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## **Up Close and Personal: Feminist Pedagogy in the Classroom**

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### Abstract

This commentary reflects on 20+ years as marketing academics committed to a feminist, critical approach to the marketing curriculum. Feminist pedagogy focuses on critiquing the wider, macro-structural realities that impact on gender inequality. A key aim is to empower students to consider how society might be differently structured. We also advocate a multiple perspectives approach, whereby there are no absolutes but rather contexts, thus nudging students to move beyond a micro-managerial mindset, and problematising many of the assumptions embedded in marketing. This includes understanding that identify positions shape social worlds and consumption patterns. Finally we identify three tools for implementing a feminist pedagogy: subjective personal introspection (SPI), collaborative and action learning and a low-hierarchy learning environment.

### Keywords

Feminist pedagogy, critical marketing, marketing curriculum, eco-feminism, activist feminist pedagogy

How can we be more critical in the marketing classroom? This question continues to preoccupy us after 20+ years, having first considered it in an article with our colleague Miriam Catterall who is now retired (Catterall, Maclaran and Stevens, 1999, 2002). Then we put forward the case for critical reflection in our teaching and looked at some of the potential ways this could be achieved. We highlighted how a managerialist focus on decision-making within organisations excludes the wider moral, political and social contexts of marketing actions. Unfortunately, as we look around at current module contents on marketing courses, we do not seem to have come very far in terms of embedding critique within the mainstream marketing curriculum.

Encouragingly though – as this special issue evidences – there is hope for the future with a much wider critical community that embraces not only critical marketing studies, but also social marketing, macromarketing, consumer culture theory (CCT), gender in marketing (GENMAC) and transformative consumer research (TCR). However, institutional pressures and large student numbers, especially on marketing courses, often militate against more innovative ways of engaging students in critique. So, in this short commentary we are going to draw on feminist pedagogy that we have absorbed since our interest in the intersection of feminism and marketing. This has enabled us to build new ways of introducing critical reflection into our courses. In order to frame our commentary, we go back to the differences we highlighted between a traditional and a critical curriculum, differences we believe still hold good today – see Table 1.

Traditional Curriculum	Critical Curriculum
Marketing as a management function within the firm	Managers do marketing in a wider political, cultural, and societal context
Marketing studied from a single perspective; marketing managers in companies	Marketing studied from multiple perspectives; e.g. managers, consumers, citizens
Marketing concept and techniques need to be learned	Marketing concept and techniques need to be made problematic
Marketing literature is the source of marketing knowledge	Interdisciplinary perspectives and students' experiences are sources of knowledge

**Table 1: Comparison of emphases in a traditional and a critical curriculum (Catterall, Maclaran and Stevens, 1999)**

We will use these markers of a critical curriculum to discuss how feminist perspectives can help deepen analyses of these elements. Then we will outline practical ways of implementing feminist pedagogical principles even when faced with large classes and, in doing so, draw on a favourite technique of ours for generating new insights, namely subjective personal introspection.

### **The Wider Context**

Just as there are multiple feminisms, there are also multiple feminist pedagogies (Briskin, 2015). However, there is a common thread that runs through all of them: feminist pedagogy calls for an awareness of macro-structural realities of gender inequalities. Whilst feminist pedagogy has some similarities with critical or emancipatory pedagogies, it emerged to draw attention to women's lives and to challenge androcentric theories and practices (Llewellyn & Llewellyn 2015; Nicholas & Baroud 2015).

So it follows, from a feminist standpoint, that education should be seen as an empowerment method for students, as well as leading to social change (Manicom, 1992). In practice, this means a feminist pedagogical approach moves marketing beyond its management function to consider how marketing actions are shaped by, and impact on, wider political, cultural and societal contexts. The emphasis is on transformation because feminist critique challenges

traditional ways of knowing, not just to expose gender inequities, but also to question taken-for-granted power relations. This questioning and embedding of marketing actions within wider contexts is really important to establish better credibility for marketing as a discipline. So, for example, when it comes to discussing marketing's role in environmental destruction, we regularly use ecofeminist perspectives to lead class discussions and challenge the Dominant Social Paradigm (DSP). Comprising the values, beliefs, norms and institutions that give meaning to our social and political worlds, the DSP perpetuates dualistic thinking that humans are superior to the rest of nature. Under this logic, nature and the environment become free resources to be used in the service of humans. This masculinised position is interrogated by ecofeminists who espouse an ecocentric (as opposed to an androcentric) worldview, which recognises the inter-connectedness of all the Earth's living and non-living systems.

