

Finding Voice: Feminist Writing Pedagogy and the Silenced and Marginalized

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Abstract

Pedagogical theory is the foundation of any writing and rhetoric classroom, and there is no shortage of theories on which faculty may base their teaching upon. Traditional classrooms are often based on canonical ideas that lack diversity and inclusion. The loudest voices are always heard, many of their quieter counterparts are uncomfortable fighting for their space at the academic table. Feminist pedagogy has always sought to empower the student and the instructor by changing the dynamic of the classroom and putting student needs at the forefront. While writing and rhetoric programs' use of critical pedagogy is more student-centered and democratic in their approach than other disciplines, there is still room for vast improvement when it comes to the inclusion of silenced and marginalized students. The methodology in this paper consisted of examining research and discussion of critical pedagogy and feminist pedagogy, comparing the approaches of these pedagogies, and drawing conclusion as to how feminist pedagogy could be incorporated into our writing and rhetoric programs in order to nurture and support all students, but especially those from silenced marginalized communities. This paper specifically addresses the marginalization of women and people of color in undergraduate writing and rhetoric classrooms across the United States and suggests that faculty education, alterations to the writing workshop, assigned discussion tasks, and deliberate usage of inclusive texts might give voice to these students by making them feel safe and fostering a more inclusive and nurturing environment for these students.

Key Words:

feminism, pedagogy, writing pedagogy, silenced and marginalized communities, student engagement,
writing and rhetoric

Introduction to Pedagogy: Traditional, Critical, and Feminist

The need for diversity and inclusion across the political, social, and cultural spheres of life is more apparent now than ever before. This transformation to a more conscious way of looking at the world, as well as our writing and rhetoric classrooms, calls for a reevaluation of the needs of students within an inclusive feminist framework. To understand why a transition to feminist pedagogy in such classrooms is import, we must first understand the pedagogical traditions that came before. Traditional pedagogical instruction dominated the classroom for centuries, and “has been defined as the art and science of teaching children.”¹ This form of instruction is exclusively instructor-led. Instructors are the authority on all classroom matters and students are receptors for information. According to Tomei, teachers believed that the best way for their students to master content was through repetition, a principle derived from behavioral learning theory; a notion that dominated educational thinking since the time of Ivan Pavlov and his experiment with animals. Students should spend their time copying spelling words, reiterating historical dates and places, and proving and re-proving mathematical formulas

¹ Lawrence A. Tomei. "Learning Theories and Pedagogy: Teaching the Traditional Learner." In *Designing Instruction for the Traditional, Adult, and Distance Learner: A New Engine for Technology-Based Teaching*. Hershey, PA: IGI Global, 2010. <http://doi:10.4018/978-1-60566-824-6.ch001>

until they 'learned' the information.² While traditional pedagogy may have its merits in some settings, it can also be harmful to both students and instructors.

Such an approach perpetuates the social narratives that undergird oppression, and it breeds a hegemonic, or power-over, dynamic between educators and students. This dynamic marginalizes students by failing to recognize and develop their personal power while also oppressing educators by disallowing them to bring their whole selves to their work.³

Pyles explains that traditional pedagogy can place too much emphasis on the power dynamic and inadvertently ostracize students who do not learn well by rote repetition. This type of student/instructor relationship also boxes instructors into a role that may not be best suited for their students or themselves. If instructors adhere strictly to this hierarchical relationship, they may miss opportunities to learn and grow with their students or find other ways to reach marginalized students.

Many instructors using critical pedagogy, on the other hand, push for a less strict academic discourse and call for the inclusion of more personal, creative nonfiction.⁴

According to Cowden and Singh, “[a]t its core critical pedagogy aims to encourage

² Tomei.

³ Loretta Pyles, and Gwendolyn Adam, editors. *Holistic Engagement: Transformative Social Work Education in the 21st Century*. Oxford University Press, 2016.

