Dennis Cato
Pierrefonds Comprehensive High School

Is There a Feminist Pedagogy?

Abstract

The following paper attempts to show that there is no "feminist pedagogy." It is maintained that attempts to show that there is have failed to establish either methodological or epistemological grounds on which such a pedagogy might be based. In the case of methodological grounds, the claim is seen to be either rhetorically empty or, where "consciousness-raising" is invoked, to be disingenuous. In the case of epistemological grounds, the claim to a distinct feminist pedagogy which appeals to gender distinctions deriving from Freudian theory is seen to be vacuous. Where the epistemological claim appeals to "postmodernism," it is seen to be incoherent.

Résumé

L'auteur de cet article cherche à démontrer qu'il n'existe pas de "pédagogie féministe". Il affirme que les tentatives visant à démontrer qu'il en existe une n'ont pas réussi à en établir les bases méthodologiques ou epistémologiques. Pour ce qui est des bases méthodologiques, l'assertion est perçue comme étant soit vide sur le plan de la rhétorique soit déloyale lorsqu'on invoque la "prise de conscience". Dans le cas des bases épistémologiques, la revendication d'une pédagogie féministe distincte favorisant la distinction entre hommes et femmes issue de la théorie freudienne est perçue comme vide. Lorsque l'assertion épistémologique en appelle au "postmodernisme", ell est perçue comme incohérente.

According to the views of some feminists, the application of the principles of feminism to educational practice contains revolutionary implications. For example, Margo Culley and Catherine Portugues (1985) maintain that

> . . . to bring women into the curriculum means nothing less than to reorganize all knowledge, and that changing *what*

> we teach means changing *how* we teach. Educators involved in this late-twentieth-century revolution in teaching and learning must continue to explore and to articulate – through reflection and dialogue – the content of this new conjunction 'feminist pedagogy.' (p. 2. Italics in original.)

Similarly for Anne-Louise Brookes (1992), feminist pedagogy is a "revolutionary work," one which calls upon teachers "to create and devise pedagogies which teach learners how to transform those structures of authority which produce oppression" (p. 55).

For Glorianne Leck (1987) there is a " 'maverick' called 'feminist pedagogy' (which is) altering the basic structure of the entire taken-for-granted patriarchal paradigm of schooling" (pp. 353-4). Magda Lewis (1990) sees feminist pedagogy as "transformative pedagogic practice" (p. 128). Carol Nicholson (1989) envisions a "radical new pedagogy (serving as) a corrective to postmodernism's tendencies to nihilism on the one hand and apologies for the status quo on the other" (p. 203). Finally, for Carolyn Shrewesbury (1987) the feminist pedagogy constitutes a "crucial component of the feminist revolution" (p. 13).

However, questions concerning the precise nature and content of the feminist pedagogy have arisen, questions which have not gone unnoticed by feminists themselves. For example, Susan Laird (1988) observes that "feminist pedagogy has so far escaped philosophic analysis, so its meaning is admittedly not yet altogether clear or precise" (p. 450). In the same way, Glorianne Leck (1987) points out that, as a result of "the entanglement of concerns about education that are offered by contemporary critics, it is often difficult to generate a clear sense of what a distinctly feminist pedagogy would be" (p. 347). "The whole notion of feminist pedagogy," for Berenice Fisher (1986), "still leaves us with serious questions" (p. 22). Finally, Kathleen Weiler (1991) says that

> . . . defining exactly what feminist pedagogy means in practice, however, is difficult. It is easier to describe the various methods used in specific women's courses and included by feminist teachers claiming the term 'feminist pedagogy', than it is to provide a coherent definition. (p. 455)

The reason why providing a coherent definition of feminist pedagogy is difficult is that there is no single feminist background theory informing such pedagogy. In addition to a "liberal" feminism which seeks simply to end sexist discrimination in the classroom (Houston, 1985), there exists, according to Patti Lather (1991), lesbian, third-

