

# GOOD INTENTIONS, DANGEROUS TERRITORY: STUDENT RESISTANCE IN FEMINIST WRITING CLASSES

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“... humans are creatures of habit who have an interest in maintaining their existing world view even if they are victims of social domination.”

—Ann Ferguson

In the last few years in Composition Studies, we have witnessed a rising interest in bringing politics into the writing classroom.<sup>1</sup> Many composition instructors, experienced and new teachers alike, have implemented critical, feminist, or “alternative” pedagogies and changed their curricula to reflect cultural diversity or challenge status quo ideologies. While many have

headed for these uncharted territories with an abundance of enthusiasm and energy, many also have found the journey difficult. The “good news,” according to Pamela Annas and Frinde Maher, is we are teaching in a time and place which is beginning to recognize and validate the diversity of experience, including gender, race, ethnicity, class, age, sexual preference, religion, and physical capability. The “bad news” is that “diversity and difference are unfamiliar territory for many of us and fraught with (usually unintended) dangers” (2).

Our training as teachers may not have prepared us for those dangers. For example, when I taught a cross-listed women’s studies/composition course for the first time, I encountered one danger that has stubbornly remained with me for quite a few years: student resistance. First, I should explain that my classes emphasizing diversity include not only celebrations of “difference” but also feminist critiques of dominant systems in place in our society today. Second, when I taught this course for the first time, I was an inexperienced teacher with utopian visions directly related to feminist theory and pedagogy. My teaching philosophy placed fundamental tenets of feminist and critical pedagogy side by side: personal experience and critical consciousness. I hoped my classes would promote student self-empowerment, social change, and liberation from oppression. I wanted to enable students to write about their own experiences in the dominant systems of society and to think critically about such systems. However, in the process of attempting to create an emancipatory environment, I did not realize some students might resist exposure to material that asks them to question their biases and assumptions about the society in which they live. Many of the students championed—or were at least invested in—a society I considered oppressive, and when I challenged their beliefs, they coded me as an “enemy.” Were my students engaged in resistance against something they found oppressive—me as powerful teacher? Did I impose my reading and critique of culture on students, thereby, as Patti Lather writes, “substituting [my] own reifications for those of dominant culture”? (75). If I was oppressive, if I did impose upon students—and I am not convinced the answer is that simple—I intended the opposite. I intended to present ideas that students might not encounter in their everyday existences; I hoped that students would be

enabled by these views to consider making changes in their lives and even in society.

All my good intentions did not stop many of the students from resisting. The underlying reasons for such resistance were not self-evident then nor easily pin-pointed in hindsight. I cannot believe simply that the students were wrong, misguided, or ignorant, and if they could only listen, I could give them the right answer. At the time, in anger, I did feel that way—evidence of my knee-jerk reaction in answer to theirs. But that mindset has offered me little help in learning to work with the resistance that I see in my classes now. The dangers of student resistance will not stop as long as students wrestle with ideas that are not “academic” but that touch their lives deeply. The question many writing teachers face is whether or not we should abandon asking students to confront such ideas. Are we imposing too much on students and ourselves? Is the resistance too difficult to face daily in the classroom? I claim no foolproof solutions to problems teachers may encounter, but I can share some lessons I learned after I leapt into a struggle with *Women and Writing*, a feminist composition course. After teaching this class, I felt compelled to further explore the problem of student resistance, particularly after discussions with other teachers who mentioned similar experiences. My current explorations are mainly centered on the difficulties faced by teachers who employ a feminist curriculum, but composition teachers who teach “volatile” curricula or use alternative pedagogies may recognize their own struggles as well.