⁴ Peter Elbow. “Reflections on Academic Discourse: How It Relates to Freshmen and Colleagues.” *College English* 53, no. 2 (February 1991): 135. <https://doi.org/10.2307/378193>.

progressive participative methods to deliver learning by breaking down the traditional power nexus between teacher and student...” it “is also about developing certain dispositions among students that enable them to think, read, write and speak in ways that penetrates the surface of received wisdom, common sense or ‘official versions of life.’”⁵ This means that relationships between students and instructors are less hierarchical and more collaborative. Elbow believes a student’s broader worldview and experience are essential to the writing process and to a deeper understanding of their discourse community. There are three main points to his argument: one, most students will write for their jobs and personal lives after college and not for academia, and writing creatively can foster a love of writing outside academia; second, it’s important to learn the type of discourse that explains and describes things to gain a higher understanding of them; and third, learning only to write inside academic discourse and one’s area of expertise can render students unable to explain things outside of that context.⁶ Critical pedagogy begins to lean into some of the ideas behind feminist pedagogy by lessening the power dynamics between students and instructors, as well as fostering more creativity than traditional pedagogy allows for.

⁵ Stephen Cowden, and Gurnam Singh. *Acts of Knowing: Critical Pedagogy in, Against and Beyond the University* New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2013. 127-8.

⁶ Peter Elbow. “Reflections on Academic Discourse: How It Relates to Freshmen and Colleagues.” *College English* 53, no. 2 (February 1991): 135. <https://doi.org/10.2307/378193>.

Gender politics in the classroom and the foundations of feminist pedagogy took hold in the late 1970's with educators like bell hooks and Madeline Arnot. Many others have since developed theories and trends. According to BJ Bryson and Victoria A. Bennet-Anyikwa, "the empowerment of learners, critical thinking and analysis applied to personal experiences, and challenging memorization are elements of a feminist pedagogy."⁷ Empowerment, its definition, and the nuances of how empowerment takes place in critical pedagogy versus feminist pedagogy are the center of many of arguments in favor of feminist pedagogy.⁸ Hierarchical structures of the traditional classrooms are challenged, along with the competitive nature that often accompanies this type of structure. "Feminist debates on pedagogy uncover the tensions related to democratizing the social relations in the classroom advancing hidden tacit and embodied knowledge."⁹ Feminist pedagogy has always sought to empower the student and the instructor by changing the dynamic of the classroom and putting student needs at the forefront. This feminist tradition lays the foundation for more recent approaches to teaching that include not just women, but other marginalized groups as well. The theory behind feminist

⁷ BJ Bryson, Victoria A. Bennet-Anyikwa. "The Teaching and Learning Experience: Deconstructing and Creating Space Using a Feminist Pedagogy." *Race, gender & class* (Towson, Md.) 10, no. 2 (January 1, 2003): 133.

⁸ Lyn Yates. "Feminist Pedagogy Meets Critical Pedagogy Meets Poststructuralism." Edited by Jennifer M. Gore, Carmen Luke, Jennifer Gore, and Sue Middleton. *British Journal of Sociology of Education* 15, no. 3 (1994).

⁹ Bryson and Bennet-Anyikwa, 134.

pedagogy has grown and shifted over time, and while the ideas have focused strongly on the Women's Studies classroom, in what follows here I will be suggesting that introducing the ideals behind feminist pedagogy may be more effective than critical pedagogy at nurturing writing and rhetoric students and giving them confidence and safe spaces to participate more in class and succeed in the broader academic sphere, including the writing and rhetoric classroom.

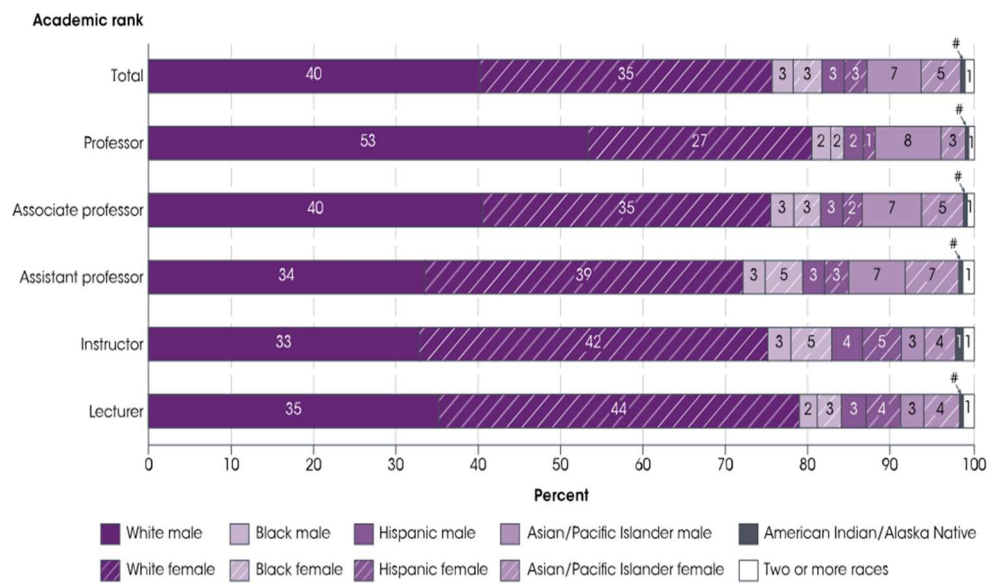
Traditional classrooms are often based on canonical ideas that lack diversity and inclusion. The writing and rhetoric classroom is not exempt from these issues because as Harvard, et al. state, “[f]rom the design and scaffolding of courses content to the implementation of assignments, from prescriptive grammar to evaluations and assessments, oppressive structures such as white supremacy, ableism, queerphobia, sexism, and transphobia... are an inherent part of our composition classrooms.”¹⁰ While writing and rhetoric programs’ use of critical pedagogy is more student-centered and democratic in their approach than other disciplines, there is still room for vast improvement when it comes to the inclusion of silenced and marginalized students. Feminist pedagogy is one way to accomplish this goal.