world, gynocentric, structuralist, post-structuralist, neo-, post-, and just plain Marxist feminism, to say nothing of the "old French feminism" of Simone de Beauvoir which is to be distinguished from something called "French High Feminism" or "French High Theory of the Female Body". Nonetheless, it is possible to discern a generalized spectrum of feminist thought and its application to feminist pedagogy by virtue of a range of positions in respect to the origins of the "patriarchal paradigm" in educational thought and practice. At what might be termed the "conservative" end of the spectrum are those (Noddings, 1984; Belenky, 1986; Grummet, 1988) who emphasize the role of gender differences in male and female ways of knowing, differences arising, according to the view, from early, Freudian-defined childhood experiences. At the "radical" end of the spectrum are those who see ways of knowing and learning as rather the outcome of oppressive patriarchal institutions which structure social relations. Such institutions may be seen as products of patriarchal power relations (Lewis, 1989, 1990; Brookes, 1992) or from a "post-modernist" perspective (Weiler, 1987, 1991; Lather, 1991), one which simply rejects the old "metanarratives" of Western thought in favour of "understanding a world of multiple causes and effects interacting in complex nonlinear ways, all of which are rooted in a limitless array of historical and cultural specificities" (Lather, p. 52). Patricia Rooke (1989) observes that "it is a naive assumption [to suppose that all feminists] are united in a selfless sisterhood which transcends all differences, including moral, aesthetic, or intellectual ones" (p. 112).

In addition to, and often linked with, these "conservative" and "radical" positions relative to the origins of the "patriarchal paradigm" in education, there is a rich humus of an emotive and even mystical quality attending feminist writing. The emotion comes often in the form of an enormous sense of grievance extending in some cases to overt androphobia. Berenice Fisher (1986) sees feminist pedagogy as alleviating "the universe of our oppression" (p. 22), while for Janet Miller (1982) "sexual oppression is the paradigm of all oppression" (p. 9). For Glorianne Leck (1989), those who ignore such oppression are simply "intellectually comatose" (p. 388); Kathleen Weiler (1991) deplores the "universalizing tendency of 'malestream' thought" (p. 469); Anne-Louise Brookes (1992) is repelled by "the madness of male organized culture" (p. 172). Mary O'Brien (1986) draws back from those "male hands [which] maintain their sweaty grip on public and private power" (p. 172).

The mystical quality attending feminist writing attaches to a protean effort to articulate the distinctive nature of female emotion and experience. Weiler (1991) sees such emotions in feminist pedagogy serving as "links between a kind of inner truth or inner self and the outer world - including ideology, culture, and other discourses of power" (p.

463). For her, that inner truth is connected to "the unique vision of women in a male-defined society and intellectual tradition" (p. 60). In its turn, the unique vision emerges in "that world of experience prior to expression", which, as a consequence, requires that women "create a new language based on women's actual lived experiences" (p. 60). Jo Anne Pagano (1988) sees the primary task of women teachers as that of creating "a new language and an art in which we can all converse as ourselves and in which the intellectual and emotional in each of us remain in conversation" (p. 337). For O'Brien (1986), the new language, one "uncontaminated by collective patriarchal power and self-interest of particular men (constitutes) the condition of an exciting projection of a new epistemology" (p. 101). The new epistemology will become manifest, for Anne Walsh (1986), in the form of "a metatheory that will be everywhere at once, multifaceted and kaleidoscopic in practice, like a quilt" (p. 19). "Women", Janice Raymond (1985) asserts simply "need the knowledge and the understanding of their own truth" (p. 50).

What exactly is this "unique vision", this "inner truth" of which feminists speak? What is this new language designed to articulate the world of experience prior to expression? Are they to be found in the realm of gender differences having their origin in early childhood experiences, or are they the outcome of later encounters with oppressive patriarchal structures? Is there a feminist pedagogy to be derived from such sources?

I want to argue here that there is no such "unique vision", no such "inner truth". I want to argue that there is no "feminist pedagogy". Its proponents have failed to establish either a methodology which is distinct from what one understands as a generally humanistic pedagogy, whether specified in terms of an emphasis on experience, the deconstruction of classroom hierarchy, or as exercises in "consciousness raising". They have equally failed to establish a distinctive epistemology, that is, that females come to know and, therefore, come to learn differently than males. Whether specified in terms of gender distinctions arising from early childhood identity construction or in terms of socially-constructed experience arising from encounters with oppressive patriarchal institutions, there is simply no evidence to support a distinct feminist pedagogy.

