. Her essay is a blueprint for how to build true solidarity and community through a recognition and understanding of difference. It is also a call for self-examination and accountability as a critical step in that process. As Lorde notes in the conclusion to her essay, "Racism and homophobia are real conditions of all our lives in this place and time. I urge each one of us here to reach down into that deep place of knowledge inside herself and touch that terror and loathing of any difference that lives there. See whose face it wears. Then the personal as the political can begin to illuminate all our choices."<sup>1</sup>

Our schools and our classrooms are indeed a series of choices. What we teach, how we teach, and, in independent schools, even whom we teach are choices made every day. This article is not so much an advertisement for making the choice to teach gender studies<sup>2</sup> in our schools (though I do believe it creates a unique and important space in our communities to engage the personal and political), rather, I hope it demonstrates how we benefit when we make the choice for *all* our classes to be feminist spaces.

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1. Lorde, Audre. "The Master's Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master's House" From *Sister Outsider*, The Crossing Press Feminist Series (1984).

2. My course is titled "Interdisciplinary Introduction to Women's and Gender Studies," but it falls under a wider umbrella of High School Feminism. On this topic I follow Ileana Jiménez, teacher at the Little Red School House and author of the blog Feminist Teacher (<https://feministteacher.com/>)



So, what are feminist classrooms and how do we create them? For me, feminist vision is rooted in the transformative work of generations of Black, queer, and other feminists of color. Through experience, scholarship and activism, they have used their vantage point on the margins to clearly delineate how markers of identity such as race, class, gender, and sexual orientation function not only as sites of oppression, but also as sites of resistance and change. A feminist classroom based on this vision inherently requires a deep understanding of historical systems of oppression and their continued impact on the present. It is also an environment that, at its core, focuses on examining power dynamics and creating more just and equitable relationships both at individual and structural levels. This does not mean that every teacher needs to teach history or feminism explicitly, but it does mean that every teacher must be aware that our schools and classrooms are not ahistorical, apolitical<sup>3</sup>, or acultural.

Many of our students already know this. A year ago my students completed an assignment modeled after the document “What Sistas Want, What Sistas Believe: Black Feminist Twelve Point Plan.”<sup>4</sup> Published by the Black Feminist Working Group in 2011<sup>5</sup>, the

document assessed and outlined the most pressing needs not only for Black women, but also for the liberation of the Black community. After reading and discussing the document, 17 students in Gender Studies each crafted their own list, considering what would be necessary to create a just and equitable education for all students at the school. Students then shared their lists to look for overlap. Collectively, the students decided on six main points that reflect a clear understanding of power dynamics, the choices we make or don’t make in our schools, and the impact this has on their sense of safety, community, and well-being.

### *6-point plan*<sup>6</sup>

#### **1. We want our voices to be heard.**

When we tell you our experiences, actually listen. Please do not disregard our experience by saying “we already are diverse, so that can’t be true.”

#### **2. Hold everyone in the community accountable.**

Everyone should be held accountable for their actions, regardless of being a student, teacher, staff member, or administrator.

3. The term “political” should not be confused here with “partisan.” *Partisan* signifies adhering to, supporting or lifting up a specific political party, ideology or faction. I use *political* here to refer to structural power dynamics and how those play out institutionally, symbolically and individually in our classrooms and schools. Those power dynamics (systems of oppression such as racism, sexism, and homophobia) cut across political parties and institutions.

4. Black Feminist Working Group, 2011. Reprinted with permission of the Black Feminist Working Group (Iresha Picot, Tiamba Wilkerson, Nuala Cabral, Ladi Sasha Jones, Darasia Shelby, Kim Murray). In *Ain't Gonna Let Nobody Turn Me Around: Forty Years of Movement Building with Barbara Smith*. Eds. Alethia Jones and Virginia Eubanks. (SUNY, Albany: 2014), 270-271.

5. Their work was inspired by the Combahee River Collective Statement and the Black Panther Party for Self Defense.

6. Created collectively by Sidwell Friends School WGS Class of Spring 2018

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### **3. We want to feel represented in the curriculum.**

There should be more inclusive classes for students of color, the LGBTQ+, and other minority students including religious minorities in our community (and not just electives).

### **4. We want more teachers of different backgrounds including race, class, ethnicity, nationality, religion, and sexual orientation.**

Diversity should not just be in the student body and curriculum, but also in the teachers who teach us every day.

### **5. We want to feel safe to express our experiences with the community.**

Our community is supposed to be a safe space, but many people don't feel comfortable enough to share their true experiences due to fear of backlash and ridicule from not just their peers, but also adults.

### **6. Affinity groups should not be the fall back for students.**

Students should not be forced to feel that affinity groups are the only safe space for them to be themselves. Our school can't be for some and not for others.