*Women and Writing* was a class that explored the problems faced by women writers in composing, publication, conversation patterns, and language use. I chose Dale Spender’s *Man Made Language* as the main text, Casey Miller and Kate Swift’s *The Handbook of Nonsexist Language* as a reference guide, and a coursepack of supplemental readings that included excerpts of sources that Spender refers to in her text.<sup>2</sup> For writing assignments, I followed part of Pamela J. Annas’ plan outlined in “Style as Politics” in which she proposes an alternative to teaching primarily “defended, linear, and ‘objective’ writing” (360). While Annas does not necessarily think teaching “objective” papers should be dropped from composition courses, she maintains that teaching subjective writing is equally important. In her version of a “women and writing” course, Annas suggests

teaching rigorous writing which brings together “the personal and political, the private and public” (370). The writing she envisions is powerful and committed because authors are willing to take risks, speak from their own experience, and experiment with different styles and formats (370). In implementing these ideas, I chose to have students work on discovering the differences between subjective and objective writing based on the contention that women are often linked with the subjective and men with the objective (Belenky et al 7, Annas 363, Spender 191). In addition to maintaining weekly journals, students wrote one paper grounded in objective support, two based on personal experiences, and one which incorporated library research and interviews as well as subjective reflection.

Annas’ article also provided me with links between teaching writing and politics, echoing feminist theories that illustrate the connections between personal and political and critical pedagogy that considers education a highly political enterprise, steeped in historical and social contingencies. Education, as Henry Giroux and Peter McLaren suggest, is not a “neutral or transparent process antiseptically removed from the concepts of power, politics, history, and context” (153). And as Jane Tompkins notes, “what we do in the classroom is our politics. . . . [O]ur actions and our interactions with our students week in and week out prove what we are for and what we are against in the long run” (66). Teachers and students will not, cannot in fact, leave all their biases outside the door anyway; they will emerge in the course in some form or another, maybe in discussions, conferences, grades, or comments on papers. I felt more honest sharing my “hidden” political views with students, particularly when the class itself centered on the politics of women’s writing. Peter Beidler explains that when he does the most serious, caring teaching, he “teaches himself” to the students. Beidler explains:

I reveal my personality, my way of thinking about things, my way of explaining things, my way of loving literature and the people in it, my sense of values, my sense of humor. . . . I am increasingly convinced that revealing myself is the most important thing I do as a teacher. (6)

Feminist pedagogy also stresses that teachers situate the perspective they present in class as partial. Frances Maher suggests

that instead of presenting material as “the objective truth,” teachers need to be clear about rationales behind the choice of readings and issues for discussion (41).

As I planned the class and considered rationales, I harbored much goodwill toward my as-yet-unknown students and hoped they would enjoy the class discussions and readings. I thought that I would encounter different reactions from students, different responses and opinions, perhaps. But, in general, I assumed that the students would come to understand and fight their own oppression as women and writers—and the male students, if any, would come to recognize their roles in the battle against patriarchy. In other words, I expected to be “preaching to the converted.” In my planning, I had not considered how to answer opposition to my pedagogy or to the texts I brought into the class; in fact, I had not considered opposition at all.<sup>3</sup>

Kathleen Dunn, in “Feminist Teaching: Who Are Your Students?,” argues that when students in feminist classrooms feel uncomfortable with the material, teacher, and/or pedagogy, they can raise a variety of barriers which interfere with learning or processing information (40). These include the “intuitive/affective barrier” which is raised when students feel in danger of ridicule or are afraid they cannot do the work; the “ethical barrier” which students raise when they are asked to work with material that challenges existing value systems; and the “critical/logical barrier” which derives from a failure to process information that does not fit into the students’ current patterns of thinking (40-41).<sup>4</sup> These barriers can manifest themselves as what has been called “student resistance”: silences or student “shut downs,” emotional outbursts, general defensiveness, agitated or resistant body language, heated but unproductive discussion, vitriolic papers or journal entries, and other “attacks.” From almost the first day of *Women and Writing*, I watched in horror as the all-female class immediately raised barriers in reaction to the content of the class. For example, the day we began discussing Dale Spender’s book, I was taken aback by the students’ reaction; the most vocal challenged me on the choice of *Man Made Language*; some questioned Spender’s credibility and the validity of her main points; others reacted by “shutting down,” slumping in their seats without looking at me. If any students agreed with Spender, or were open to her ideas, they must surely have felt silenced by the vocal majority. Furthermore, to add to Dunn’s

notion of barriers, teachers' responses to student resistance often set the tone for any future discussions or interactions. It seems to me that teachers can also raise barriers when they feel powerless or believe their authority is in question. These barriers interfere with learning or processing information—for both teacher and student. For instance, my explanations of Spender's position were tinged with defensiveness and did little to open discussion or work through problems. I believe we were all frustrated, angry, and scared. Janet Wolff put it best when she wrote: "I'm uneasy about their resistance, and mine, and our combined ignorance in dealing with it" (490).