Methodological Claims

A distinctive pedagogy means a distinctive methodology, a distinctive way of proceeding in the classroom. The lecture method, the Socratic method, the child-centered method, and so on are distinctive pedagogies. The ideological perspective that one happens to hold –

pacifism, vegetarianism, feminism - is not itself a pedagogy but rather a perspective which may (or may not) be transmitted by means of a particular pedagogy. This confusion between pedagogy and perspective dogs feminist accounts of the feminist pedagogy. As a consequence, the feminist pedagogy conceived as a distinctive methodology is never articulated, only insinuated. It is insinuated in two distinguishable but related ways: a rhetorical claim which invokes purportedly uniquely feminine personal and/or moral attributes which bestow upon the feminist pedagogy its distinctive character; secondly, an appeal to the activity of "consciousness-raising" in which experiences and feelings of a particular feminine nature are elicited which then come to serve as the basis of the "revolution in pedagogy". The difficulty is that where the rhetorical claim is empty - it amounts to little more than tilting at the "straw man" embodied in the patriarchal paradigm - the claim based on consciousness-raising is incoherent. We never learn just what those experiences and feelings are, to say nothing of how they come together to constitute a feminist pedagogy.

The rhetorical claim. Once one understands that "patriarchy", "hierarchy", "tradition", and "competition" are bad and that the "personal", "community", "growth", and "renewal" are good, then one will have understood the rhetorical claim. However, one must also understand that to ask for evidence for the one or demonstration of the other is misconceived. The assertion is to be understood as self-establishing. So Glorianne Leck (1987) directs our attention to those feminist teachers who,

> . . . by emphasizing the role that the personal plays in learning, have developed an educational paradigm which at times is diametrically opposed to the patriarchal one (where the personal is seen as a source of contamination and the subjective as something to be avoided). (p. 350)

Leck never reveals just where one might discover any reference to the "personal" as a source of "contamination" and the "subjective" as something to be "avoided". It is simply what the patriarchal paradigm means. Similarly, one must not ask for greater specification of the role the "personal" plays in the feminist educational paradigm, nor, for that matter, just what Leck's "educational paradigm" might look like. Its existence is embodied in its utterance. In the same way, Nancy Schniewind (1983) proclaims: "Femininist education implies that we enter into dialogue with other students, meeting them as human beings, and learning with them in community" (p. 271). What has to be understood is that in the patriarchal paradigm, one does not enter into dialogue with students, meet them as human beings, nor learn with them in community. One does

not do this since that is simply what the "patriarchal paradigm" *means*. In the same vein, Carolyn Shrewesbury (1987) reveals that "[f]eminist pedagogy begins with a vision of what education might be but frequently is not" (p. 6). She points to a "web of interrelationships in the classroom [which] is seen to stretch to the local, regional, and global communities and, potentially, even beyond the boundaries of the earth" (p. 6). But what is the content of Shrewesbury's vision? Beyond reference to vague qualities such as "empowerment", "community", and "leadership", qualities which, of course, are absent from the patriarchal paradigm yet which are also indistinguishable from mainline liberal pedagogy, Shrewesbury is silent. Nonetheless, she concludes that "fundamental to feminist pedagogy is a commitment to growth, renewal, to life. The vision itself must continue to evolve" (p. 7). At length, one can only demur when Kathleen Weiler (1987) triumphantly proclaims that, for feminist pedagogy, "it's okay to be human" (p. 122).

The consciousness-raising claim. Beyond simple rhetoric, the methodological claim for a feminist pedagogy looks to the activity of consciousness-raising as its distinctive quality. What consciousness-raising does, according to Berenice Fisher (1987), is to focus on "the need for women to look at our real feelings about the world and the actual character of our experience as women, in order to provide the clue to both the theory and practice of liberation" (p. 21). The difficulty is that not all "experience" counts, since women's experiences in a patriarchal society, according to her, are "systematically *discounted* as trivial or irrelevant, unless they are the experiences of 'exceptional' women" (p. 21. Italics in original). How will Fisher's consciousness-raising provide the clue to both the theory and practice of liberation when the actual character of experience as women is discounted as trivial or irrelevant? The dilemma presents no obstacle. While the actual character of their experience as women may be discounted, for Fisher the clue to both the theory and practice of liberation shall spring from "the highly developed capacity for feeling which our situation as women has forced us to cultivate" (p. 21). This highly developed capacity for feeling shall determine what shall "count" as experience.