¹⁰ Julia Havard, et al. “Anti-Oppressive Composition Pedagogies.” *Radical Teacher*, vol. 115, Nov. 2019, pp. 1–4. *DOI.org (Crossref)*, doi:10.5195/rt.2019.729. 1.

Silenced and Marginalized Voices

Inequality in the classroom often starts along racial and gender lines in the faculty. The National Center for Education Statistics (NCSE) reports on the academic rank of full-time faculty in degree-granting postsecondary institutions.¹¹ As this NCSE graph shows, the higher up the academic ladder faculty climb, the more the numbers skew toward white men and women over minorities.

For each academic rank, percentage distribution of full-time faculty in degree-granting postsecondary institutions, by race/ethnicity and sex: Fall 2018



Rounds to zero.

¹¹ "The NCES Fast Facts Tool Provides Quick Answers to Many Education Questions (National Center for Education Statistics)." Accessed November 16, 2020. <https://nces.ed.gov/fastfacts/display.asp?id=61>.

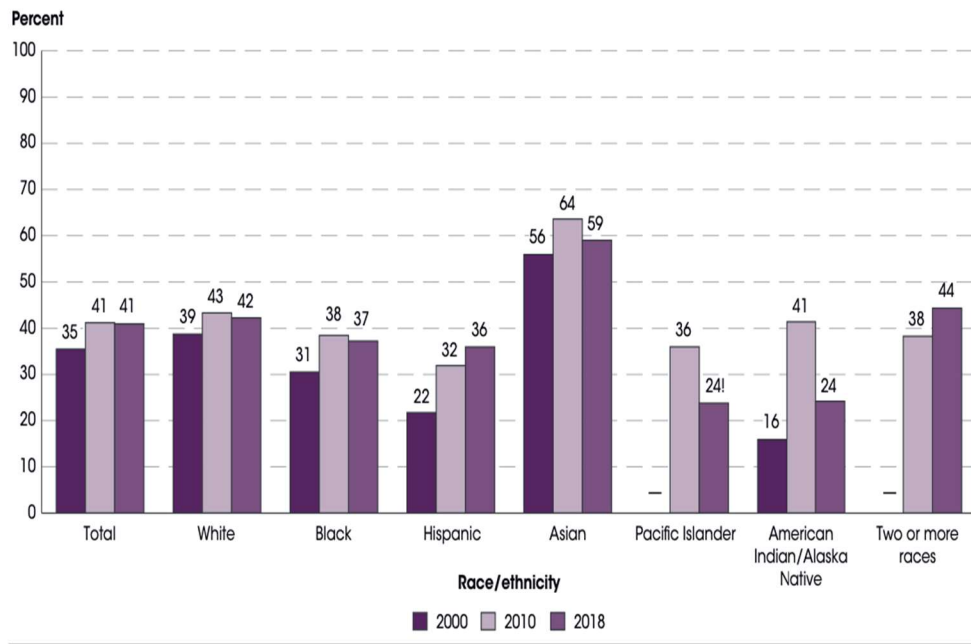
This culture then spreads to the classroom where the hierarchy of students is similar. Much of postcolonial discourse centers on “othering,” and “othering” places too much emphasis on class and social structure, creating a subalternity that “is not just a general term or synonym of any ‘Other’ lower class group, but an ‘Other’ that is to be removed from all lines of social-mobility.”¹² The concept of “othering” falls on racial or gender lines and causes a rift between students that labels one group as better or more important than another. In the writing and rhetoric classroom, this can be seen in the language of white supremacy, the accepted Standard English, which is deeply entrenched in this hierarchy. This leads to the marginalization of voices of color.¹³ Sexism adds another layer to this silencing and marginalizing, as does the exclusion of the LGBTQ+ community. The enrollment rate for college students 18- to 24-year-olds, by race/ethnicity by the NCSE illustrates the numbers of minority students enrolled in college in 2018.¹⁴