This is just an instance of one topical debate that we like to raise but there are many other feminist themes that we use to encourage students to voice their opinions, especially around ethical consumption and how middle-class consumers in the Global North can impose their values on producers in the Global South that may negatively affect the life worlds of women there.

### **Multiple Perspectives**

The introduction of such topics illustrates to students the importance of studying marketing from different lenses of experiences. The micro-managerial perspective that continues to dominate in marketing is one where individualism and personal gain are valorised at the expense of a wider understanding of the environment in which we live and work. Students who have embarked on a marketing or management degree understand the dominant narrative that prevails, and whilst many welcome the opportunity to engage in social enterprises or charity or service projects, they are uncomfortable with a pedagogy that critiques the system (Briskin 2015). Therefore there is a need to tread softly but steadily in nudging students to think outside themselves to consider the spaces and micro-spaces they occupy, a key aspect of an activist feminist pedagogy (Briskin 2015). This approach can also inspire them to make changes in their own communities, for example whereby students fully embrace their own

experiences to enable them to better understand privilege, context, agency and options – and hence learn to be agentic.

Taking this approach, a feminist pedagogy helps students to move beyond managerial perspectives and understand the life worlds of consumers, as well as considering the implications of marketing activities on their own and society's welfare. Sometimes too, it is not appropriate to frame everything in marketing terms and so in our classes we try to problematise the word "consumer", discussing with students when is it more desirable to be conceptualised as a citizen, highlighting deficiencies regarding the marketisation of education, health and other public services. As such, we try to illustrate how neoliberalism values social relations only in economic terms and that the application of market principles may not always be the best way to distribute social good (Blackmore, 2019).

### **Critiquing Marketing Concepts and Techniques**

Using multiple perspectives, as already discussed, makes problematic marketing concepts and techniques and emphasises the ideological underpinnings of much marketing knowledge. A feminist lens places importance on revealing knowledge to be a product of prevailing social, cultural and historical conditions. In these ways, we illustrate that marketing management is neither neutral nor apolitical and try to encourage critical reflection. One particular discussion topic that we find generates plenty of debate is the silences in marketing's history and the past absence of women's voices, except as consumers. To this end, we introduce the pioneering contributions of female home economists in the early half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, showing how this was deemed a suitable discipline for women at the time and how they played significant roles in diffusing consumer culture, particularly in relation to household technologies. Similarly, for marketing communications classes, we highlight the current lack of representation of women in advertising at executive level, but particularly in relation to women of colour. We support this with Judy Foster Davis's great book entitled, *Pioneering African-American Women in the Advertising Business: Biographies of MAD Black Women*, which documents the successes of black women in making major contributions to the US advertising industry.

### **Students' Experiences as Sources of Knowledge**

Feminists believe that to understand the complexities of the world and the forces that dominate it we need to begin with ourselves. Personal experience and subjectivity have been key tenets of feminist pedagogy since it emerged in the 1980s (McCusker 2017). One of the goals of feminist pedagogy from the outset was “to liberate the tortured voice” (Juncker 1988, in [McCusker 2017, p. 453](#)). The point of this perspective in teaching is that it encourages students to understand that politics is not something ‘out there’ but a force that directly impacts on their own (gendered) lives, a concept encapsulated in the well-known feminist phrase that the personal is political: the personal experiences of women are rooted in their political situation and gender inequality. However, in recognition that we are not running courses exclusively with women and that business and management classes contain students of diverse genders, we find it important to emphasise that the principles of feminist pedagogy help us better understand ourselves and the world around us. To this end, we introduce the concept of multiple femininities, masculinities and non-binary genders, to show how these identity positions shape our social worlds and consumption patterns. We find this enables more students to relate to the pedagogical principles we are using.

