

# “Truth” and Advocacy: A Feminist Perspective

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Feminist professors are often accused of being merely advocates in their classrooms. This charge suggests that feminist teachers do not share the time-honored commitment to the pursuit of “truth,” but are instead attempting to recruit students to their causes(s), and to indoctrinate rather than instruct. Many individual feminist scholars, and movements for women’s studies themselves, did take their inspiration from a political movement. Feminist scholarship and political activity were connected at the root. Nevertheless, it does not follow that feminist scholars are simply trying to use the classroom to spread propaganda in a political skirmish.

Feminist scholars have devoted much thought to the nature of advocacy in the classroom. Most feminist scholars would probably agree with our central premise: that the question of advocacy itself needs to be reformulated before it can be answered. For, in a not-so-trivial sense, all teachers are advocates. This realization then leads to the really interesting question of what forms of advocacy are acceptable in the academy? Feminist thinking about advocacy involves a complex rethinking of the nature of truth that belies caricatures of feminists as strident advocates in search of converts. In this article, we will demonstrate that dismissals of feminist pedagogy are inappropriate because everyone is an advocate, feminist research into the nature of knowledge repositions the questions about the nature of

advocacy, and the reconceptualization of knowledge requires pedagogical changes.

## Everyone Is an Advocate

When organizing a syllabus, preparing a lecture, and asking a question, all academics are selective. They all exercise their judgment and choose some materials rather than others. Although professors use a variety of criteria, each person somehow comes to the conclusion that “these are the questions, texts, materials, and ideas, that I think are worthwhile.” In the first sense, then, all academics are advocates for their particular focus points. Often, though, professors do not need to be explicit about the criteria used for making these selections: they seem to go without saying. Indeed, because these standards seem completely acceptable to their users in normal practice, professors do not even notice that they are “advocates” for these positions. Accepted standards typically include such ideas as what constitutes basic knowledge within the discipline, the nature of good research, and the basic accepted facts of the field.

Val Plumwood (1993), in her description of dualistic ways of thinking, pointed out that in creating dualisms, such as the one of advocacy versus impartiality, people often “background” important starting assumptions. Within the academy, Plumwood’s contention would be that assumptions about what constitutes a discipline, what facts count as accepted, and the (in)contestability of these standards are pushed to the background. These unspoken and unexamined assumptions form the background and foundation of the discipline, and are assumed to be value neutral. Feminist scholars often bring these background assumptions into the foreground and question their meanings and implications. For example, in political sci-

ence, many feminist theorists have looked more closely at the “universal citizen” and found him to be gendered (see, for example, Pateman 1988; Okin 1986; Young 1990; Jones 1993; Phillips 1991). Such “foregrounding” makes an issue out of a matter that was previously not an issue. While this foregrounding is not the same as advocating a particular position, it does change how we think. To continue our example, pointing out that the universal citizen has in fact been treated as if “he” were male opens the question of what danger/harm/advantage comes from the assumption that the citizen has no gender? When previously backgrounded aspects of concepts come to the fore, our thinking about them may change. Raising these questions might appear to be advocacy to those who now have to justify their starting assumptions, it is, in fact, no more than a call for a justification of a previously backgrounded position. Once exposed, such a backgrounded assumption may be untenable. In this regard, feminist “advocacy” has not been an attack on truth, but a demand for greater clarity of accepted truths.

Let us take as an example the assumption that faculty members should be “value neutral” when presenting materials to their students. The idea of value neutrality itself rests upon some hidden assumptions whose justifications require careful scrutiny. Value neutrality is often equated with the absence of political partisanship or a “passionate detachment” that then lets the facts/arguments speak for themselves. Each of these assumptions rests upon an implicit assumption about the nature of politics, knowledge, and higher education. Feminist scholars and teachers are not asking that these background assumptions be dismissed, but that they be called into question. Feminist scholars are not likely to reach a consensus on how persuasive these different arguments

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are. Nevertheless, to call previously unspoken assumptions into question does change the nature of the discourse.

All feminists will not take the same view on value neutrality; indeed, the two of us disagree about its value. We do agree, however, that there has to be a full airing of the concept's background assumptions. To do this, faculty members have to reveal much more about their way of thinking to students. For example, if faculty members believe that value neutrality allows students to make their own judgments, then they might have to be more explicit about their understanding of the judgment-making process. When professors, especially political scientists, look more closely at how they believe people reach decisions some biases in this approach become apparent. For example, common standards include the understanding that judgments based on emotion are suspect or that universal standards should guide judgment. But who articulates these standards? In articulating some standards and not others, faculty serve as advocates for a decision rule, not a policy *per se*. Nevertheless, if the decision rule excludes some kinds of outcomes, then decision rule advocacy, though it does not look partisan, will have the same effect.