One year later, students contributing to this article<sup>7</sup> reiterate several specific needs outlined in the six-point plan. Representation, accountability and voice all appear as prominent themes, but so do calls for radical love and empathy. In the stories that follow, we see what happens when students experience both windows and mirrors in their classes, when we tell the truth about the past, when students feel responsible for creating class content rather than just receiving it, and when community norms are not only established, but also collectively upheld.

Taken together, these personal narratives offer important lessons and provide a glimpse into what I get to see every day. It is often messy and always imperfect, but the main lesson I have learned from the gender studies classroom is that when we open spaces for students to bring their whole selves, they show up not just for themselves, but for others as well.

### *Lesson #1: Give Students Mirrors* **Mikala Jones, SFS '18**

Growing up as a Black biracial woman in predominantly white spaces, I often felt isolated from my peers. I was unsure of myself and where I belonged because I let

7. I did not ask the students who co-authored this article to write on a specific, pre-determined topic. Rather, they volunteered to write on what they wanted to write about – what resonated with them, what they found most salient. For me, this is an exercise of feminist pedagogy in and of itself, and how we as educators can use feminist ethic in any setting or task. It does not mean that my voice as a teacher is absent or that I have wholly removed myself from the process or power dynamics (since, in the end, I did prompt, piece together and edit the article). Nevertheless, the voices and ideas present in this article are the students', and I have shaped how I chose to write based on their ideas, rather than the other way around.



my peers define who I was. In their eyes, I was “an oreo” or “black, but not *really* black.” I have spent the past few years unlearning these internalized notions of myself by creating and seeking spaces that approach identity with nuance and care. I can honestly say that taking an introductory women’s and gender studies class my senior year of high school is one of the best steps I took towards unlearning such internalizations. For the first time ever, I was part of an academic community that not only saw who I was, but respected and centered experiences like mine. This was made especially clear while reading Chicana feminist and queer theorist Gloria Anzaldúa’s “*La conciencia de la mestiza/Towards a new consciousness*” from her book, *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza*. In the article, she rejects a solely dualistic way of thinking, and instead, asks readers to embrace the ambiguity of bicultural and biracial identities. While Anzaldúa’s was one of the more challenging articles we read that semester because of style and structure, it felt liberating to work through my confusion in a supportive environment.

Discussions about identity are often vulnerable places for students and teachers, which is why it is necessary to establish and continually evaluate the community norms created by each new class. Additionally, it is so important that students can see themselves in the material and authorship *and* process the information in a variety of mediums. Our

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class not only exposed me to a diversity of authors and ideas, it also allowed me to consider and express my ideas through writing journal entries, creating videos, and leading class discussions. This was integral to being able to bring my whole self to the table. It let me showcase different parts of myself and it let those differences not be seen as deficits in the academic classroom, but as strengths and assets. In the words of Anzaldúa, I learned that, “I am an act of kneading of uniting and joining that not only has produced both a creature of darkness and creature of light, but also a creature that questions the definitions of light and dark and gives them new meanings.”<sup>8</sup>

### ***Lesson #2: Give Students Windows*** **Tala Anderson, SFS '18**

I arrived in Women and Gender Studies (WGS) class with a passion for feminism but little formal background knowledge on the subject. From the moment I set foot in the

8. Anzaldúa, Gloria, *Borderlands: the new mestiza = La frontera* (San Francisco: Spinsters/Aunt Lute, 1987).

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classroom, I was enveloped in a cascade of new information. There was Kimberlé Crenshaw's definition of intersectionality; bell hooks' writing on the purpose of feminism; Audre Lorde's ideas about the kinds of tools required to achieve those goals; historical context for understanding the feminist "waves;" and a thick stack of articles about topics ranging from the relationship between homophobia and sexism, to workplace dynamics for men of color, to the role of systems of oppression in children's media.

WGS simultaneously gave me words to describe my experiences, as well as new experiences to describe. It showed me that my experiences were layered into a larger system of experiences both similar to and different from my own. And it opened my eyes not only to the privilege I had, but to the history of that privilege and what its future implications could be depending on what I chose to do with it. Before WGS, my understanding of feminism was an idea more than an action. WGS showed me how to see feminism as action grounded tangibly in experience, reality, and history.

Towards the end of the semester, a classmate and I did a project in which we designed and led an hour-long workshop for students and faculty about the interplay of racism, sexism, and homophobia in children's media—specifically, Disney movies. The workshop involved reflecting on my own experiences, listening to other people's narratives and perspectives, and examining

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related theoretical and empirical writing to paint a detailed image of a real-world issue. It also involved stepping outside of my comfort zone to take what I had learned and share that with others, with the goal of creating new tools to reflect and drive change.