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At the same time, we emphasise how feminist pedagogy calls for action projects that connect theory with practice and reflection. Whilst praxis is at the heart of feminist pedagogy, it is only through reflection that we can begin to connect theory and practice. And it is only by understanding ourselves that we can begin to step outside an individualist mindset to learn respect for others. In effect, students can then be change agents and political actors, engaged with the issues outside of themselves, and thus be less passive and accepting of the status quo. As such, an ‘activist feminist pedagogy’ can challenge and contest the instrumental values internalised by many students (Briskin 2015). To put it another way, when students analyse themselves they can then view the world outside of their own one as more nuanced, and this gives them a wider understanding of the macro forces that enable and inform resistance.

### **Feminist Pedagogical Tools**

Ultimately, then, feminism is a “politic of transformation” (Briskin & Coulter 2015, p. 249). Feminist pedagogy seeks to create a teaching and learning environment that is not a “chilly climate” ([Hall & Sandler 1982, p. 3](#)) where some voices are silenced, but one that

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acknowledges inequalities, political struggles, multiple viewpoints, and the liberatory potential of education, as well as its wider, political impact beyond the University walls.

Overall, there are three key elements permeating feminist pedagogy: 1) a focus on lived experiences; 2) encouraging collaborative forms of learning; and 3) minimising hierarchical relations in the classroom by reconfiguring the teacher/pupil authoritarian model of didactic learning. So, moving beyond seminar discussions and lecture formats, what are the realistic ways of putting these elements into practice when we are faced with large (200+ often) business school classes that are ethnically diverse and multi-gendered? We go on to discuss two that we have found to work in practice with feminist pedagogy: subjective personal introspection and collaborative learning projects. Of course, the two can also be used together with students undertaking subjective personal introspections (SPIs) to gather their own reflections and then discuss these with their peers. However, in large classes this can be problematic, and students are often reluctant to share with others who they do not know well and with whom they don't feel confident.

### *Subjective Personal Introspection*

Subjective Personal Introspection advocates a deep-dive into ourselves. The SPI method, first introduced by Holbrook (1995) enables us to gain deeper insights into our experiences and motivations (Gould, 1995, Holbrook, 1995). The process enables us to describe our feelings, sensations, behaviors and experiences in a personal, reflective manner. Through this, we are better able to understand how we are shaped by that world. A key aspect of this process is that in acquiring a deeper sense of one's own positionality, it may invoke cognitive dissonance – a stepping back from oneself to appreciate wider implications, contexts and interests (Briskin, 2015). This approach also sits well with increasing interest in and awareness of intersectionality. In considering our own experiences, situatedness, privileges, and positionality in the world, we are better able to understand that 'others' may have very different perspectives from us. We therefore prompt students to consider their own cultural backgrounds and think of how the various axes of power from an intersectional perspective - gender, race, class, sexual orientation, physical ability, and so forth – affect them. In turn, as part of the SPI process, we ask them to then reflect on how these intersections affect their



marketing decisions, the brands they love or hate and their preferred consumption choices. We have each incorporated SPI into our classroom teaching in several ways: as preparation on a topic for seminar discussion; as a form of empirical research to then analyse in relation to specific marketing and consumer behaviour theories for an assignment; and as an auto-ethnographic method where the subject of analysis is oneself. Essentially, we ask students to consider a personal consumption experience and write a SPI on it, then analyse it using the literature to better understand and interpret those consumption experiences. In academia we are trained to focus extrospectively. So students focus on grades, competition with peers, placement opportunities, job opportunities. The SPI approach advocates that knowledge and understanding begins with ourselves. Gould (2006) argues that we can adopt a watcher self perspective – i.e. we look inwards at ourselves in an extrospective, objective way, or the opposite can occur: we may see the outer world as an extension of oneself (p. 191). From a feminist pedagogical perspective, we apply a full introspection followed by a watcher self perspective to entangle the wider, socio-cultural meanings of our individual experiences and how the outer world influences our inner world. Furthermore, if we return to the personal is political feminist principle, we suggest that by engaging in SPI students may be equipped to think more about how they can actually influence that outer world. Our students typically enjoy the SPI exercise, as it offers them the opportunity to write as freely as they wish about their own consumption behaviour. This validates the personal, and also makes them deep-dive into their feelings, emotions, perceptions, and motivations, which for many is a unique and liberating premise for a university assignment! The second stage of the SPI process enables them to stand back and perceive the bigger picture outside themselves and how their personal experiences connect not only to the marketing academic literature but more importantly, to much wider spheres of influence. In so doing, they may then question and even want to change the prevailing norms and structures that control them.