Spender's text garnered what seemed at the time a shocking amount of negative reaction from my students, especially considering my expectations. When I chose the text, I had read sections of it, highlighted the extensive bibliography, and looked at the footnotes. At the time, I did not think *Man Made Language* overly radical for students who had previously confronted feminist issues.<sup>5</sup> In the book, Spender concerns herself with various concepts of language, silence, and verbal and written communication—all from a radical feminist point of view.<sup>6</sup> In the first section of her first chapter entitled "The Deficient Woman," she argues that

women appear . . . deficient—or deviant—in studies of language and sex. And, as with so many other research areas in the social sciences, when the assumptions on which this knowledge has been constructed are examined, it becomes increasingly clear that this female deficiency often has its origins in the research premises and procedures themselves. By beginning with the initial assumption that there is something *wrong* with women's language, research procedures have frequently been biased in favour of men.  
(7)

To someone used to reading strong feminist rhetoric, this passage might seem to be a logical, rational—albeit strongly feminist—argument, one which Spender proves in the next few pages through much documentation. However, to readers who rarely encounter feminist rhetoric or have been exposed to negative images of radical feminists, such a passage may seem to be opinionated raving. What appeared as feminist strength to me

weakened Spender's argument for the women in my class. One student wrote the following in a telling journal entry:

I'm also quite sure that she [Spender] could care less about what I think of [her book]. . . . I got the impression that she is a very self-sufficient woman who thinks that she needs no one. She seems very cocky. Of course this is only speculation, I have never met her, so I suppose that isn't a *very fair accusation*. (emphasis mine)

In accusing Spender of being overly-confident, inappropriately self-sufficient in writing the book, this student plays out the very crux of Spender's argument—that, as an oppressed group, women have little claim to language—there are few avenues to express themselves with strength and conviction—and that women are taught to impose silence on themselves and one another.

The more passionate responses completely discounted Spender, *Man Made Language*, and sometimes the other reading material as well. One person suggested I drop Spender's book entirely in future classes: "I would have to say that I think you should find a different book to use other than Spender's (sic). One which both males and females could relate to. And the male not feel like the book is full of male hating sayings."<sup>7</sup> Many students argued that not only were Spender's theories "wrong" but that she was complaining needlessly. Some suggested that there was something wrong with Spender and other feminist writers and asked me in journals or verbally if the authors were lesbians, divorced, rape survivors, and/or scared by men in some way. In other words, the students looked for personal vendettas rather than general explanations for the arguments the authors were making.

I was devastated. Encountering verbal and written resistance for the first time shook me badly—mostly because the reaction was so unexpected. Many of the women were angry at me for presenting feminist ideas and readings—or perhaps it was something else—and I was just as angry that they could not drop the resistance. I had no answers for students who challenged me and I was surprised and disturbed by the difficulties I encountered. I pushed my students toward "resistance" but had theorized "resistance" only in the context of resisting social

oppression—not thinking about whether or not I was oppressing my students or that they might resist me.

For a long time I felt that the class was a disaster. I blamed myself *and* the students. A few years later, I began to write about this experience to dissolve some of my anger and because the patterns of resistance were repeated in other feminist classes I taught. Although *Women and Writing* might have been better for all involved if I had been a more seasoned teacher, I continued to encounter similar resistance as I gained more experience. Therefore, my lack of experience was not the only factor, and I needed to understand some of the underpinnings of student resistance. Part of my problem seemed to stem from my resistance to the students, my impatience with their backgrounds, blind spots, limitations, and my inability to deliberately mediate conflicts between us. Instead, I tried to convince students that my ideas (and Spender's) were right. In working through some of the experiences with *Women and Writing*, I was able to place myself in the students' position.