¹² R. Kark, R. Ronit, Ruth Preser, and Tanya Zion-Waldoks. “From a Politics of Dilemmas to a Politics of Paradoxes: Feminism, Pedagogy, and Women’s Leadership for Social Change.” *Journal of Management Education* 40, no. 3 (June 2016): 294. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1052562916634375>.

¹³ Villanueva, Jr., Victor. “Maybe a Colony: And Still Another Critique of the Comp Community.” *JAC* 17, no. 2 (1997): 183–90.

¹⁴ National Center for Education Statistics. “College Enrollment Rates.” NCES, 2020. <https://nces.ed.gov/search/?q=college+enrollment+rates#gsc.tab=0&gsc.q=college%20enrollment%20rates&gsc.page=1>.

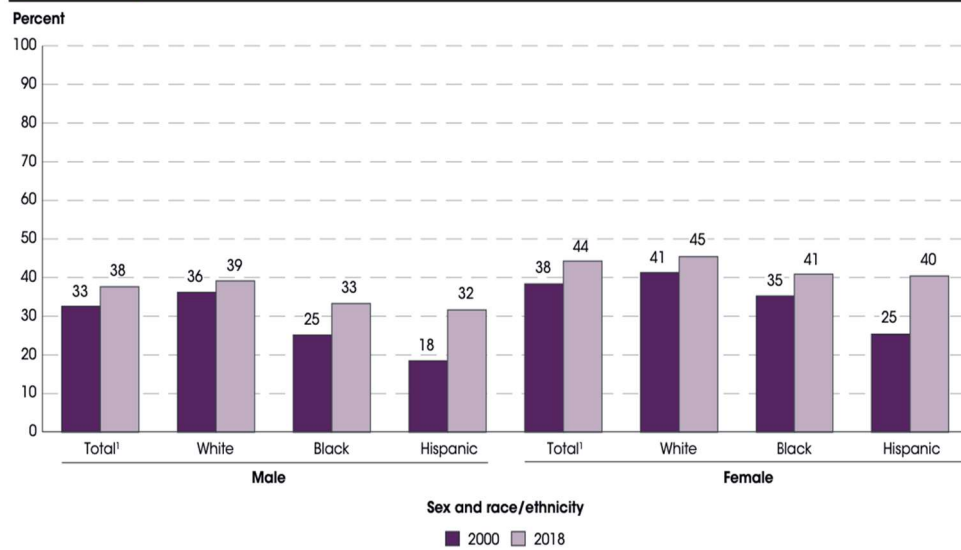
Figure 2. College enrollment rates of 18- to 24-year-olds, by race/ethnicity: 2000, 2010, and 2018



The enrollment rate for college students 18- to 24-year-olds, by sex race/ethnicity by the NCSE can be seen here:¹⁵

¹⁵ National Center for Education Statistics. "College Enrollment Rates." NCES, 2020.

Figure 3. College enrollment rates of 18- to 24-year-olds, by sex and race/ethnicity: 2000 and 2018



These numbers illustrate the large numbers of women and minorities enrolled in college. Their voices should not be ignored or left behind simply because the competitive nature of traditional pedagogy does not leave room for them. The research on feminist pedagogy discusses its own inclusivity, often hinting at the fact that it is traditional white male voices overshadowing the women, people of color, and the LGBTQ+ community. These issues are not cut and dried either, when matters of intersectionality come into play, as they almost always do, it complicates the issue further. These are the silenced and marginalized voices we need to hear more of in the writing and rhetoric classroom.

