



2009

Inverting the Inverted Pyramid: A Conversation about the Use of Feminist Theories to Teach Journalism

Danna L. Walker
American University

Margaretha Geertsema
Butler University, mgeertse@butler.edu

Barbara Barnett
University of Kansas

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalcommons.butler.edu/ccom_papers



Part of the [Journalism Studies Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Walker, D., Geertsema, M., and Barnett, B. (2009). Inverting the Inverted Pyramid: A Conversation about the Use of Feminist Theories to Teach Journalism. *Feminist Teacher*, 19 (3), pp. 177-194. Available from: http://digitalcommons.butler.edu/ccom_papers/6

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the College of Communication at Digital Commons @ Butler University. It has been accepted for inclusion in Scholarship and Professional Work - Communication by an authorized administrator of Digital Commons @ Butler University. For more information, please contact digitalscholarship@butler.edu.

Inverting the Inverted Pyramid: A Conversation about the Use of Feminist Theories to Teach Journalism

DANNA L. WALKER, MARGARETHA GEERTSEMA,
AND BARBARA BARNETT

Teaching is always challenging, and for some of us who are feminists, teaching journalism is particularly difficult. The tenets of good journalism—objectivity and neutrality—are often antithetical to our feminist values. We face the dilemma of how to incorporate feminist sensibilities into teaching journalism—a profession that strives for detachment and, at times, seems oblivious to its own position of power.

At a professional meeting three years ago, several of us were talking casually about our teaching responsibilities and our students. During the course of that conversation, we began discussing the *ways* we teach journalism, and one of us made the comment—the others agreed—that we cringe at some of the things we tell students: write with detachment, always use third-person, use the inverted pyramid to tell your stories, take yourself out of the story. We admitted even we don't believe some of the instructions we give students, but we often feel we have to tell students these things because of journalistic professional standards and also because our departments tell us to.

We shared stories about how our students come to us pretty media-savvy,

knowing there is a different way to write, to interview, to tell stories. They're looking to us for guidance, and we aren't always sure what to say. Some of us lamented that we had lost creative students who chafed at the rigid instructions we give them for writing in "true" journalistic fashion.

So our initial discussions led us to think about how we might realistically change the way we teach journalism. One of the ideas of feminist theory is to question the status quo—why does it have to be *this* way? So we asked questions about our teaching practices.

In this article, three of us who participated in that informal discussion three years ago—all journalism professors—discuss how we have worked to incorporate feminist theories into our classroom teaching. We currently teach in the United States, and our conversations focus on our work in this specific geographic setting. Each of us shares thoughts about the contradictions we face. We hope these discussions will generate further conversations about how to use feminist theories to teach journalism differently—and better—and also how to incorporate feminist theories into other classroom settings. Some

of our discussions are theoretical, but we offer some practical examples of how we have actually incorporated some tenets of feminism into our classrooms, and how those things have worked—or not.

Questioning a Dominant Discourse

DANNA WALKER

As a young journalist and a woman interested in equality, I thought that making it in the tough-talking, risk-taking, hard-charging world of journalism had something to do with feminism. It was the Nellie Bly school of feminist thought. As a woman wanting to succeed in the news business, I often adopted and incorporated the ways of journalism with enthusiasm, including bellying up to the bar and downing tequila shots after a hard day of writing and reporting on deadline, with the best of them—the guys.

As a more experienced feminist academic these many years later, I've come to see those traditions, as well as the underlying discourse of mainstream journalism itself, as gendered—not an exciting test of mettle for “equal” entry into the boys' club but a patriarchal structure built on the language and ideology of the powerful.

I assume I'm not the only female news-person to feel this way. When Barbara Barnett, Margaretha Geertsema, and I happened to cross paths in Dresden, Germany, we confided in each other that we found certain requirements of our jobs distasteful. We met at an International Communication Association pre-conference event, sponsored by a group of well-known feminist leaders within the discipline, and we quickly felt safe enough to admit we were living a kind of lie. It was

the notion that we were passing on to a new generation the same old gendered discourse that I readily adopted as a Nellie Bly wannabe, with its rigid rules of construction, its emphasis on simplistic dualities, and its illusion of neutrality.

As feminist intellectuals, isn't it our job to deconstruct a dominant discourse, not reinforce its power? But how do we effectively pull that one off as communication scholars working within professional schools? We work in an academic environment, yes, but one heavily influenced by a tradition of training journalists for success in the corporate media marketplace. It's one thing to write about feminist theories in peer-reviewed papers and expound on our feminist research at academic conferences held under the umbrella of the whole of communication studies. It's quite another to bring our feminist principles into the journalism classroom, with its concern for writing and reporting stories attractive to journalism's male-dominated leadership. And yet, we soon discovered, we were all figuring out ways to do it.

To talk about a feminist classroom in journalism is to talk about a classroom that challenges traditional methods of teaching and makes students aware of the social construction of knowledge. It is one in which critical theory must come to the fore—critical theory in which the experiences of groups other than the dominant forces in society are taken into consideration and in which dominant discourse—such as that found in mainstream media—is questioned. That means, effectively, that as feminist journalism educators we must teach students to act and perform like journalists while questioning the very lessons we teach to enable them to accomplish that. Not an easy feat. But

it's exciting to begin to exchange ideas about this effort to subvert power within our own discipline.

For me, it's been a long road of trial and error. I first tried to introduce feminist teaching methods in a beginning journalism writing course. It's one of those courses in which you teach all types of writing—newspaper, broadcast, online, public relations, etc. For the newspaper writing—usually thought to be the most important aspect of the course—I stuck to the hard and fast rules, hoping to introduce more creativity later. I went along with the thinking that students must first learn the inverted pyramid style of journalism—beginning a news story with the most important facts, then following up with less important details until the least noteworthy information is found at the end. This tradition comes from the newspaper layout rules that say an editor is safe as long as he/she cuts the story from the bottom, or that a reader will get the important information even if he/she goes on to the next story halfway through the first.