Most of the students attending the university came from solid white, lower-middle-class American backgrounds; many were also first generation college students. Few had experience with people of different socioeconomic status, race, culture, or sexual orientation.<sup>8</sup> In addition, the majority of students had not been exposed to feminist theory before—or any radical politics—and often were more or less hostile to feminism: as a movement, a set of theories, and an academic subject. Certainly, many of the students in this *Women and Writing* class were no different. Two of the students enrolled had taken a women's studies class prior to this one, but the rest of the class had not. Most were not ready for the class I planned. Although these students could choose another class to fulfill the junior writing requirement, no one dropped in the first two or three weeks after discovering what the class entailed. To their credit, all the women decided to continue with the class, even though many opposed the feminist emphasis of readings, discussions, and pedagogy.

Many of the students found themselves in an overtly political classroom for the first time, with readings which they did not consider "objective," presented by a teacher who made her political biases clear as well. Most of the women in my class understood "bias" as something to be avoided by authors, teachers, and other authorities. Many seemed to consider the



classroom an ideologically-neutral space—one based in objective facts and free from the instructor’s (as well as their own) political beliefs. A few expressed anger at me for asking them to discuss political issues in what they considered an inappropriate venue. As Henry Giroux and Peter McLaren argue, most traditional views of education code the classroom as an objective, nonhistorical, and apolitical space, and students who move through this type of system all their lives can hardly be expected to feel comfortable in a classroom which seems antithetical to their beliefs (153). In addition, Elizabeth Fay notes that one of her women students in a composition class wanted enfranchisement in the establishment, not an exploration of her “difference”:

She made it clear that notions of multiple voices and visions, notions of gender politics, notions of student empowerment did not touch her need for the proper style, the proper accent, the Doolittle makeover she had signed up for. (15)

This student wished to jettison difference and become “American, middle-class, conservative, genderless” (15).

Furthermore, students may feel uncomfortable with overtly feminist theories, pedagogy, and curriculum. Confronting the “other F word” in classes can raise powerful barriers for many students, as Dale Bauer notes. Bauer writes that students (and others as well) tend to think that “feminism is not a discipline, that gender issues are based on perspectives unsuitable for the labor of the intellectual” (386). Feminist theory is sometimes derived from personal experience, which is not valorized in much of the academic world, or based on alternative research that questions “facts” about men and women. Some academics as well as students may see feminism and gender studies as subjects based on opinion rather than fact, based on politics and political/personal vendettas rather than logic and research. Worse, feminism conjures up images of sexuality, sexual orientation, libidinal desires, female bodies, pregnancy, menstruation, bra burnings, and other “non-intellectual” topics. Indeed, foregrounding gender issues from a feminist perspective often does mean dealing with “non-intellectual” topics, simply because women are coded as sexual, “natural,” mothering, and bodily. I believe that it is difficult to discuss gender without addressing

such potentially uncomfortable issues even if only to debunk myths.

For many of my students, feminism was also considered a stigma. I asked them to explore subjectivity and feminism when they understood neither to be highly-prized commodities. These women may have sensed that such explorations could prove dangerous. Like many people in America today, most of the students saw their place in the world, their status or lack thereof, as a matter of complete individual control; they believed in the Horatio Alger myth of pulling oneself up by bootstraps. These women students were seeking enfranchisement in the “system,” and I believe some women saw feminism as a collective attack on individual goals. For them, feminism seemed to make women into “victims” and suggested that as women they *were* truly powerless to help themselves or stop the victimization. Or perhaps they believed that aligning themselves with the feminist movement would turn them into “bad” women who might be punished for their thoughts and deeds.<sup>9</sup> Many of my students seemed desperate to hold on to the idea that if they were “good,” they too could share in the wealth of society. My class presented the idea that women in general—no matter what they accomplished individually—are an oppressed group and as such could not share in the wealth fully unless they joined together to understand and fight that oppression.