> Our feelings of pain or pleasure, suffering or joy, operate as a sort of beacon light to locate those relations to the world that act as experience and help us get in touch with what in our experience we want to change and eliminate and what we want to claim as our own. (Think, for a moment, of feelings connected with housework or with having an orgasm.) (p. 21)

Thinking for a moment about Fisher's feelings connected with housework or with having an orgasm, just how do her feelings (presumably pain and suffering) "locate" such housework as an experience she wants to change and eliminate? Are not such feelings a *consequence* of doing housework? In the same way, how do Fisher's feelings (presumably pleasure and joy) "locate" having an orgasm as an experience she then wants to "claim as her own"? Are not such feelings a *consequence* of the experience of having an orgasm? If Fisher's housework and orgasms are experiences which she has had imposed upon her by the patriarchal society as part of her oppression, just how can the feelings they engender be taken as that beacon light to locate those relations to the world that count as experiences? Unless Fisher is an "exceptional" woman, are not such experiences to be discounted as trivial or irrelevant? And, finally, what exactly is the relationship between Fisher's highly developed capacity for feeling, her "beacon light", and establishing consciousness-raising as the theoretical foundation for feminist pedagogy?

Fisher's (1987) highly developed capacity for feeling has revealed that the "desire to change our condition leads directly to the search for instruments by which to do so" (p. 22). Principal among such instruments is theory, not just any theory, but theory burnished in the fires of consciousness-raising. Fisher's beacon light has revealed what part of experience she wants to "claim as her own", and such experience now comes "to test the relevance and values of any such theory" (p. 22). The sort of experience Fisher wants to claim as her own and which will now come to test the relevance and values of theory is her "current action". "Where our past experience is not sufficient," Fisher muses, "we can always test theory, prior theory or our emerging theory, by current action" (p. 21). It seems that Fisher's beacon light, her highly developed capacity for feeling to get in touch with what she wants to change and eliminate, what she wants to claim as her own, is not, after all, sufficient to the task. It turns out that Fisher is an "activist" and that, for her, simple exercises in consciousness-raising fall short of achieving liberation. Fisher does not reveal just how her highly developed capacity for feeling revealed that her past experience was not sufficient to get in touch with what she wants to change and eliminate (since one supposed that her highly developed capacity for feeling is all there is) nor just how her current action works to correct prior or emerging theory. Indeed, the latter difficulty, at least, does not seem to have escaped Fisher (1987) either, who observes that "[h]ow theory is related to action remains a crucial problem for feminists, as well as other thinkers with an activist commitment" (p. 22).

There are other problems for thinkers, like Fisher, with an activist commitment who find the clue to both the theory and practice of libera-

tion in current action, principal among which is the disagreement among feminists as to the purpose of consciousness-raising itself. According to Fisher (1987), there are those who claim "that consciousness-raising prevented action, that it became a diversion of energies into an exploration of feelings and 'private' concerns to the detriment of political action" (p. 22). It seems, after all, that it is not Fisher's highly developed capacity for feeling which is central to feminist pedagogy, a capacity developed and enlarged in the course of exploration guided by principles of consciousness-raising. What is central to feminist pedagogy, in general, and the purpose of consciousness-raising, in particular, is political action. Fisher puzzles about those who insist on talking about consciousness-raising in connection with women's highly developed capacity for feeling. She deliberates over whether such talk was "a necessary consequence of consciousness-raising theory or whether the theory itself was so misunderstood or badly applied that it led women in the wrong direction" (p. 22)? How will Fisher resolve the dilemma of those conflicting goals of consciousness-raising? Is the endeavour to be the exploration of feelings and private concerns or, as Fisher maintains, political action? Whose beacon light will illuminate the proper path? What criteria will Fisher employ (since one now supposes that consciousness-raising is all there is) to distinguish the right from the wrong direction?

Unfortunately, Fisher concludes that she "cannot begin to explore the question here" (p. 22). This is a pity, since **we** can only conclude that Fisher's consciousness-raising served simply as a vehicle for **her** highly developed capacity for feeling, for **her** definition of what is to count as experience, and, of course, for **her** particular program of political action.

Epistemological claims

Where the methodological claim to a feminist pedagogy appealed either to an empty rhetoric on the one hand or to a disingenuous account of consciousness-raising on the other, the epistemological claim derives, in the one instance, from the view that females, as a consequence of early gender formation, come to know and therefore to learn differently than males. This is the "gender-based claim" to a distinct feminist pedagogy. Alternatively, others claim that a feminist pedagogy is to be derived from the rejection of the old modernist "metanarratives" characteristic of a superseded "patriarchal paradigm" in favour of a "postmodernist positionality". Here the distinction is not so much a matter of gender differences but rather a distinctly feminist view of the nature of knowledge itself. This is the postmodernist claim to a distinct feminist pedagogy.