WGS pushed me to think critically about systems of oppression; to listen to and consider multiple perspectives thoroughly and empathetically; to value experience, both my own and others'; and to get uncomfortable for the sake of creating change. And more than a specific fact or concept, those are the lessons that have stuck with me. Having windows into the lives and stories of other people is key to understanding both oppression and privilege. Equally important is learning to place those stories within a larger historical narrative and a recognition of the systems that shape people's experiences as well as the various ways that people creatively navigate, challenge, and shape the system in return. In this way, the purpose of the window is not voyeurism and the result is not pity, guilt, or complacency. Instead, the windows in my class taught me the importance



of empathy, solidarity, and the responsibility I have, especially from a position of privilege, to think about the world and my place in helping transform it so we *all* can be free.

### *Lesson #3: Tell Hard Truths*

**Ariana Warden, SFS '19**

As a White woman, I saw myself represented when I learned about the first and second waves of the women's movement in U.S. History. Elizabeth Cady Stanton, Susan B. Anthony, Betty Friedan—these were the “heroes” I read about. Women like Sojourner Truth, Ida B. Wells-Barnett, Mary Church Terrell—women of color who contributed just as much to the women's movement as their white counterparts—were given cursory treatment at best. Moreover, discussion of how White women like Anthony openly discriminated against Black women, particularly as tensions rose

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over the 13th, 14th, and 15th amendments, was glossed over or ignored altogether.

In feminist movement today, race and class continue to be overlooked. A perfect example is the #MeToo movement. Tarana Burke launched the Me Too campaign in 2007 to help impoverished young Black and Native American women cope with sexual assault. But the movement only reached public consciousness in 2017 after white Hollywood actresses co-opted the movement. Even as Burke's story began to be told, the women of color Burke fought to give a voice to remained marginalized and relatively invisible, prompting Burke to comment in a 2018 interview: “We can't wait for white folks to decide that our trauma is worth centering on... we have to be proactive, unfortunately without the benefit of massive exposure. That's our reality, but it always has been.”<sup>9</sup>

Like feminist leaders, teachers must learn to address differences in race, class, sexual orientation, and other important markers of identity. Only then will they achieve outcomes that will benefit all students. They can start by providing visibility and giving credit where it is due. As a White woman still figuring out how to navigate not only a racist past, but also present, it can sometimes be hard to know how to avoid the mistakes of my feminist mothers and grandmothers. I definitely don't have all the answers, but acknowledging those mistakes, embracing the

9. <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/10/20/us/me-too-movement-tarana-burke.html>

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tensions, and lifting up women like Truth, Terrell, and Burke who are to thank for much of the progress that occurred, seems like a good place to start.

#### *Lesson #4: Let Students Lead* Jahari Shelton, SFS '19

As is consistent with my spiritual journey, I have spent Winter Break reflecting. In my sacred time, I have noticed that some of the most salient moments in my life happened in 2018 over the weeks I spent in the Women's and Gender Studies seminar. Gender Studies, as it is affectionately called at our institution, exists to guide young people through the history and context of sexuality, gender, and the intersecting social constructs that shape our lives and affect our livelihood on a daily basis. That is probably what I value most about the moments I've shared with others in the group: the respect

and integrity, honoring the experiences of those different from ourselves as well as those not represented by the array of faces sitting in the chairs. But that does not mean it came easy. As an African-American male who is heterosexual, religious, and from a working-class family, I always feel responsible for honoring each part of my identity, especially those that subject me to an oppressed class. And I particularly worried about entering a space like Gender Studies where I assumed we would focus on gender rather than race and class. Fortunately, bell hooks, Audre Lorde, Patricia Hill Collins, Kimberlé Crenshaw, the Combahee River Collective, and especially Brittany Cooper and the Crunk Feminist Collective proved me wrong. Getting to lead class on essays from the Crunk Feminist Collective (CFC) is still the topic and moment from class I hold closest to my heart.

For my seminar lead on Hip-Hop Feminism, my peers and I read three articles from *The Crunk Feminist Collection*<sup>10</sup>: "Do We Need A Body Count to Count?," "My Brother's Keeper and the Co-optation of Intersectionality," and "Disrespectability Politics: On Jay Z's Bitch, Beyonce's 'Fly' Ass, and Black Girl Blue." Within the seminar itself, we explored hip-hop feminism as a discursive space where Black women have written themselves into existence, using their own language on their own terms. We covered violence against Black women, images of Black women in

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10. Cooper, Brittney C., Susana M. Morris, and Robin M. Boylorn, *The Crunk Feminist Collection* (New York: Feminist Press, 2017).



music and culture, and Black feminist theory. As someone who has grown up around hip-hop music and culture, I already felt deeply invested in and protective of the genre. Hip-hop feminism added an entirely new layer and helped me appreciate the intersection of music, culture, and Black feminism. But it felt extremely important for me to have control over the discussion of my culture, especially in the elite, white normative environment of the private school classroom. It was important to me to debunk myths and avoid stereotypes of Black men while still elevating the voices and experiences of Black women. It was also important, with my new understanding, to help create a space where Black women gained visibility in conversations about feminism to deconstruct white normativity in mainstream feminist discourse. Being given the opportunity to create this space in my class reminded me that it is not only possible, but also vital that our classrooms embrace the culture of young people not in a way that is paternalistic, but in a way that makes them confident in knowing they have the space to authentically show up for themselves and others like them.