Therefore, the students bumped up against feminist values and beliefs which not only called into question their ideological frameworks but presented them with the unpalatable alternative of fighting a difficult battle. When faced with this alternative, young women like my students might want to maintain romantic visions of “having it all”—great husband, kids, and job—in the future. Anne Machung, in “Talking Career, Thinking Job,” finds that this “having it all” mentality pervades many young college women’s lives. They believe that they can maintain a high-power, well-paying career, find a supportive husband (who will perform one-half of the household chores), and take time off from their careers to raise two or three children (35). Most of these women think the feminist battle has been won, and they can “have it all” without seeking any broader changes in society. This mentality seems to be a form of denial about the oppression facing these young women.

Yet denial and perhaps resistance may be necessary to students, particularly women students. Most quickly perceive how alternative pedagogies and curriculum can impact upon them. Students who expect to maintain the same degree of investment in a feminist class as they do in a sociology class may find themselves enmeshed in an emotional experience that they did not seek out. Magda Lewis, in "Interrupting Patriarchy: Politics, Resistance, and Transformation," acknowledges that "attending to feminist politics and cultural critique in the classroom requires difficult emotional work from [students] and from [teachers]. I know that new understandings are often experienced painfully, and that lives are transformed" (472). How much harder it would be for someone who finds herself unprepared for such an encounter. As a feminist teacher, I, like Magda Lewis, must ask:

How might I create a feminist pedagogy that supports women's desire to wish well for ourselves when for many women the 'good news' of the transformative powers of feminist consciousness turns into the 'bad news' of social inequalities and, therefore, a perspective and politics they want to resist? (68)

In addition, as Evelyn Beck suggests, it is easy for feminists to forget their own process of transformation: "[T]he longer I teach, the more I learn, the more I assume a feminist perspective as given, the harder it is for me to remember how the world once looked to me" (290). I too can easily forget that feminist classes create so much tension in students' lives that they become depressed and angry. Many students in *Women and Writing* accused Dale Spender of presenting only negative sides of women's lives, giving readers a lopsided story that did not show what progress has been made:

Generally Spender seems very pessimistic. She talks about the problems that women have, but she rarely attempts to provide a solution . . . it would be nice if she could at least have faith that there is hope. Sometimes Spender seems to say that we are in a no win situation and that there's no way out.

These protestations now sound to me like a cry of pain. Spender's book touched a nerve, and the veil of denial was suddenly torn away. Oppression made itself felt in some of the students' lives painfully and they could see "no way out." These students had begun to realize that individual accomplishment meant little for women, for themselves, if one is seeking broader social change. I believe that this form of resistance is a first step toward understanding the material and the class; it is an integral part of the process of coming to terms with troubling subject matter. Resistance, in general, seems to be necessary: the barriers Kathleen Dunn describes perhaps protect students until they can process information. Instructors, then, must understand resistance and attempt to work it through with students, helping them dissolve the barriers if possible.<sup>10</sup>

While attending a workshop on conflict management, I re-discovered one way of working through resistance that I learned in my undergraduate group facilitation training.<sup>11</sup> In working with groups, facilitators may use what is called "active listening" as a conflict mediation technique and communication tool.<sup>12</sup> Since composition classes frequently are devised as groups, it seems to me that this technique could be useful to teachers. As Gene Stanford argues in *Developing Effective Classroom Groups*, "perhaps the single most important thing teachers can do when students confront this is to *listen!* No solution will ever be satisfactory unless the students feel that they have been heard and understood" (235). Active listening, in most cases, insures that students are "heard" and validated by encouraging them to talk about their resistance to the material, discussions, and pedagogy. When a student speaks in class discussions or office hours, an instructor who is listening "actively" works to clarify his or her understanding of the student's position, rather than assuming knowledge of what the student means or is trying to say. The instructor may rephrase the student's statement to check content, clarify the emotions underneath the statement, or even try to identify values at work behind the statement.