I don't know how to explain it, but when I tried teaching writing this way students gave me a lot of bad writing, which I red-lined to death with quite a bit of resentment on their parts. The whole process of teaching and reinforcing this style took up to four weeks.

Then I offered the class a chance to get more creative, teaching writing with a capital W and using a coaching method. I hoped they would be inspired. I encouraged them to give voice to those who normally did not get a voice. I tried to introduce feminist perspectives. Unfortunately, by that time they were so traumatized by the hard and fast rules of the straight news newspaper style that the experiment

was pretty dismal. I concluded that these students, despite the university's high entrance standards, were not very good writers overall.

The problem I had with teaching the inverted pyramid and straight news writing was the way I had to pretend that I—and the news media—know of one knowable truth. We were dealing in rights and wrongs, good versus bad, and objective over subjective. As a feminist who tries to avoid such dualities, I believe truth is a contested terrain. I believe that traditional news discourse legitimizes these dichotomies, helping to maintain hierarchy, inequality, and oppression.

Perhaps I've been more successful at laying out the problem than in solving it. To add to the irony of the situation, the majority of students in undergraduate journalism courses are women. Journalism historian Maurine Beasley and other scholars have written about this issue, which doesn't change the fact that most of the leading voices in journalism are men (Beasley). Add to that the nature of undergraduates, which is that they want rationality and knowable truths, and you have a pedagogical challenge, indeed.

But the effort, as I stated before, is what is exciting because I believe feminist pedagogy and its goals are paramount in a rapidly changing media environment in which media power no longer goes unquestioned. Those goals include engaging students in participatory learning (what bell hooks calls "an engaged pedagogy") (*Teaching* 15), furthering the ideas of the social construction of knowledge, and validating personal experience in context. Feminist instructors also challenge traditional structures of authority, power, and knowledge—a topic my co-

author Margaretha Geertsema explores as she examines the fundamental questions behind teaching as an endeavor.

My belief is that eventually everyone will realize that feminist approaches are more useful than the old top-down approach anyway because students no longer view the world in a top-down way. Whether traditionalists like it or not, top-down journalism is quickly becoming a thing of the past as the citizenry charges forward with digital technology. It is a rare time in history—what some scholars call a critical juncture—in which power over technology is being contested on a large scale (McChesney).

I have been able to dovetail discussions on what's going on in the industry with feminist perspectives in a more successful class called *Dissident Media*, a lecture class I teach on the history of alternative publications focused on social causes. I have tried to keep in mind hooks's notion of teaching as a site of resistance and the classroom as a community and democratic space. I particularly like her idea of teaching to transgress and fostering an atmosphere in which all students in the classroom have agency.

One thing I do right away in this course is to try to encourage us as a class to see each other as individuals and in groups to see where our different situated knowledges might be formed. I do an exercise in which I ask students to stand up if they feel they identified with a certain group. I try to make it light-hearted by asking questions such as who likes chocolate or who has brown eyes, but then I ask about race, religion, sexual orientation, marriage, divorce, and other elements of identity. I say they don't have to stand up if they don't want to, and I stand up, too, when appropriate. It's a good ice-breaker and a

way to let the class know that I accept and value all viewpoints.

I also try to use my own experiences in giving lectures so students will feel free to relate the class themes to their experiences. For example, in talking to them about ideology I give an example of a Baptist church near my neighborhood that is predominantly African American. I talk about the fact that I am white and have been wanting to attend the church for quite a while but have not done it. I talk about how, when you feel strongly about something intellectually but you can't put it into practice, ideology is at work. I talk about the way some of my experiences have affected me and my desire to challenge the existing power structure. Examples include seeing my father give my mother an allowance and experiencing my Southern high school being locked down when it was racially integrated for the first time. I talk about all the expressions of power and privilege that got us into our particular classroom at that particular time.

I think students initially balk at some of this. Feminist educators know that students are skeptical toward structural explanations for oppression, preferring to look for someone to blame (even perhaps the oppressed themselves) or blaming the professor for casting blame (Markowitz). As Linda Markowitz contends, students often have avoidance, denial, and resentment toward critical analysis in general. Students assume "truth" is objective, and they often marginalize non-mainstream voices.

This is where one challenge lies, particularly with undergraduates and particularly in journalism. But feminist education—the feminist classroom—as hooks says, is and should be a place

where there is a sense of struggle, where there is visible acknowledgement of the union of theory and practice, where we work together as teachers and students (*Teaching*). I hope my students ended up respecting the fact that I have tried to do those things. As scary as it may be sometimes, I want the classroom to be a place of honest exchange as much as I think my students do. Education is, after all, a practice of freedom (Freire). I want most importantly to overcome what hooks describes as “the estrangement and alienation that have become so much the norm in the contemporary university” (*Talking* 51).

According to Markowitz, the few empirical studies that measure the effectiveness of feminist pedagogy show that non-traditional learning does create long-term change among students. Studies have found generally that after participation in a class organized around feminist pedagogy, students (especially female students), are likely to self-identify as feminists and become more active in issues related to women.

I know that for me, when I’m open about my feminist views in the classroom I feel freer to analyze issues from feminist perspectives as various topics come up. I found, too, that with more openness and struggle, students seemed to take more risks as writers.