The gender-based claim. For some, the gender-based claim is simply assumed rather than argued. For example, Mary Belenky (1986)

points out that "[f]or women, at least, once they include the self, they use connected 'passionate' knowing as the predominant mode for understanding, regardless of whether separate or connected procedures for knowing had been emphasized in the past" (pp. 141- 2). In the same way, Nel Noddings (1984) reveals that "man (in contrast to women) has continually turned away from his inner self and feeling in pursuit of both science and ethics" (p. 8). Neither Belenky nor Noddings, however, show just how they were aware of such gender differences. In the rhetorical fashion, the claim is simply established in its articulation.

For those feminist writers who have attempted to establish gender differences as the basis of a distinctly feminist pedagogy, the Freudian oedipal crisis plays a central role. Carol Gilligan (1982) asserts that while "separation and individuation are critically tied to gender identity since separation from the mother is essential for the development of masculinity" (p. 8), for females "the strength and persistence of women's pre-oedipal attachment to their mothers [constitutes] a developmental difference" (pp. 6-7). While Gilligan derived no pedagogy from the "developmental difference", Jo Anne Pagano (1992) declares that:

> The structure of our public classrooms, our curricula, our teaching methods, and our relationships with colleagues and students recapitulate the male Oedipal drama shaped by repressed desire for connection with the maternal body, a desire expressed defensively in our patterns of differentiation, compartmentalization, and control. (p. 114)

According to Madeleine Grummet (1988), those defensive patterns which recapitulate the male oedipal drama and which are constitutive of public education may be traced to "male epistemologies" which, for her

> . . . are compensations for the inferential nature of paternity as they reduce preoedipal subject/object mutuality to postoedipal cause and effect, employing idealistic and materialistic rationales to compensate as well for the repressed identification that the boy experienced with his mother. (p. 17)

Man's preoedipal mutuality, according to Grummet, has given way to postoedipal cause and effect which then seeks to employ idealistic and materialistic "rationales" to mask the postoedipal rift between boy and mother. These catastrophes, for Grummet, have clear implications for a feminist pedagogy.

> This is the art that women who teach must bring to our work, studying the relations in which we came to form, reflecting on those relations and creating new forms in the curriculum which express our appreciation, our critique and the transformation of the processes that constituted our subjectivity (our identities) and objectivity (the world we share). (p. 190)

However, before Grummet sets to work reflecting on those relations in which she came to form, she might begin by reflecting on whether a shred of evidence exists for her claims. Like Belenky, Noddings, and Pagano, Grummet simply assumes rather than establishes the truth of her Freudian principles, assumptions which are not universally shared.

In what he has termed *MacFreud in America*, the contemporary psychotherapist E. Fuller Torrey (1992) makes two points in respect to Freudian theory, in general, and the oedipal crisis, in particular: (1) Freudian theory is employed to explain every pathological form of behaviour, and (2) there is no evidence whatsoever for its truth. "The common denominator of virtually all counselling and psychotherapy," according to Torrey,

> . . . is the Freudian assumption that intrapersonal and interpersonal problems originate in childhood experiences, especially in one's relations with mother and father. Shyness, difficulty in making a commitment, depression, anxiety, obsessiveness, slovenliness, substance-abuse, eating disorders, trouble making friends, inability to find meaning in life - virtually all problems are said to have the same origin. (p. 208)

In addition to such intrapersonal and interpersonal problems, of course, one might also wish to add the structure of our public classrooms, our curricula, our teaching methods, our relationships with colleagues and students, to say nothing of those "male epistemologies" which compensate for the repressed identification the boy experienced with his mother. The difficulty, however, is:

> There is not a single study verifying Freud's theory that events in the anal stage of development determine adult personality characteristics. The same conclusion is reached when studies relating to the oral and Oedipal stages are examined. There are studies showing that some individuals have personality traits called 'oral' traits but no study which relates such traits to breast-feeding or other events of the oral stage of development. (p. 220)

In addition to the absence of studies establishing any sort of connection between Freudian stages of development and adult personality traits (to say nothing of the structure of our public classrooms, our curricula, and so on), it seems it is difficult to even identify something which might be called an "oedipal event". Torrey goes on to point out that

> . . . [r]esearch on the Oedipal stage and its possible relationship to adult personality is similarly plagued with methodological problems despite the importance attached to the stage by Freud himself. In contrast with breast-feeding or toilet training, the events of the Oedipal period are very difficult to quantify. (p. 220)

The conclusion Torrey draws is that Freud's oedipal hypothesis has roughly the same standing as that of the Loch Ness Monster.