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#### *Collaborative learning - Action Projects/Group work*

Group work on specific action projects is a key learning skill in feminist pedagogy. The objective is to have groups that are as diverse as possible: a mix of different personalities, backgrounds, perspectives, degrees of commitment, and academic ability (Briskin 2015). Needless to say, groups such as outlined above may be met with less than enthusiasm by students embracing the neoliberal customer-service provider model that now predominates in

higher education. They are focused on grades and jobs after completing their degrees. The application of marketing to that of education has ironically had intense effects on those of us who are marketing educators. In effect we are victims of our own success!

Some of the benefits of group work include learning respect for others, trust, the importance of having a voice, of sharing tasks equally, taking responsibility for one's own actions, and negotiating authority (Briskin 2015). Putting together groups that reflect diversity works well from a feminist, pedagogical perspective. However, it must be admitted that introducing feminist pedagogy to group work continues to be one of the most challenging issues. There is inevitably a tension between feminist pedagogy and the neoliberalist university model that prevails, which values "individualism, rationality, productivity, and efficiency" above all else (Penttinen & Jyrkinen 2017, p. 77).

#### *Minimising Hierarchical Relations*

This brings us to some of the drawbacks with feminist pedagogy for business and management classes. In trying to implement a feminist pedagogy that is participative and transformational, resistance can be encountered. A 'low-hierarchy' environment where learning is emphasised over teaching students, and where the co-construction of knowledge is encouraged, can be very difficult to manage (Penttinen & Jyrkinen 2017). Students with a customer mindset may question course content and pedagogical practices that require them to make more of an investment than they had expected. Furthermore, this is a pressing gender issue: female educators may be in the eye of the storm as they continue to be more likely to adopt a feminist pedagogical approach that is relational, participative, empowering, and transformational. In doing so, they risk a backlash from students: in their efforts to be respectful of difference and individual perspectives, in their eschewal of a didactic, authoritative, patriarchal form of teaching, they may be perceived as ineffective and indecisive (Briskin & Coulter 2015). Breaking down the barriers between 'us and them', and devolving control and authority can thus have negative consequences (Penttinen & Jyrkinen 2017). In effect, the knowledge and credibility of the educator is questioned because they do not fit a dominant model.

Furthermore, in nurturing a low-hierarchical, cooperative learning environment, female educators can find themselves expected to be nurturing and maternal, and thus engage in a style of teaching that spills over outside of the classroom and results in intense and very time-consuming emotional labour with students, which is of course a gender(ed) issue (Briskin & Coulter 2015, McCusker 2017, Stevens 2019). In the face of pressure to produce research, many female educators find themselves unwittingly silo-ed into nurturing, administrative roles that are not valued in terms of promotion prospects, and nor do such activities garner respect from colleagues who are more strategically focused on publications and output.

Despite these difficulties, we still believe it is important to take critical pedagogical approaches in our teaching and, as we have tried to demonstrate, feminist pedagogy has a role to play, even if only applied incrementally and with caution depending on the particular topic area of the class. We have found it works well for the consumer behaviour, marketing communications and research methods classes that we teach, and hope that this short commentary will be useful to others with students in these areas. No one ever said it was easy to do things differently, but just because it isn't easy doesn't mean we shouldn't try to inject a more critical awareness into the marketing classroom so that we encourage students to be fully engaged, politically aware and educated (in the broadest sense) citizens when they complete their courses.

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