Although teaching writing and reporting is not part of the Dissident Media class mentioned earlier, I had students do a writing assignment that could only be described as journalistic reporting. They were to find a social issue that was important to them and attend a related event—and then report on it in a blog that they started. Because the course is designed to fulfill a general education requirement, a lot of the students had no training in

journalism. But I found that the writing for the most part was quite good when the traditional constraints were removed and the inverted pyramid was symbolically turned upside down. Once I approached the teaching from this new perspective, I saw my students as generally creative and thoughtful writers—a very different outcome from before.

Perhaps like feminist professors in economics, law, or other male-dominated fields, feminist communication educators must walk a fine line in teaching in their disciplines. Power and who wields it are of central concern in journalism. They are also of central concern in the traditional classroom. Women have not typically been the arbiters of power. This irony means that feminists who teach journalism must eschew the powerful professorial role they may have initially fought so hard to achieve, and then they must teach ways of deconstructing power within the field—all the while risking criticism from traditionally trained students for doing both.

Jane Tompkins has noted the difficulty of sharing power in the classroom, especially for women, because of women’s long struggle to claim agency and authority in the social hierarchy. In creating a course that she facilitated but was essentially taught by the students, she remained mindful of Alison Jaggar’s argument that since reason has traditionally been stipulated in Western epistemology as the faculty by which we know what we know, and since women in Western culture are required to be the bearers of emotion, women are automatically delegitimized as sources of knowledge, “their epistemic authority cut off from the start” (26–27).

Working within that constraint and furthering feminist principles in the process is much more of a challenge than bellying

up to the bar and keeping faith with the dominant discourse of journalism.

Like my co-authors, I have hunches about what the future of teaching journalism will look like, and I think it will get easier for feminists. One of the overarching themes of my research on feminism and news media is that feminists and other social groups have been key to the deconstruction of traditional news via citizen-generated content. Women have actually been leaders in co-opting these technologies for their own purposes and forming dissident media via the Internet. At the same time, journalism as an industry is searching for alternatives to its corporate traditions, if only in the quest to stay profitable and relevant. A decade from now, journalism will be more diverse by necessity, because a diverse populace is looking for a voice. The trick is to continue to bridge that tension between tradition and new approaches while keeping alive the purpose of journalism to further democratic principles. As new voices emerge, I hope there will be better examples of feminist approaches in journalism writing. Just since writing this piece, I have noticed that talking openly about feminist issues is more accepted as gender and race take central roles after the 2008 presidential race. Because journalism is often seen as a reflection of society, this development affects journalism fundamentally. I feel freer to talk about gender in the classroom and trust that the growing diversity of professors in journalism will bring about even more openness. I do feel that I have made it clear that I incorporate feminist approaches and that has made a difference to my students as they think about entering the profession.

Using the Master's Tools to Dismantle the Master's House

MARGARETHA GEERTSEMA

I enter this discussion as one of many print media writing teachers at U.S. colleges who seem to be stuck in an outdated teaching style in which students are continually judged and punished for mistakes. Typically, students complete a writing assignment under deadline pressure in class, and assignments are graded based on their acceptability for publication in the mainstream news media. In this model, the teacher assumes the position of authority while students remain the clay to be molded. The result is that year after year, most students and (some) teachers get frustrated and demoralized. Surprisingly, this method often yields good teaching evaluations, as students feel they are told exactly what to do, and they do it. It is simple: When they follow the rules, they will be rewarded with good grades.

But how does the feminist teacher justify these authoritarian teaching practices? For many of us, this way of teaching creates an uncomfortable disconnect between who we are, what we believe in, how and why we teach, and how it relates to our own research agendas and practices. I propose that we reconsider the way that print media writing classes are taught in an attempt to envision a more progressive way of teaching. I write from the understanding that feminism aims to empower women and critically interrogates gender roles in society. It questions the status quo and those in power, just as good journalism is supposed to. In journalism, news stories are crafted around the five Ws and the H—who, what, when, where, why, and how—and I suggest that

we can use these elements to invert (or subvert) the inverted pyramid style of writing. I am doing so in hopes that the master's tools will, indeed, dismantle the master's house (Lorde).

WHO?

We can consider three questions here: Whom do we teach? Who teaches? For whom do we teach students? First, whom do we teach? As my co-author Danna Walker notes, for the last thirty years, the majority of students in journalism and mass communication programs have been women (Kosicki and Becker). In the fall of 2006, women made up 63.7 percent of undergraduates in mass communication (Becker, Vlad, and McLean). We need to consider the implications of teaching a female majority in journalism classes, and we need to reconsider whether traditional teaching methods help these students to learn best. Beyond gender, it appears that very few students in mass communication programs actually want to be breaking news reporters. If they want to be reporters at all, they are interested in entertainment, fashion, or sports. Most want to work in public relations or advertising and feel confused that they even have to take a print media writing class. At some small mass communication programs, such as the one in which I teach, students from across the campus are accepted into introductory media writing classes. The class then consists of a mix of journalism and mass communication students as well as students from such diverse disciplines as arts administration, political science, sociology, and business. When I teach this divergent group, I typically spend the first class or two just considering the nature of journalism and its importance in a democ-

racy. These students often need to learn only the basics of newswriting and editing to continue their careers. It does not make sense to teach them conventional journalism skills in the conventional way.

Second, who teaches journalism classes? The field is middle-aged male dominated. A 2002 study shows that the typical media writing teacher working at a U.S. journalism and mass communication program is male (63 percent), is about fifty years old, and holds a doctorate or master's degree (Massé and Popovich). The study also shows that these typical teachers see themselves more as traditional journalists, detached from the community, rather than civic journalists involved with problem solving in their communities. These traditionalists are unlikely to bring about the necessary innovation and change to prepare our students for the current and future media landscape. A related issue, then, is the lack of female media writing teachers. We need to make room for women in this field, and not only at academic entry-level positions. We need to bring a breath of fresh air and challenge long-established practices. We need to bring new ideas and activities to the writing table.