> The core of the oedipal hypothesis – that events in the Oedipal stage will crucially determine personality characteristics – has not been disproven, but neither are there any studies which support such a hypothesis. In this sense Freud's Oedipal theory is on precisely the same scientific plane as the theory regarding the Loch Ness Monster – it has not been conclusively disproven, and one may turn up at any moment to prove it. (p. 221)

Resting as it does on Freud's oedipal crisis, the gender-based claim for a distinctive feminist pedagogy must share the same plane. As with the oedipal crisis, no evidence has been given that females learn differently than males as a consequence of gender distinctions whether, in the case of Belenky and Noddings, such differences were simply assumed or, in the case of Gilligan, Pagano, and Grummet, such differences were attributed to the crisis itself. Of course, such a call for evidence may be seen simply as another failure of "connected knowing", just another example of those masculine epistemologies which are nothing more than idealistic and materialistic rationales to compensate for repressed identification with mother. In that case, of course, one can only acquiesce in the acceptance of the developmental difference, just another turning away from the inner self and feeling to defensively express our patterns of differentiation, compartmentalization, and control.

The postmodernist claim. "Looking to experience as the source of knowledge and the focus of feminist learning," for Kathleen Weiler (1991),

> . . . is perhaps the most fundamental tenet of feminist pedagogy. . . . That women need to examine what they

> have experienced and lived in concrete ways in their bodies, is a materialistic conception of experience. (p. 465)

As was seen with Berenice Fisher, however, not all experience counts. In a patriarchal society, women's experiences were systematically discounted as trivial or irrelevant. Fisher's resolution of the dilemma by reference to her "highly developed capacity for feeling" is rejected by Weiler (p. 464) who takes issue with those who "have asserted the social construction of feelings and their manipulation by the dominant culture; yet at the same time, they look to feelings as the source of truth". What will Weiler look to as the source of truth? How will her particular variety of "experience", the kind that women have experienced in concrete ways in their bodies, come to provide that most fundamental tenet of the feminist pedagogy?

For Weiler, what is required is an account of one's "positionality", a reconstruction of the self in which one is not manipulated by the dominant culture but rather an analysis of a "self"

> . . . struggling for new ways of being in the world through new forms of discourse or new forms of social relationships. Such analysis calls for a recognition of the positionality of each person in any discussion of what can be known from experience. (p. 467)

There is, then, a "self" lying behind the social construction of experience which is not to be identified with that "highly developed capacity for feeling" which, unavoidably, has been manipulated by the dominant culture. Such a self is to be captured in the concept of one's positionality. Oddly, in view of the fact that it is to be that by which the analysis of the struggle for "new ways of being in the world" shall proceed (to say nothing of its being "the most fundamental tenet of feminist pedagogy"), Weiler does not elaborate on the concept of her positionality. Fortunately, Patti Lather (1991) takes up the struggle for those new ways of being in the world, proclaiming that, "[a]s a first-world woman - white, middle class, North American, heterosexual - my self-described positionality shifts from post-Marxist feminist to 'postmodern materialist-feminist' " (*xix*). While it is not clear just what the connection might be between Lather's being a "first-world woman" on the one hand and her shifting "post-Marxist: postmodern materialist-feminist" positionality on the other, she is clearer with respect to

> . . . the postmodern break with totalizing, universalizing 'metanarratives' and the humanist view that undergirds them. Humanism posits the subject as an autonomous

> individual capable of full consciousness and endowed with a stable 'self' constituted by a set of static characteristics such as sex, class, race, sexual orientation. (p. 15)

Lather's positionality is not, after all, to be understood as her being a fully-conscious first-world woman – white, middle class, North American, heterosexual – since these are now to be understood simply as a set of static, humanist characteristics. Her positionality is not to be identified either with her self-description as a "post-Marxist feminist:postmodern materialist-feminist" since such descriptions, under the ruling, are little more than totalizing, universalizing metanarratives. The key to Lather's positionality is its shifting quality, her abandoning that "stable self" in favour of "a site of disarray and conflict inscribed by multiple contestatory discourses" (p. 5). In the absence of such a stable self, a self constructed by those discredited totalizing, universalizing metanarratives, what must be done, according to Lather (p. 108), is to abandon all efforts "to represent the object of investigation as it 'really' is, independent of our representational apparatus for a reflexive focus on how we construct that which we are investigating". Lather's postmodern positionality has rejected both representing a reality conceived independently of her "representational apparatus" – we will never know the object of investigation as it "really" is – as well as a stable self (a stable representational apparatus) – there is rather only a site of conflict and disarray inscribed by multiple contestatory discourses. Having effectively destroyed both the subject and object, Lather's positionality conceived as a reflexive focus on how we construct that which we are investigating comes to rest, inscribed in an "embodied reflexivity that characterizes feminist pedagogy" (p. 48). From her positionality of such embodied reflexivity, Lather proceeds to ask the question:

> Positioning modernist assumptions of truth, objectivity and 'correct readings' as ensnared in phallocentric and logocentric rationalities, how can the postmodern begin to challenge the plethora of concepts that appear as givens in our debates about the possibilities and limits of emancipatory education? How can such self-reflexivity both render our basic assumptions problematic and provisional and yet still propel us to take a stand? (p. 44)

Having abandoned all efforts to represent the object of her investigations as it "really" is, having broken with totalizing and universalizing metanarratives as little more than phallocentric and logocentric rationalities and, finally, having acknowledged the self incapable of full consciousness, as a site of disarray and conflict inscribed by multiple

contestatory discourses, how will Lather win through to challenge the plethora of concepts that appear as givens in our debates about the possibilities and limits of emancipatory education? How will she reveal that embodied self-reflexivity which both characterizes the feminist pedagogy and propels her to take a stand?

"Admittedly," Lather (p. 52) muses, "this approach (emancipatory research) faces the danger of rampant subjectivity where one finds only what one is predisposed to look for." What Lather will do to avoid such rampant subjectivity is to confront "issues of empirical accountability – the need to offer grounds for accepting a researcher's description and analysis – and the search for workable ways of establishing the trustworthiness of the data in critical inquiry" (p. 52). But if it is the case that Lather has abandoned all efforts to represent the object of her investigation as it "really" is, what can she possibly mean by "issues of empirical accountability"? How can she confront such issues if, like other modernist assumptions of truth, objectivity, and correct readings, they are ensnared as well in phallocentric and logocentric rationalities? What are Lather's grounds for accepting a researcher's description and analysis, those workable ways of establishing the trustworthiness of the data in critical inquiry? How will she be able to reconcile such issues of empirical accountability with her postmodernist reflexive focus on how we construct that which we are investigating?

By way of confronting those issues of empirical accountability, Lather (p. 47) spies a "systematized reflexivity which reveals how *a priori* theory has been changed by the logic of the data [which] seems essential in establishing construct validity in ways that will contribute to the growth of illuminating and change-enhancing social theory". But it doesn't matter. For all that Lather has done in confronting the issues of empirical accountability has been to redescribe those modernist assumptions of truth, objectivity, and correct readings and, incoherently, placed them in a context of rampant subjectivity where one finds only what one is predisposed to look for. For her "logic of the data", in other words, one may simply read the object of analysis as it "really" is, for her "*a priori* theory" one may read those totalizing, universalizing metanarratives, and for her "systematized reflexivity" is a stable self capable of full consciousness. Lather's confrontation with issues of empirical accountability has revealed that her postmodern positionality is incoherent, that it covertly appeals to the very assumptions it was the objective of that positionality to overthrow. Will Lather then admit to rampant subjectivity where she found only what she was predisposed to look for? Invoking the rhetorical mode, Lather (1991) retorts that "fears of relativism and its seeming attendant, nihilism or Nietzschean anger, seem to me an implosion of Western, white male, class-privileged arrogance - if we cannot

know everything, then we can know nothing" (p. 116). It would seem, however, that fears of relativism and nihilism arise less from the view that if we cannot know everything we can know nothing and more from the view that Lather's postmodern positionality simultaneously rejects the possibility of knowing anything at all while, at the same time, claiming such rejection as the highest knowledge. In effect, Lather's postmodern positionality is itself simply another totalizing and universalizing metanarrative, yet she gives no reason for its privileging.

Conclusion

I have argued that the proponents of a distinctive feminist pedagogy have failed to establish grounds for such a pedagogy in either methodological or epistemological terms. The methodological claim proved to be either rhetorically empty or, in the case of "consciousness-raising", to be disingenuous. The epistemological claim in its gender-based manifestation proved to be without evidential basis while, in its postmodern form, the claim collapsed into relativism and incoherence. The consequence is that there appears to be no late-twentieth-century revolution in teaching and learning called "feminist pedagogy".