The instructor should attempt to affirm statements without agreement or disagreement, approval or disapproval. At this point in the process, a neutral stance is perhaps most profitable for communication, rather than trying to answer or evaluate the student's statements. The purpose is to understand what the student is saying and try to help him or her articulate the reasons

for and emotions behind such statements. Stanford suggests that in active listening,

you do not signal agreement or disagreement until after the speaker is completely finished. We all have the impulse to indicate to the other person immediately what *we* think. We begin agreeing (or more frequently, disagreeing) as soon as the words are out of the speaker's mouth. Or we begin immediately to give suggestions and advice. But the speaker's primary need is to know that you are hearing and understanding what is being said—not to have you agree, disagree, judge, give advice, or make suggestions. There may be a place for all of these later, but at first it's best to simply signal that you're listening. (126-27)

Other tenets of active listening include maintaining eye-contact, sending encouraging signals to the speaker (nods, etc.), noting non-verbal reaction from speaker (body language, facial expressions, and tone of voice), and remaining patient with the speaker (Bidol 207, Stanford 235).

Many feminist teachers also have espoused the technique of active listening directly or indirectly. In "Teaching Feminist Process," Nancy Schniedewind suggests that students be taught guidelines for giving "constructive feedback," a close cousin to active listening. Students may be asked to begin statements with "I" rather than "you" or "he/she" or other generalizing comments (18). In addition, Schniedewind lists four guidelines for constructive feedback: it is descriptive rather than evaluative, it is specific rather than general, it is focused on behavior rather than the person (if speaker is confronting a problem), and it takes into account the needs of receiver and speaker (19). Teachers can ask students to respond to one another first by giving counterproductive feedback—not following the guidelines—and then to give constructive feedback using the guidelines (19). Similar techniques include "time-out" sessions in which students can freewrite (perhaps anonymous) responses to the discussions or readings and "round robins" in which everyone takes a turn speaking without interruption or cross-talk. Sometimes role reversals can be used to work through conflict, as long as constructive feedback guidelines (or something similar) are in place.

Ultimately, active listening may be able to save the worst of situations and, if done properly, should keep the teacher on neutral ground, thereby avoiding the pitfalls of “converting” students to one’s own politics or running “group therapy” classes. Feminist teacher Diana Hume George states that in order to work with resistant students, “I think I must still, must always, listen” (28). In “Bridges Over the Gender Gap,” George narrates an event that occurred in a women’s studies class in which a male student resisted the feminist content of the course. She claims one small achievement in dealing with such students:

Since much of [this student’s] position paper centered on charges of reverse sexism and male baiting or hating, my willingness to talk out the issues, and the clear absence of any reprisals for speaking his mind, not only validated his right to these responses but also legitimized the feelings of those who felt less free to express their anxieties. (28-29)

“No problems were solved,” she writes, “but they were certainly brought out in the open” (28). In classes which challenge belief systems, students usually will react emotionally to the material. My job is not to react in kind, evaluate the political correctness of these emotions, or try to change the students’ politics. Instead, I need to productively work with the emotions in ways that do not include either complete disclosure or total repression: a difficult and delicate balance, to be sure. After teaching many feminist classes, I discovered that allowing students to air feelings and opinions through active listening techniques enabled them later to clarify and theorize their positions from less reactionary standpoints. Students who feel heard are also more likely to “listen” to (and accept) other points of view from students, teachers, and authors. Students may never change their minds on certain issues—but political indoctrination must not be the goal of feminist (or critical) teachers. Instead, I strive for helping students toward a better understanding and articulation of their ideas and those of others.

In addition, if I am teaching a writing class, like *Women and Writing*, the ultimate goal is to use the reading to teach writing. I was still new at teaching writing when I planned *Women and Writing*, and though I had ideas about what my writing assignments should accomplish, I had little notion of how

to create them. This lack of experience, and the resistance I encountered, resulted in a separation between the topic of women's writing and the students' own writing. Somehow most of the writing assignments became quite disconnected from the class itself: a strange effect since my class was composed of women who might have benefited from a connection between the topic and themselves.