Third, for whom do we teach students? As co-author Danna Walker writes, journalism programs have traditionally trained students to work for the corporate media. Most media writing teachers have probably worked for the mainstream news media themselves. But we cannot continue to teach students to work for the mainstream news media only, when we know new media are exploding. We also cannot continue to provide writers to mainstream media that still exclude women in systematic ways. The Global

Media Monitoring Project (GMMP) of 2005 showed that across seventy-six countries, women are included as news sources and newsmakers merely 21 percent of the time (World Association for Christian Communication). The GMMP also found that women are more than twice as likely as men to be portrayed as victims and are mostly shown as celebrities, royalty, or ordinary people. We end up perpetuating the system by training students to work for patriarchal institutions. We need to teach students to become media activists. To run their own media. To write their opinions. To work for a variety of different platforms. But first, media writing teachers will need to learn all of this themselves.

WHAT?

What is the content of our writing classes? Many instructors continue to teach students only grammar, Associated Press (AP) style, note-taking and interview techniques, and a few basic story forms. Although these basic journalism skills are necessary for all reporters, college education certainly should extend beyond that level. As Wendell Berry writes, universities should help to make “human beings in the fullest sense of those words—not just trained workers or knowledgeable citizens but responsible heirs and members of human culture” (32). We need to teach students to form their own opinions and to think critically about the world. We need to help students to question the status quo and to “move beyond boundaries” (hooks, *Feminist* 207). We cannot continue to privilege the powerful as news sources in the writing class. Students need to learn that the voices and concerns of women should be included, too. Once they realize how underrepresented women are in the

news media, students are often shocked. We can teach students to include gender in all aspects of reporting, as the Inter Press Service news agency did in its gender mainstreaming work (Made and Samhungu). We can show them how to examine issues from a gender perspective and how to reach out to female sources that can be hard to come by. Let’s learn from media activists such as those working at the Southern African non-governmental organization Gender Links, which offers a variety of workshops and training opportunities for journalists, including a weeklong course on how to approach business stories from a gender-sensitive perspective (*Business*; Lowe Morna).

WHEN?

The time for new approaches is now. My co-authors and I agree that the media landscape today is changing quickly and vastly, and the transition from traditional, top-down mass media to content created by citizens themselves opens up a space for people’s authentic voices to be heard. Students need to develop their own opinions and the ability to critically evaluate issues and events around them.

WHERE?

This question relates to the place or positionality of students and journalists as knowledge creators. As both my co-authors note, our situated knowledge comes from a specific social position and represents a specific viewpoint. Students need to understand and value their own experiences, yet they also need to realize that people come from different places and have different perspectives. A variety of viewpoints should be reflected in any good news story, not the simplistic

instruction we often give to students: Get both sides of the story. Perhaps there are more than two sides.

HOW?

The “how” question seems to be the most important one in terms of teaching pedagogy. Massé and Popovich differentiate between two types of news writing teachers: those who focus on the product (an editor) and those who focus on the process (the coach). Traditionalists who focus on the product follow a teacher-centered approach, give detailed critiques on writing and severe penalties for mistakes, and emphasize the linear conception and writing of stories. On the other hand, teachers who follow the process approach create a more supportive environment by breaking writing up into steps that can be used in a nonlinear way. These teacher-coaches use more informal writing exercises, pre-writing, mindmapping, brainstorming, peer editing, and ungraded activities in classes. The process or coach approach is more progressive and in line with the ideals of feminist teaching.

Feminist pedagogy encourages participatory learning, personal experience, social understanding and activism, and critical thinking (Hoffmann and Stake). These characteristics are closely related to Maher and Tetreault’s four analytic themes of feminist classrooms: mastery, voice, authority, and positionality. These characteristics and themes are relevant to how we teach media writing classes in the following ways:

Creation of participatory classroom communities and the question of authority: Hoffmann and Stake see the creation of a participatory classroom community as a key principle of feminist pedagogy. In

these classrooms, the teacher surrenders her position as an authority who transmits information to empty vessels. Instead, the learning process becomes a collaborative effort in which “knowledge is socially produced by consensus among knowledgeable peers” (Barkley, Cross, and Major 6). Learning techniques that focus on teacher and students all working together on projects require a shift from the product orientation to the process orientation. In a media writing classroom this means more small-group activities, peer review sessions, and informal exercises.

Validation of personal experience and development of voice: Feminist pedagogy affirms students’ personal experience and helps them to make connections between class work and their lives (Hoffmann and Stake). It seeks personal transformation and the development of insight. The related concept of voice refers to students’ ability to speak for themselves and also to bring their own experience to the classroom and the newsroom (Maher and Tetreault). In the media writing class, the traditional focus on “objective” news reporting denies students their own voice and experience. We need to work with students to develop the sense that their viewpoints inform their writing and story choices. Just as Stone-Mediatore asks for a “rethinking of basic academic norms” to secure a place in classrooms for marginalized views (73), we need to rethink basic journalistic norms to find a place in the news for reporters’ voices and voices of women in particular. We can start by encouraging students to write opinion pieces on topics of interest or to blog about their experiences in learning news writing.