To argue for value neutrality, then, is also to advocate a particular account of knowledge, of how people make judgments, of power in the classroom, of the purpose of education, and so forth. If, given the background assumptions on which it rests, the argument for value neutrality requires advocacy, then all positions are "advocated." Feminists next raise this crucial corollary: It is essential that such background conditions are revealed.

### **Failure to Explore Background Conditions Perpetuates Bias**

Starting from a similar commitment to know the truth (here understood as knowing the world more completely by broadening and complicating knowledge), feminist schol-

arship has taken a radical turn. If existing background assumptions rest upon biased views, then knowledge built upon such shaky foundation

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must also be reconsidered to uncover any unconscious, continuing effects of these hidden biases. Feminist thinkers point toward two useful categories in exposing such biases—selectivity and situatedness.

### **Selectivity**

Elizabeth Minnich (1990) has argued persuasively that "the root problem" of the Western intellectual tradition is a basic philosophical error: the part has mistaken itself for the whole. Minnich argues that since many great foundational texts of Western civilization were written by people who kept slaves and who considered women as unequal, and "barbarians" as uncivilized, such writers could not have expressed the universal human condition. The problem for Minnich is not whether the foundational accounts are incomplete, but the suppression of any urge, let alone attention, to question whether their partiality influences their claims about the nature of human experience. Minnich believes that such "partial knowledge" becomes exclusive by its nature. "[A] part defined as the whole leaves no place for anything that differs from it. . . . The whole is partial to the interests of those thus enshrined at the defining, controlling center" (1990, 147–48).

### **Situatedness**

Feminist philosophers of science insist that all knowledge is known from the standpoint of a particular knower. Sandra Harding (1991) has observed that the place from which one conducts scientific research always influences what one comes to know. For Harding, scientists are

not disembodied creators of knowledge who hover "above" or "beyond" the knowledge that they can create. If Harding is correct, then

the task for any researcher is to be aware of the situatedness of knowledge. Harding does not think the fact that knowledge is situated precludes people's abilities to discover things they believe to be genuinely true. She does observe, however, that what people think they know to be true may in fact be mere chimera in their narrowed field of vision. Broadening their base of knowledge, then, requires people to broaden the perspectives from which they look at knowledge.

If we have to situate knowers as well as knowledge, then the requirements for faculty are much more complex than simply maintaining "value neutrality." On one level, situating knowledge requires that everyone say "where one is coming from." On another level, though, faculty members must remain vigilant lest students, to get a good grade, impress the instructor, or take the path of least resistance, decide simply to adopt the view of the instructor. If one believes that background assumptions are worth exposing, then to let students opt out of this deeper exploration of assumptions would defeat the purpose of creating a greater plurality of voices. Once it is realized that all knowledge is selective and situated, the need to revise the nature of teaching becomes obvious. In this situation, teaching is not about "advocacy"; it is about enabling students to understand the framework of knowledge.

### **Feminist Pedagogy**

The feminist account of knowledge as being selective and situated places greater demands on students and faculty. It requires that faculty "fore-

ground” some hidden assumptions. Feminist scholars must, of necessity, treat students as knowers and learners capable of making sense out of the world as they see it. Feminist pedagogy requires that students and faculty talk explicitly about such things as the criteria for understanding they will use, the grounds for judgment they find convincing, and why they decide upon the criteria they do. It is making knowledge self-reflexive that poses the great challenge to both teachers and students in the feminist classroom.

At its best, feminist pedagogy is interactive, interrelational, and interdisciplinary. This learning model demands intellectual integrity and rigor from both professors and students equally. Feminist teachers have discovered that the process of making hidden assumptions explicit

does not make students cynical or distrusting of knowledge. Instead, students gain a greater appreciation of what we do know and what we still need to find out. Both students and professors interrogate knowledge together, and the traditional model of teachers as founts of knowledge is undermined. All of this is new and often uncomfortable to students who have often been taught that they simply have to master (often through memorizing) a body of knowledge. To such students, a feminist approach feels very different, and they are quick to raise charges that these instructors are trying to indoctrinate them.

Students in a feminist classroom are wrong to think they are being indoctrinated with a partisan position, but they are correct to notice a

difference. Feminist scholars insist that students and faculty take responsibility for what they think is true and explain why they think it is true. Students feel discomfort because they are being asked to think critically about assumptions they may not even have known they held.

We have argued that all teachers are advocates since they select and situate knowledge in their classrooms. If so, then the main advantage of feminist pedagogy is that it permits teachers more fully to seek an account of truth. We opened this article with the accusation that feminist advocacy seeks only to forward its own agenda. What we have argued is that feminist advocacy has a still more fundamental and critical agenda: to rethink what, in any classroom, might constitute “truth.”

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