NOTE

"Is There A Feminist Pedagogy?" is an abridged version of an earlier paper presented at the twenty-seventh conference of the Philosophy of Education Society of Great Britain, New College, Oxford University, April 17, 1993.

REFERENCES

Belenky, M. et al. (1986). *Women's ways of knowing: The Development of self, voice and mind.* New York: Basic Books.

Brookes, A. L. (1992) *Feminist pedagogy: An autobiographical approach.* Halifax: Fernwood Publishing.

Culley, M. & Portugues, C. (Eds). (1985). *Gendered subjects: The dynamics of feminist teaching.* Boston: Routledge & Kegan Paul.

Fisher, B. (1986). What is feminist pedagogy? *Radical Teacher, 18,* 20-25.

Gilligan, C. (1982). *In a different voice: Psychological theory and women's development.* Cambridge: Harvard University Press.

Grummet, M. (1988). *Bitter milk: Women and teaching.* Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press.

Houston, B. (1985) Gender freedom and the subtleties of sexist education. *Educational Theory, 35*(4), 359-369.

Lather, P. (1991). *Getting smart: Feminist research and pedagogy with/in the postmodern.* New York: Routledge & Kegan Paul.

Leck, G. (1987). Feminist pedagogy, liberation theory, and the traditional schooling paradigm. *Educational Theory, 37*(3), 343-354.

Leck, G. (1989). Examining gender as a foundation within foundational studies. *Teachers College Record, 91*(3,) 382-395.

Lewis, M. (1989). The challenge of feminist pedagogy. *Queen's Quarterly, 96*(1), 117-129.

Lewis, M. (1990). Interrupting patriarchy: Politics, resistance, and transformation in the feminist classroom. *Harvard Educational Review, 60*(4), 467-488.

Laird, S. (1988). Reforming "woman's true profession:" A case for feminist pedagogy. *Harvard Educational Review, 58*(4), 449-463.

Miller, J. (1982). Feminist pedagogy: the sound of silence breaking. *Journal of Curriculum Theorizing, 4*(1), 5-11.

Morgan, K (1982). Freeing the children: The abolition of gender. *Educational Theory, 35*(4), 351-357.

Nicholson, C. (1989). Postmodernism, feminism, and education: The need for solidarity. *Educational Theory, 39*(3), 197-205.

Noddings, N. (1984). *Caring: A feminist approach to ethics and moral education.* Los Angeles: University of California Press.

O'Brien, M. (1986). Feminism and the politics of education. *Interchange,* 17(2), 95-105.

Pagano, J. (1988). Teaching women. *Educational Theory, 38*(3), 321-340.

Raymond, J. (1985). Women's studies: A knowledge of one's own. In M. Culley & C. Portugues (Eds.), *Gendered subjects: The dynamics of feminist teaching.* (pp. 49—63). Boston: Routledge & Kegan Paul.

Rooke, P. (1989). Re-ordering our partiality: Reflections on careerism and feminist commitment in academia. *The Journal of Educational Thought, 23*(2) 106-119.

Schniewind, N. (1983). Feminist values: Guidelines for teaching methodology in women's studies. In C. Bunch & S. Pollack (Eds.), *Learning our way: Essays in feminist education.* Trumansburg: The Crossings Press.

Shrewesbury, C. (1987). What is feminist pedagogy? *Women's Studies Quarterly, 15*(3-4), 6-14.

Torrey, E.F. (1992). *Freudian fraud: The malignant effect of Freud's theory on American thought and culture.* New York: Harpercollins.

Walsh, A. (1986). The maps are drawn by a living choir: Contexts for the practice of a feminist metatheory of literary history. *Interchange, 17*(1), 1-22.

Weiler, K. (1987). *Women teaching for change.* Westport: Bergin and Garvey.

Weiler, K. (1991) Friere and a feminist pedagogy of difference. *Harvard Educational Review, 61*(4), 449-474.

Dennis Cato teaches social studies at Pierrefonds Comprehensive High School (Quebec). In addition to *The McGill Journal of Education*, he has had papers published in the *Journal of Educational Thought*, the *Journal of Philosophy of Education*, and *Educational Theory.*

Dennis Cato enseigne les études sociales à la Polyvalente de Pierrefonds (Québec). En dehors du *McGill Journal of Education,* il a publié des articles dans le *Journal of Educational Thought,* le *Journal of Philosophy of Education* et *Educational Theory.*