Growth of social awareness/activism and an understanding of positionality: Hoffmann and Stake say the feminist

classroom should encourage actions to achieve social justice. Awareness of social justice (or the lack thereof) relates to each person's specific social position as defined by markers of gender, race, and class, as co-author Barbara Barnett points out in her discussion of standpoint theory. If our students are white and middle class, they need to realize how these markers influence their view of the world. Today, mainstream journalism typically requires journalists to remain objective and detached. Yet, the muckraking journalists of the twentieth century worked passionately for social change. So do contemporary journalists who believe in interventionist journalism models such as public journalism, development journalism, emancipatory journalism, and advocacy journalism.

Development of critical thinking skills/open mindedness versus mastery: Feminist pedagogy encourages students to develop a critical stance and openness to a variety of perspectives (Hoffmann and Stake). This is in contrast to the conventional educational idea of mastery that requires students to understand material as presented by the teacher. Students are here competitively evaluated based on the "same external standard" (Maher and Tetreault 16). Journalists, of course, should have a critical stance toward authority if they want to act as any kind of watchdog. We should design new ways of evaluating students' critical thinking skills instead of their simple mastery of AP style and grammar.

WHY?

The final question to consider here brings us back full circle to feminism and its meaning in our lives. Why do we teach?

What do we want to accomplish in the classroom? As a feminist teacher, I believe we have a responsibility to enrich our students' lives and to contribute to a better society. We can't simply teach because it is part of a job description.

The characteristics of feminist pedagogy dovetail neatly with my ideas about journalism and its potential to bring about social change. I do believe that a feminist media writing pedagogy is possible and necessary as we confront the changing media environment.

From Theory to Classroom: Some Practical Applications of Standpoint Theory

BARBARA BARNETT

I teach a class entitled Diversity in the Media, in which we discuss how the mass media challenge or reinforce stereotypes of race, class, sex, sexual identity, age, and physical abilities. To help students gain a deeper understanding of these issues, I have worked to incorporate standpoint theory into my teaching.

Standpoint theory grew out of notions about power and power in society (Harding; Hartsock, "*Feminist*"). It is, for me, a very complex idea, but when I incorporate it into teaching, I try to think of it in simple terms: as a way to understand others' experiences.

First, standpoint theory is about the different ways in which we experience situations. Our perceptions are influenced by our position in society, by power relations. The example that is most often given is the idea of slavery—both master and slave are in the same institution, but they experience slavery in radically different ways. I talk about this topic in the diversity and

media class and in a research methods class I have taught for graduate students. I give the slavery example, but I also give an example students may be better able to understand: Ever been on a date and one of you is having a great time, and the other can hardly wait for the evening to end?

Second, standpoint theory questions the whole notion of objectivity (Harding). In contemporary journalism, reporters seek “balanced” viewpoints, but in so doing, they rely on dualisms to construct their stories, and this reliance creates false oppositional categories of good and evil, right and wrong, male and female (Creedon). Although journalists are encouraged to craft narratives devoid of personal values, the journalistic standard of objectivity is but a theoretical ideal, and “in practice objectivity is a standpoint—white and male” (Creedon 15).

Third, standpoint focuses on lived experiences, positing that people’s own lives are important sources of “expertise.” Standpoint acknowledges that members of marginalized groups have experiences different from members of the mainstream group, but also acknowledges that members of marginalized groups are not homogeneous; one member’s experiences can vary greatly from the experiences of another member of the group (Collins, “Learning”; Collins, *Fighting*; Hartsock, *Money*; Orbe).

In our diversity class, I encourage students to abandon the notion that they can ever achieve the elusive position of objectivity. Instead, we explore and acknowledge biases and think about how those biases work to structure the ways we research and write news stories. Harding, who has looked at this idea in science, talks about “strong objectivity,”

the systematic examination of our own beliefs and values and how these affect our research questions, interests, and practices. When we apply this to journalism, we in the class talk about our positions in society—how race, sex, religion, sexual identity, and age affect how people perceive us and how we perceive others. I ask students to consider who has power, and who doesn’t, as they start to research, report, and write. I suggest they abandon the notion of objectivity and instead think about “strong objectivity” in crafting news stories that have the potential to connect journalism with social advocacy and social action (Brooks; Durham).

Fourth, and related is, reflexivity. Again Harding suggests that if we acknowledge our biases, we’ll eventually produce a less partial and distorted view of the world. Not only should students become aware of their own biases, they also need to learn to value their own experiences and to develop their own voices, as my co-author Margaretha Geertsema suggests. In journalism, reflexivity might result in a more accurate and authentic story, not just a story in which all the facts are right.

Finally, I ask students to think of research as collaboration. I suggest standpoint theory may be used as an analytical tool, allowing journalists to “consider competing accounts of the same phenomenon” (Hawkesworth 150). Within a news article about construction of a new sports arena, for example, there may be numerous stories: the story about how much revenue the new arena will bring for downtown businesses, the story about people who will be displaced when the construction begins in their neighborhood, the story about new jobs that will be created by the construction project, and the story

about the need for a new sports arena versus other community needs. Journalists need to consider all these points of view and to think in terms of a nuanced, multi-faceted news account.

In our diversity and the media class, I introduce the idea of standpoint to students, mainly to get them thinking about how to ask questions. Asking questions (i.e., conducting research) will be a major component of any job students take in journalism, public relations, or advertising, and learning how to ask the right questions—the questions that truly inform, not just garner a good quote or sound bite—is a skill they need to hone. We acknowledge that we will never totally understand the experiences of someone different from us—we live in different bodies, and society evaluates us on the basis of sex, race, ethnicity, sexual identity, and so on. Yet, although we may not totally understand how it feels to live in that body, we can at least make an attempt to learn by asking thoughtful, respectful questions.