### *Lesson #5: Create Class Guidelines Together and Uphold Them*

**Serena Baldick Martinez, SFS '18**

My senior year Women and Gender Studies elective was the personification of an unlikely crew, one that nobody expected to become close. Yet, that class of 17 was the

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closest I've ever felt to my classmates and to the academic space. In any learning space, a closer community creates a more intriguing and vibrant learning environment, and there is no closer community than one that acknowledges everyone's differences and builds upon such uniqueness.

The first day of class we spent brainstorming community norms that we could all agree upon. These norms were meant to make our classroom not only productive, but also a place where everyone felt valued so that we could each maximize our own potential and help others do the same. Now the thing about community norms is that they don't fix problems or power dynamics in the classroom completely. I have been in plenty of communities where we set up community norms and they were promptly forgotten or broken. Community norms set the space, but they are only as good as our ability to maintain them.

My favorite day of class was actually the day that our community norms crashed and burned; then we rebuilt them together. We

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were discussing why LGBTQIA+ people felt unsafe in the feminist space and a cisgender straight white girl spoke up: “I know we should be incorporating all women, but I think it is better to let separate movements —#BlackLivesMatter, immigrants’ rights, etc. —fight for themselves because we don’t always have time to support all groups. People should just prioritize identifiers that are close to them.” Immediately I felt my close friends on either side of me, one biracial and the other gay, tense up. I recognized their feelings as I also sat with clenched fists, feeling my own identity suddenly tossed into a game of dissection that I didn’t want to play. By suggesting the prioritization of singular identities, the student had excluded my friends and me. How would I choose between my being a woman or being queer or being Filipina-American? Without realizing it, she had minimized and excluded the people in the class who did not fit neatly into boxes, who were not cis straight white women. But then something happened. My teacher stopped the class and called out the comment: “I know you have good intentions, but that statement invalidates the experiences of some people in this room and outside of it. Let’s unpack it...”

A conversation opened up that my teacher started, but then asked if anyone else wanted to speak. It opened a way for us to ensure

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everyone felt seen, heard, and accepted in the space, including the girl who had made the initial comment. Although my teacher called out the comment, she called in the student.<sup>11</sup> She didn’t try to shame or embarrass her, and she openly acknowledged that making mistakes is not only normal, but actually expected since part of the reason privilege and oppressive systems work so well is because we are taught not to see them. By the end of the conversation, we all felt safe to make mistakes and to trust that our peers and our teacher would hold us accountable, but also would leave room for us to re-enter the conversation and try again. It is important to distinguish between safety and comfort because throughout much of that conversation, we were all uncomfortable. But that discomfort was part of the learning curve. As stated in our community norms, we needed to “lean into discomfort”

11. For a good discussion of calling out vs. calling in, see <https://www.tolerance.org/magazine/spring-2019/speaking-up-without-tearing-down?fbclid=IwAR0iNiOER9Ma6786tRL7hu8BsGCVtjBN9Cd5asNFqS01KdRP2lnQw8QYCoM>



to come out stronger. While community norms or guidelines inspire trust and are important in every classroom, they are often only sustainable when accompanied by fair and consistent methods of accountability.

### *In Conclusion*

There is radical potential in a feminist classroom. Putting students, teachers, staff, and administrators from different backgrounds into a school might make it diverse, but it does not ensure an equitable education nor a beneficial experience for everyone at the school. Saying that we love our students does

not necessarily make our classrooms places where all students can successfully develop and thrive. I can say I love my students but show them something very different every day in the way I structure and manage my class. Feminist classrooms are not special because they are not fraught with difficult relationships and power dynamics rooted in the same history and dominant culture that permeates our country. Feminist classrooms are special because they refuse to ignore those dynamics; examining, questioning, and working to change the oppressive systems that alienate or create obstacles for some students while validating others is part of everyday practice. Tearing down old structures, or the “master’s house” as Audre Lorde calls it, is urgent and difficult work. Envisioning a new “house” built with different tools such as joy, creativity, mutuality, respect, and empathy is even harder. This is a huge responsibility when the pressure on teachers already feels overwhelming. But we are not alone. The students are ready to build the house with us. We just have to let them. ●

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