Problem Statement

There are many silenced and marginalized voices in the writing and rhetoric classroom. While the loudest voices are always heard, many of their quieter counterparts are uncomfortable fighting for their space at the academic table. They should not have to fight for space. Exacerbating the issue, many of these quieter students are women, people of color, and the LGBTQ+ community. Feminist writing pedagogy can empower those students by fostering a more nurturing, less competitive classroom that limits the intimidating hierarchical structure of traditional pedagogy used at many institutions. To create an equitable, inclusive, and empowering writing and rhetoric classroom, professors need to embrace and implement this style of teaching.

Feminist Pedagogy at Work

Critical pedagogy in the writing and rhetoric classroom does focus more on democracy and student-centered learning, however something akin to the traditional hierarchy still often exists. The naturally vocal students speak out, sharing their ideas without hesitation, while the silenced and marginalized shrink back from the competition of the opinionated. A more intentional style of teaching is needed to bridge the gap of diversity and inclusivity. Using feminist pedagogy in the writing and rhetoric classroom and asking students to find their voice and connect with writing, practicing various styles of writing that may not necessarily conform with the strictest of traditions can give the silenced and

marginalized students a safe place to share and speak out. According to Karyn Hollis, classroom structures where the “use of non-competitive and student-centered activities” can eliminate some of the hierarchy and competition, having a positive effect and make silenced and marginalized students feel more comfortable and accepted in the classroom, making them more likely to speak up and be heard.¹⁶

Feminist pedagogy utilizes Bryson’s idea that “[a] delicate balance between shared authority and the use of ‘teacher power’ must exist for the rewards of shifting classroom politics and alleviating barriers for course participants.”¹⁷ Power is placed in the hands of the students, and special attention is paid to ensuring that silenced and marginalized voices are heard. Bryson and Bennet-Anyikwa call for bringing “voice” to these students and claim that “[g]reater intimacy among the class develops as exchanges occur and layers of understanding unpeel like an onion.”¹⁸ This idea of intimacy and a more interconnected classroom is seen in much of research done on feminist pedagogy.

Potential Roadblocks

There are a few potential roadblocks to transitioning to feminist pedagogy in the writing and rhetoric classroom. The first is resistance that may come from faculty who value

¹⁶ Karyn L. Hollis “Feminism in Writing Workshops: A New Pedagogy.” (*College Composition and Communication* 43, no. 3 October 1992): 341. <https://doi.org/10.2307/358226>.

¹⁷ Bryson and Bennet-Anyikwa, 134.

¹⁸ Bryson and Bennet-Anyikwa, 134.

critical pedagogy and are not open to change. Kark, et al. point out that some instructors may seek, instead, to maintain the intrapersonal process and shun the idea of an interpersonal development.¹⁹

The other, potentially larger, roadblock stems from the fact that a lot of work that must be done to incorporate feminist pedagogy into the classroom in many departments. As Sarah Parsons points out in her paper “Radical Possibilities: Feminism, Pedagogy and Visual Culture,” many disciplines lack a canonical foundation for such teachings. Parsons’ work in visual arts supported this notion and can be applied to the writing and rhetoric curriculum. Women are often left out of the critical teaching surrounding the visual arts as they are not considered “canon.” Women artists generally come from different backgrounds and have different (often fewer) resources than their male counterparts, making it easy for historians to overlook them. Parsons argues that academics must make a concerted effort to include women in this canon and to address the ideas behind what is considered canon. Parsons states, “[t]herefore feminist scholarship has also examined the means by which one history gets privileged over others” (p. 157).²⁰ Inside the classroom, this may likely call for a wider dialogue with

¹⁹ Kark, Ronit, Preser, and Zion-Waldoks, 294.

²⁰ Sarah Parsons. “Radical Possibilities: Feminism, Pedagogy and Visual Culture.” *Resources for feminist research* 29, no. 3/4 (2002): 157.

writing and rhetoric students surrounding feminist pedagogical ideals and how they serve the classroom.

Solutions

There are several ways in which feminist pedagogy can be incorporated into the writing and rhetoric classroom, including faculty education, the writing workshop, assigned discussion tasks, and deliberate usage of inclusive texts to reach out the silenced and marginalized. Changes can only begin to take place if faculty are informed and convinced of the merits of feminist pedagogy. Workshops on feminist pedagogy provided to instructors with a detailed accounting as to their efficacy and inclusiveness will serve as a foundation for convincing traditionalists to bring more nurturing ideals and inclusive practices into their teaching.