Similar to the exercise that co-author Danna Walker uses to illustrate different situated knowledges, I have incorporated some short, simple in-class assignments to get students thinking about standpoint and the experiences of “the other.” These aren’t necessarily original, and I encourage others to adapt these and to offer their own ideas:

- U.S. students are very familiar with *The Wizard of Oz*. Students all know the story of Dorothy, who kills the Wicked Witch of the East, then sets out on a journey to find her home, all the time with the witch’s sister, the Wicked Witch of West, trying to do her harm. To introduce the idea of standpoint, I read a passage from the

book *Wicked*, which tells the story of Oz from the witch’s point of view. In this version, the witch, Elphaba, is the sympathetic figure because, after all, someone killed her sister. Dorothy is portrayed as a dumb farm girl and Toto as a pesky distraction. After I read the passage, I tell them to think about a fairy tale, fable, or myth they know. Then I ask them to re-tell the story from the perspective of an “other” in the story. Afterward, we talk about how the story can change, depending upon whom you interview.

I’ve done this as a graded and nongraded assignment. When I grade it, I make it an in-class assignment, and I’m pretty generous with points, mainly grading to see if they got the concept of standpoint. I’ve gotten stories told from the perspective of the Big Bad Wolf who ate little Red Riding Hood; from the perspective of the wolf in “The Three Little Pigs”; and from the perspective of Scar, the evil uncle in *The Lion King*. Interestingly, I’ve gotten retelling of “Cinderella” from the point of view of the stepsisters. Often these end with “and the stepsister got married and lived happily ever after.” I usually feel compelled to write a note about how maybe she started her own business, or fell in love with a woman, or didn’t fall in love at all, but still lived happily ever after. Some fairy tales are harder to dispel than others. However, this exercise leads to discussions of whose stories need to be told, who is considered the “other” in contemporary society, and how to tell stories from multiple points of view.

- When we study issues of sexual identity, I pass out slips of paper and ask students to pretend they are gay and they’ve just this very minute told their parents, a loved one, a friend. Then I ask them to write how their loved

one reacted—or how they wished they reacted—and I say, “If you’re gay, you already know the answer to this,” so you can write the actual answer or what you wished had happened. The responses are anonymous, but we read the reactions out loud in class. Many of the responses are in the vein of “they would love me anyway,” and I ask why no loved ones offered hearty congratulations. We then discuss whether this was “hard” or “easy,” and why, and this leads into discussions of how journalists cover issues of sexual identity, and when sexual identity is relevant in stories. We talk about the ethics of “outing” and how to make decisions about listing survivors in obituaries and family members in wedding announcements.

- In another exercise, I divide the class, with men on one side and women on the other. I ask students to “switch” places. The men have just become women, the women have just become men. They discuss things they can do in their new roles, things they can’t. Then we talk about this as a class. We list things on the board, then we note whether these are “biological” or “social.” Sometimes the lines are confused or blurred. We talk about how these notions and ideas might affect the way we approach stories—for example, who do we consider authorities and why? how do we describe people in news stories?
- One issue I want students to be aware of is ageism. Often I begin this discussion by asking how students feel the world sees them—what are the stereotypes people have about college students? Do they think people have prejudices against them because they are young? Usually, the answer is yes, and they often cite examples of trying to get a news story and not

being taken seriously because they don’t have experience, or they tell me young men have to pay higher auto insurance rates than older men or women. Then we make a list on the board of all the euphemisms we have for old people. We take a look at the list, and most of the names aren’t too flattering. Then I ask students to imagine their lives at seventy. They write a short in-class paper on what they think their life will actually be like vs. what they want it to be like. We talk about stereotypes and how those can shape the stories we tell. And we talk about where we see older people in the media—in both ads and news, as victims, clowns, or helpers for primary characters.

- To better understand issues of socioeconomic class, we play a poverty game. I tell students to form a family. They don’t have to form a traditional nuclear family—they can be a “family” of four adults all living in the same house. Then I give each family an envelope with instructions. I tell them how much the family’s salary is per month (I try to base this on minimum wage or poverty levels), and I give them a list of expenditures for the month. They have to figure out how to pay the bills. I include rent, transportation, food, utilities, but I also include one “emergency”—water pipe breaks and ruins rug, car dies, and the big one—trip to the doctor and no insurance. I also include a “luxury” item, such as “family member birthday, trip to the video store” or “trip to see new movie.” This leads into a discussion of where we see poor people in the media—often as a problem or a drain on society. We use this to discuss the types of news stories we cover, our sources, our “authorities,” and concepts such as “invisible labor”

and the role advertising plays in creating desire.

- To help students get out of their comfort zones (the campus environment), I ask them to participate in an exercise developed by staff at The Poynter Institute. The “listening posts” exercise requires students to visit a place they normally wouldn’t visit. I tell them not to go to a place where they would feel unsafe but to go to a place they may never have been before—maybe a place about which they are curious. They can go with a “guide,” but the idea is to get them to observe and to think about stories they might develop from this new place they’ve visited and to think about news sources. When I asked the diversity and the media class to do this exercise earlier this year, students visited a bowling alley, a trailer park, a knitting class, a gay bar, a yoga studio, and a NASCAR race. When I asked students what lessons they might take with them when they started work, one female student, who visited her mother’s knitting class, said she was surprised to learn that “ordinary housewives” were so passionately interested in politics and world events. Another student replied, “I never gave a second thought to other people and what their lives were like. Now I realize there are people going to bed without enough food and heat.”

In the research methods class for graduate students, I also introduce some of the ideas of standpoint and feminist research methods—ideas that are often antithetical to their previous journalistic training. In this class I borrow from the concept that feminist scholars approach research as a partnership (Bloom). The idea is that I, as the researcher, don’t come in and study you, the subject, then leave. The

idea is that we talk together about what needs to be studied—if anything—and the person who does the research works collaboratively with the people who are being researched (Hesse-Biber). This is not the standard journalistic hit-and-run approach. It involves community and consensus-building, and it is about breaking down hierarchies.

