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Putting Feminist Pedagogy to the Test: The Value of Creative Assignments [1]

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Feminist pedagogy has long stressed the importance of fostering authentic forms of expression in the classroom. One way to accomplish this is through encouraging students to engage in creative forms of research, writing, and digital work. Substituting creative assignments for traditional argumentative papers can cultivate deeper engagement with the material. Students are encouraged to take their studies out of the plane of abstraction and to see the relevance of the research they undertake to their own lives. Further, these kinds of assignments spur students to see themselves as active producers of culture (stories, websites, documentaries) rather than as passive recipients, thereby dispelling the mystique of the professional writer or auteur and nurturing imaginative production. While these are laudable goals in any field, they are perhaps particularly relevant in Women's and Gender Studies. Because this discipline is informed by activism and devoted to the discovery of one's subjectivity and voice (especially on the part of dispossessed populations), its pedagogical practices stress the necessity of embracing forms of expression outside of the conventional five-paragraph essay.

My own anecdotal experience has reinforced the value of assignments in which students can combine analysis with creative expression. In my course on Contemporary Feminist Thought last year, I encouraged students to substitute a creative paper for their capstone assignment, counseling them beforehand that these kinds of projects still need to be analytically grounded in the reading for the course and in outside research. (Requiring a conference and a 1-page prospectus helped to disabuse students that this kind of assignment might lead to an easy A.) Those who pursued this option produced stunning works. One student documented her own history of sexual abuse in the form of a short graphic novel modeled after Allison Bechdel's *Fun Home*. Her gift for illustration was evident, but just as impressive was the plethora of critical voices she incorporated into her novel, mixing her own observations about gender-based oppression with those of Kimberlé Crenshaw, Dorothy Allison, and Gloria Anzaldúa. This was an example of rigorous scholarly engagement combined with deep personal investment, the kind of work that feminist pedagogy touts as transformative for students.

I plan to use my Contemporary Feminist Thought course to test the value of creative assignments in a more formal way. Students will be randomly assigned to two groups, one of which will be given the option of turning in a creative assignment for their first paper and the other of which will be given the same option for their second paper. (This set-up will guard against the possibility that the timing of the creative paper contributed to its success.) Clear prompts and expectations will be laid out for both creative and non-creative options. On the days that their papers are due, all students will be asked to fill out a short questionnaire, designed to measure both their knowledge of the material and the extent of their enjoyment

and engagement in fulfilling the terms of the assignment. The aim is two-fold: 1) to measure the differences in response between those who undertook creative assignments and those who undertook traditional ones; and 2) to measure the differences in response among individual students who undertook a creative assignment in one instance and a traditional assignment in the other.

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