In short, teaching writing got completely lost in the emotional shuffle of the class. First, I did not spend enough time discussing how to improve writing, reading, and thinking skills. I held conferences and students reviewed one another's papers in class; however, because (usually unproductive) topic discussions overshadowed everything in the class, these "nods" at writing seemed incidental to both the students and myself. At the end of the quarter, I felt that writing improvement had been minimal; those who wrote well progressed further and those who didn't continued to have trouble. Students did not seem comfortable taking risks, either in discussions or writing. Second, at the time I was more concerned with student reaction to the curriculum than their papers and journals. I was unable to juggle student resistances and teaching writing, and I did not know how to turn the resistances into writing.

I have since learned that there are many strategies for turning resistance into writing; instructors can use resistance to reading material as a catalyst for paper topics, journal entries, and written debates. Resistance can provide an opening to teach argument, persuasion, reasoning, and voice. Janet Wolff argues that moments of resistance can bring about "impassioned," strong-voiced writing: sometimes students write with "a voice that may be politically counter to mine, but a voice nonetheless" (491). She attempts to use the passion of student resistance and her "teacherly," counter-resistant responses to create a written dialogue. "Here is the place for more writing," she argues (49). Teachers can ask students who disagree with an author or point of view to think through and write about their disagreements in argument form, especially if they are encouraged to understand other sides of the issue thoroughly. When I teach argument these days, I ask students to write from different positions on the same topic, and they must frame a convincing argument for these positions, even if they do not personally agree with the stance.<sup>13</sup>

Asking students to consider (in writing) their resistance to the structure of the class can also be productive, if teachers can remain relatively neutral in the face of such critiques. Jane Tompkins suggests, in “The Pedagogy of the Distressed,” that teachers talk about the class with students everyday—in a low-key, matter-of-fact manner “so that anything that’s making you or other people unhappy can be addressed before it gets too big or too late to deal with” (18). Daily or weekly feedback can, and probably should, take the form of journal entries or written responses, in order to keep students focused upon writing. Teachers can then read parts out loud or use the writing in other ways as a basis for discussion.

Ronald Strickland takes this idea of feedback to a more radical level. He espouses a method for dealing with resistance that is founded upon a change of attitude. Welcome critiques, he argues; students do not have to agree with teachers and those disagreements can be productive sites of inquiry into assumptions and politics on both sides. Resistant students, Strickland claims,

make it difficult for me to pursue my political/intellectual agenda. My role, as I see it, is to make it as difficult as possible for them to get what they expect [traditionally] from [this type of] course, to confront and contest students in ways that will challenge them to recognize and rethink their assumptions. (297)

In Strickland’s class the disagreements are conducted publicly and in writing; that is, students write position or opinion papers on issues concerning the structure, content, and practice of the course and he “publishes” copies of these each week. In addition, he writes his own public responses to some of the papers. Strickland concludes that these texts “become part of the general text to be studied, decentering the institutionally authorized content of the course and producing alternative centers of meaning” which are based upon students’ class, racial, sexual, or gender orientation (295). Strickland provides students with a public forum which embraces confrontation and places contestations beyond the realm of the personal gripe. The oppositions necessarily must be written critically in order to convince both



teacher and students. The teacher also models critical modes of dialoguing through her or his public responses.

Not all teachers will want to embrace Strickland's model; I myself am more comfortable with Tompkins' suggestion, particularly because as a woman and a feminist, my power base in the classroom is sometimes in question. I am not as comfortable as Strickland in pushing the limits of student resistance. However, in general, Strickland is correct in allowing students to engage with him and make resistance public. Resistance cannot be ignored when dealing with controversial topics; a teacher who represses his or her class in this way risks alienating the class entirely. When I taught *Women and Writing* for the first time, I learned that teachers need to listen to students and hear beyond their resistance and that students often must deal with their fears and anger before they can engage with material more productively. I found that if I create a space in my classroom for students to air their feelings and objections without judgment, the students eventually will move through that necessary phase and get down to work. Student resistance should not stop writing teachers from working with challenging issues or topics. We should continue to ask students to write about a system fraught with injustices, a system which often oppresses the students themselves. Lately, I have quite a few students say that my feminist class changed their perspective on writing. They said they have found a voice at a time when they had felt most silenced. And that is what I intended.