Writing workshops or peer review are often an integral part of the writing and rhetoric classroom, and the structure of these groups can also be modified to ensure that the quiet voices are heard. When pairing students up to workshop their papers, intentionality can play a large role in creating a safe space for all students. Karen L. Hollis's feminist-centered writing workshop, while intended for graduate students, could easily be modified for the undergraduate classroom. Hollis offers advice on bringing voice to the quieter students, particularly female students in the classroom: experimenting with all-women critique groups, being mindful of dominating male voices, and assigning roles to

students in groups to ensure equitability.²¹ In order to do this effectively, instructors must get to know their students and learn their personalities. In doing so, intentional groupings can be formed that foster the best diversity and inclusivity.

Another major shift must happen in the classroom to foster the vocalization of silenced and marginalized students. Curriculum and canon need to undergo a heavy reevaluation. Women, people of color, and those in the LGBTQ+ community are often left out of everyday classroom discussion. Canon is heavily laden with white male voices that students may not relate to or may even feel alienated by. In the writing and rhetoric classroom, course developers should look for a broader range of voices that still meet the academic needs of the course. Speeches and essays by Barack Obama, Ibram X. Kendi, Angela Davis, Christina Jiménez Moreta, Joy Harjo, and many others could fill this void in a way that does not compromise the academic integrity of the course. Silenced and marginalized students deserve to see their own stories on the page and examining positive ways to modify curriculum and canon are essential to this.

Conclusion

Feminist pedagogy is more concerned with making students, especially those who are silenced and marginalized, feel comfortable in the classroom than with upholding

²¹ Hollis, 341.

traditional and hierarchical structures of pedagogy. The “non-competitive and student-centered activity”²² of a feminist classroom strips away the exclusionary ways traditional classroom activities can divide students. Collaboration is at the heart of feminist pedagogy. In talking directly to students about goals and assignments, instructors can ask students to think about their work in a metacognitive sense and evaluate their own writing to get them thinking about their thought process. They can assign group work or group assignments with critical thinking in mind. Equitable teaching empowers the silenced and marginalized students in the writing and rhetoric classroom. Students exposed to feminist pedagogy will likely be more comfortable sharing ideas in the classroom and participating in groups with their classmates. The implications of these findings are twofold. One, understanding what it is about feminist pedagogy that makes silenced and marginalized students more comfortable will illustrate to faculty why this style of teaching is essential to any successful classroom. Two, it will provide strategies for implementing feminist pedagogy into the day-to-day curriculum of the writing and rhetoric classroom. Feminist pedagogy views classroom dynamics and hierarchical structures in a different way than traditional or critical pedagogy. The focus shifts from a competitive atmosphere to a more open and nurturing environment. Instructors work to build more interpersonal relationships with the students inside the classroom and have a mentorship teaching style. This type of pedagogy has the potential to lessen the stress of students and cut down the

²² Hollis, 341.

intimidation factors that may keep some students from contributing. The intentionality that is the center of this pedagogy, the desire to connect students to each other and their instructors may well lead to silenced and marginalized students participating more in class.

Theoretically, the biggest obstacle facing a shift to feminist pedagogy in writing and rhetoric classrooms is garnering support from existing professors with more traditional pedagogical models; therefore, it is important to focus on the professors who embrace a more critical approach already. Critical pedagogy is less rigid in its hierarchy, which allows for a bridge between critical and feminist methods of classroom management. The collaborative method these instructors use could easily be modified to be more feminist by added another layer of intentionality to their teaching. A more intentional model of teaching may mean assigning students to groups and creating group tasks with student personalities in mind (e.g., not placing the most marginalized and quiet students with the most outgoing students or giving the outgoing students quieter tasks like note taking). It may also include asking students to reply to prompts via private online forms and having the instructor read them aloud for discussion. Instructors using feminist pedagogy are free to find new and innovative ways to make silenced and marginalized students feel safe participating in the classroom.

Graduate student teaching fellows will play an important role in adopting not just feminist, but other disruptive pedagogies that encourage an intersectional perspective.

Many universities' writing and rhetoric courses are taught by graduate students. If incoming graduate teaching fellows are taught the merits of feminist pedagogy when they begin their career, they can instill more inclusive practices into their teaching. As they graduate and begin teaching at other institutions, these former students of feminist pedagogy will take what they've learned to other departments and institutions, sharing their passion for diversity and inclusion. This practice will increase the number of writing and rhetoric instructors who are trained in feminist pedagogy, and likely other more recent forms of inclusionary pedagogy. Every English department that embraces these techniques will help build a new generation of more inclusive minded instructors.

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