For many students, this concept is a difficult one. They’ve been taught a whole different kind of research technique—detached, short-term, us versus them. So the idea that research could be conducted as partnership is foreign to most. For many, it shakes the foundations of what they’ve been taught and raises questions about integrity, and it raises a troubling question for some: Does loss of objectivity—or the acknowledgement it never existed in the first place—mean that the quality of their research is compromised? As we debate this issue, we talk about what has passed for objective journalism in the past—news outlets that ignored or downplayed the Civil Rights movement or AIDS—and I ask students to think about current news coverage that may fail to meet the objectivity criteria. Some students note the lack of coverage of women’s sports; others note the wealth of stories about Christmas and the dearth of stories about non-Christian holidays, including Hanukkah and Ramadan.

I have to admit that I was reluctant to introduce the concept of standpoint into the research methods class. After a semester in which we discussed how to develop a research question, how to operationalize variables, how to ensure consistency in analysis, I wondered how students would react. I also admit that I worried my colleagues would find out I’d taken such an off-the-beaten path

approach and question my teaching skills. Truthfully, I felt I was doing something radical by suggesting students re-think the research process. As I considered whether to introduce standpoint, I thought about my own research, and I came to realize that my feminist research skills had led me to richer, deeper understandings than my objective journalistic techniques. Also, I decided if I didn't share this with students, I would be providing them with only partial information about the research process and what they could discover.

To introduce the notion of standpoint in the research methods class, we began by discussing how particular news stories students have read, even how journalism in general, would be different if we followed some feminist research techniques. Briefly, some key points in feminist research are that:

- You break down the barriers between the researcher and researched. You're striving for connection, often intimacy, rather than detachment and tricking someone into an answer.
- You don't make judgments about what the person tells you.
- You start with the assumption that the people you are researching are the best spokespeople about their lives and their conditions.
- You value intellectual as well as personal knowledge (Brooks).

Then I posed a series of questions to students. They could answer and give examples in class, but I wanted them to think carefully about these questions as they developed their research papers for the class.

- How would news stories be different if our goal wasn't to be objective and detached but to achieve a kind

of friendship with our sources? What would happen if both the interviewer and the interviewee disclosed information? What if the interviewee could ask the reporter questions? Does this happen now in other types of coverage (sports, politics)?

- What if we let the interviewees define the research agenda? What if we let them suggest what stories we should report? Is this what community journalism is about?
- What would happen if we let sources read our stories, to see if we accurately captured their ideas?
- How would our sources change if we valued personal knowledge, not just intellectual knowledge?
- How would this perspective of partnership change the questions we ask?

For some students, the idea of reflecting on their own social positions and considering how to hear better the voice of social "others" led them to research projects they hadn't anticipated. One woman developed a research project that involved a series of blogs on teen sexuality. She developed the blogs by interviewing teens about their own experiences and the issues they considered important, and her blog entries were based on their comments.

Julia T. Wood has suggested that standpoint can be "the starting point from which to frame research questions and concepts, develop designs, define what counts as data, and interpret findings" (12). Standpoint also can be a starting point for rethinking journalism and the way we teach students to gather information, write, and tell stories. If we fail to teach students about the tools available to them, we do them a disservice as they enter a media world in transition.

Some Thoughts for the Future

For some of us who have practiced the profession of journalism and who now teach students who hope to enter this field, there is an uncomfortable fit between what we were taught and what we want to teach. We were taught to speak, write, and think in a patriarchal voice, one that we do not believe has captured the authentic voices of the people we interview. Feminist theories, applied in the classroom, can help students learn better how to do research, report, and write. We see journalism as a public service, designed to inform citizens about the world in which they live, and we believe feminist teaching methods will serve our students as they take on their roles as storytellers, as truth seekers, as cultural interpreters, and as challengers of authority in contemporary society.

In this paper, each of us has noted that journalism is changing. The professional environment that students enter now bears little resemblance to the male-dominated, hierarchical one in which we worked, which privileged detachment to the point of callousness. Our students live in a world that privileges connection, one in which technology allows anyone with a computer—in some cases, a cell phone—to become a storyteller and in which a lack of technology casts some people as “digital others.” Feminist theories, which reject linear thinking and recognize the value of different voices, offer ways to help journalism students navigate an environment in flux. The media are no longer the elites; they are competing to be heard in the marketplace of ideas. Therefore, the stories journalists tell need to be thorough and complete to be credible. Feminist teach-

ing offers a way to help students learn how to build the connections they will need to work in this new environment.

As we think about the ways we teach, how our teaching evolves and continues to evolve, we consider our impact as feminist teachers and come to this conclusion: We chisel. We chip away at the ideas that knowledge is given to students by teachers, that separation is the best way to conduct research, that indifference is the filter through which we tell stories, that there is a right and wrong way to present information or to teach. We believe our efforts are helping students learn not only skills, but also new ways of thinking, challenging, and creating. We want our students to be “connected knowers” who are empathetic, curious, and accepting of others’ viewpoints (Belenky et al.). Our hope is that in the future our teaching content and methods will not be regarded as subversive but as essential. Although our conversations have focused narrowly on journalism, we hope this article serves as a starting point for discussions of the transformative promise of feminist teaching in all subjects.