#### NOTES

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<sup>2</sup>Selections included excerpts from Robin Lackoff's *Language and Woman's Place*, New York: Harper & Row, 1972; Adrienne Rich's "When We Dead Awaken: Writing as Revision" in *On Lies, Secrets and Silence: Selected Prose: 1966-78*, New York: Norton, 1979; Muriel Schultz's "The Semantic Derogation of Women" in *Language and Sex: Difference and Domination*, eds. Barrie Thorne and Nancy Henley, Rowley, MA: Newbury House, 1975; Tillie Olsen's *Silences*, New York: Delacorte, 1978; and Alleen Pace Nilsen's "Linguistic Sexism as a Social Issue" in *Sexism and Language*, eds. Alleen Pace Nilsen et al., Urbana, IL: NCTE, 1973.

<sup>3</sup>In all fairness, these assumptions stemmed from my experience as a peer group facilitator of a women's studies class when I was an undergraduate. My glasses may be rose-colored with nostalgia, but I do not remember encountering much resistance in the peer group—and the subject matter covered was similar in many ways.

<sup>4</sup>Dunn states that she bases her work on the research of G. Lozanov, a Bulgarian psychologist (40).

<sup>5</sup>I had also spoken with colleagues who had taught the text a number of times but said nothing about hostility, resistance, or other difficulties.

<sup>6</sup>I take my definition of radical feminism from Myra Marx Ferree and Beth B. Hess. In *Controversy and Coalition: The New Feminist Movement*, they describe radical feminists as visionaries who are often interested in how writing and language construct women and how language might be altered to work toward "transform[ing] social arrangements" (161).

<sup>7</sup>Since there was no male presence to vocalize this position in the class, this female student takes up the position of outraged man.

<sup>8</sup>In fact, this lack of experience created problems for some people on campus; for example, the student newspaper reported a variety of racist or homophobic occurrences in the dorms: graffiti, verbal abuse, and sometimes fights.

<sup>9</sup>This is not far from the truth. Magda Lewis opens her article with the story of the massacre of fourteen women at the Universite de Montreal for being "feminists." Media reports stated that one of the women, in order to save herself and her classmates, screamed at the gunman: "'You have the wrong women; we are not feminists!'" (Lewis 468).

<sup>10</sup>Sometimes students cannot work through barriers during the class. They may not be ready to confront the material for whatever reason.

<sup>11</sup>I am indebted to Mary Elliott's workshop at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee on managing conflicts in classes for the reminder about active listening; some of the ideas in this section are derived from the workshop.

<sup>12</sup>Resources for group facilitation and active listening include: Auvine, Brian et al., *A Manual for Group Facilitators*, Madison, WI: The Center for Conflict Resolution, 1977 (CCR, 731 State Street, Madison, WI 53703); Bidol, Patricia et al., eds., *Alternative Conflict Management Approaches: A Citizen's Manual*, Ann Arbor, MI: Environmental Conflict Project, 1986 (Women's Studies Department, The University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, MI 48109); Coover, Virginia et al., *Resource Manual for a Living Revolution: A Handbook of Skills and Tools for Social Change Activists*, Philadelphia: New Society Publishers, 1977 (New Society Educational Foundation, 4722 Baltimore Ave., Philadelphia, PA 19143); Johnson, David, and Frank P. Johnson, *Joining Together: Group Theory and Group Skills*, 4th ed., Boston: Allyn Bacon, 1991; Barnes, Douglas, and F. Todd, *Communication and Learning in Small Groups*, London: Routledge, 1977; and Stanford, Gene, *Developing Effective Classroom Groups*, New York: Hart, 1977.

<sup>13</sup>For instance, Peter Elbow and Pat Belanoff, in *Sharing and Responding* (a supplement to *A Community of Writers*), suggest the technique of "believing and doubting" to help students see other sides of an argument.

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