REFERENCES

- Barkley, Elizabeth F., K. Patricia Cross, and Claire Howell Major. *Collaborative Learning Techniques*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2005.
- Beasley, Maurine. *The New Majority*. Lanham, Md.: University Press of America, 1988.
- Becker, Lee B., Tudor Vlad, and Joel D. McLean. “2006 Enrollment Report: Enrollments Level Off; Online Instruction Now Routine.” *Journalism & Mass Communication Educator* 62 (2007): 263–78.
- Belenky, Mary Field, Blythe McVicker Clinchy, Nancy Rule Goldberger, and Jill Mattuck Tarule. *Women’s Ways of Knowing*. New York: BasicBooks, 1986.

- Berry, Wendell. "The Loss of the University." *Home Economics*. New York: North Point Press, 1987. 76–97.
- Bloom, Leslie Rebecca. *Under the Sign of Hope: Feminist Methodology and Narrative Interpretation*. Albany: State University of New York Press, 1998.
- Brooks, Abigail. "Feminist Standpoint Epistemology: Building Knowledge and Empowerment through Women's Lived Experiences." *Feminist Research Practice: A Primer*. Ed. Sharlene Nagy Hesse-Biber and Patricia L. Leavy. Thousand Oaks, Calif.: Sage, 2002. 58–82.
- Business Unusual Resource Material*. Johannesburg, South Africa: Gender Links, 2007.
- Collins, Patricia Hill. *Fighting Words: Black Women and the Search for Social Justice*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1998.
- . "Learning from the Outsider Within: The Sociological Significance of Black Feminist Thought." *Social Problems* 33.6 (1986): S14–S32.
- Creedon, Pamela J., ed. *Women in Mass Communication*. 2d ed. Newbury Park, Calif.: Sage, 1993.
- Durham, Meenakshi Gigi. "On the Relevance of Standpoint Epistemology to the Practice of Journalism: The Case for 'Strong Objectivity.'" *Communication Theory* 8.2 (1998): 117–40.
- Freire, Paulo. *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. New York: Continuum, 1972.
- Harding, Sandra. *Whose Science? Whose Knowledge?* Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1991.
- Hartsock, Nancy C. M. "The Feminist Standpoint: Towards a Specifically Feminist Historical Materialism." *Discovering Reality: Feminist Perspectives on Epistemology, Metaphysics, Methodology, and Philosophy*. Ed. Sandra Harding and Merrill B. Hintikka. Dordrecht: D. Reidel, 1983.
- . *Money, Sex, and Power: Toward a Feminist Historical Materialism*. New York: Longman, 1983.
- Hawkesworth, Mary. "Analyzing Backlash: Feminist Standpoint Theory as an Analytical Tool." *Women's Studies International Forum* 22.2 (1999): 135–55.
- Hesse-Biber, Sharlene Nagy. "The Practice of Feminist In-Depth Interviewing." *Feminist Research Practice: A Primer*. Ed. Sharlene Nagy Hesse-Biber and Patricia L. Leavy. Thousand Oaks, Calif.: Sage, 2002. 111–48.
- Hoffmann, Frances L., and Jayne E. Stake. "Feminist Pedagogy in Theory and Practice: An Empirical Investigation." *NWSA Journal* 10.1 (Spring 1998): 79–97.
- hooks, bell. *Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center*. Boston: South End Press, 1984.
- . *Talking Back: Thinking Feminist, Thinking Black*. 1999 Boston: South End Press, 1999.
- . *Teaching to Transgress*. New York: Routledge, 1994.
- Jaggar, Alison. *Feminist Politics and Human Nature*. Totowa, N.J.: Rowman & Allanheld, 1983.
- Kosicki, Gerald M., and Lee B. Becker. "Annual Survey of Enrollment and Degrees Awarded." *Journalism & Mass Communication Educator* 53 (1998): 65–82.
- Lorde, Audre. *Sister Outsider*. Freedom, Calif.: The Crossing Press, 1984.
- Lowe Morna, Colleen. *Business Unusual: Gender and Economic Reporting*. Johannesburg: Gender Links, Nd.
- Made, Pat, and Farai Samhungu. "Strengthening Gender Perspectives in IPS News Coverage." *Whose News? Whose Views? Southern Africa: Gender in Media Handbook*. Ed. Colleen Lowe Morna. Johannesburg: Gender Links, 2001. 136–42.
- Maher, Frances A., and Mary Kay Tetreault. *The Feminist Classroom*. New York: BasicBooks, 1994.
- Markowitz, Linda. "Unmasking Moral Dichotomies: Can Feminist Pedagogy Overcome Student Resistance?" *Gender and Education* 17 (2005): 39–55.
- Massé, Mark, and Mark N. Popovich. "The National Media Writing Faculty Study." *Journalism & Mass Communication Educator* 59 (2004): 214–38.
- McChesney, Robert. *Communication Revolution: Critical Junctures and the Future of Media*. New York: The New Press, 2007.
- Orbe, Mark. *Constructing Co-Cultural Theory: An Explanation of Culture, Power, and Communication*. Thousand Oaks, Calif.: Sage, 1998.

- Stone-Mediatore, Shari. "Challenging Academic Norms: An Epistemology for Feminist and Multicultural Classrooms." *NWSA Journal* 19.2 (Summer 2007): 55-78.
- Tompkins, Jane. "Teaching Like it Matters: A Modest Proposal for Revolutionizing the Classroom." *Lingua Franca* 8 (1991): 24-27.
- Wood, Julia T. "Gender and Moral Voice: Moving from Women's Nature to Standpoint Epistemology." *Women's Studies in Communication* 15.1 (1992): 1-23.
- World Association for Christian Communication, Margaret Gallagher, and the Media Monitoring Project, South Africa. *Who Makes the News? Global Media Monitoring Project 2005*. 2005. 3 December 2007 <<http://www.whomakesthenews.org>>.