

Why Online Learning is a Feminist Endeavor and Opportunity

Jennifer Schneider
The Community College of Philadelphia
USA
jschneider@ccp.edu

Abstract: The breadth and associated “complexity and controversy” of feminist theory, work, and active research offers many productive lessons and insights in online learning contexts (Kohli and Burbules, 2012, p. 68). This essay explores both how and why online learning (and in online learning in higher education contexts, in particular) is a feminist endeavor and opportunity. A variety of practical reflections and applications are shared, as well.

Introduction

Nielsen and Harding explore the related questions of what it means to conduct feminist-based inquiry (Nielsen, 1990) and whether there is a “distinctive feminist method of inquiry” (Harding, 1987, p. 1). Kohli and Burbules (2012), citing DeVault (1999), further note that “just as it is not easy to define or categorize feminism, we also recognize here the complexity in answering the query, ‘What is feminist methodology?’” (p. 67). Kohli and Burbules also recollect and highlight a number of feminist epistemological frameworks and explore “different perspectives on feminist inquiry” in a successful attempt to shed light on the meaning, complexity, and application of “feminist-based inquiry” (p. 67). A common thread or theme permeating much of Kohli and Burbules’ writing is an acknowledgment that:

[o]f, course none of these topics will have singular or uncontested answers. Given the plurality of feminisms and the many feminist challenges to traditional scientific and social scientific inquiry, there will be, necessarily, a plurality of approaches to feminist research: approaches dependent on the varied assumptions brought to the endeavor by different feminist researchers. (pp. 67-68)

One of Kohli and Burbules’s most enduring lessons is, in fact, the breadth (and associated “complexity and controversy”) of feminist theory, work, and active research (p. 68). Chapter 4 (Feminist Inquiry) of *Feminisms and Educational Research* provokes both reflection and application. By way of example, I am reminded both of Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie’s writing in *We Should All Be Feminists* and bell hook’s work in *Feminism is for Everybody: Passionate Politics*.

In *We Should All Be Feminists*, Adichie (2015) writes of a conscious choice “to no longer be apologetic for ... femininity” (p. 39). Adichie, rather, chooses “to be respected in all [her] femaleness” because she deserves to be so (p.39). Relatedly, in *Feminism is for*

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Everybody: Passionate Politics, hooks (2015) encourages feminism as a popular, widely applicable theory with implications for all individuals and all lives.

Another common theme identified in Kohli and Burbules's (2012) work is that of critical inquiry. For example, Kohli and Burbules write of feminist theory and research findings as an:

ally in [the] tradition of critical theory. From the start, ... feminism is first and foremost a political movement interested in changing the conditions of women for the better. It never pretended to be neutral or objective, remote from the lived reality of real women. It did not rely on abstract, ahistorical, decontextualized understandings of women's experience. Nor did it shy away from having a value-oriented intention to transform society. (p. 73)

Similarly, Adichie (2015) writes of the danger of stereotypes limiting interpretations of the word feminist (a word "so heavy with baggage, negative baggage") as well as "the idea of feminism itself" (pp. 3, 11). Feminist theory, rather, should be considered broadly and, like critical theory, grounded in emancipation and "a strong commitment to connect theory with practice and action" (p. 75). As I reflect on the work and writings of Kohli and Burbules (2012), it is both the authors' and feminist theory's, in particular, "commitment to connect theory with practice and action" that I find most powerful. In many ways, and much like Adichie (2013) and hooks (2015) suggest, feminist theory is everyone's theory. That is, anyone seeking emancipation from whatever societal forces marginalize, burden, implicate, and demoralize can benefit from the liberatory and determined perspective of feminist theory (Kohli & Burbules, 2012). This perspective also makes clear that online learning (and in higher education contexts, in particular) is a feminist endeavor and opportunity. The remainder of this essay explores how and why. A variety of practical reflections and applications are shared, as well.

A Feminist Endeavor

Higher education has longed been associated with patriarchal thinking and experiences. By way of example, Dlamini and Adams (2014) conducted qualitative research on the academic experiences of Black women at a site university. In their qualitative study positioned within an interpretivist paradigm, Dlamini and Adams found that "women at Institution X experienced male supremacy, disempowerment, and disrespect of womenfolk" (p. 121). At the student level, similar experiences present. For example, in a mixed-methods research study Cooper (2019) tested the Leaky Pipeline Theory in Social Science departments at a UK university and identified "several stages along the academic career pathway ... where women 'leak out' more than their male peers ... with figures dropping from around 50% at the undergraduate level to approximately 20% at the professorial level" (p. 95).

In reality, many systems of higher education (around the world) reflect "a historically patriarchal system that has not undergone significant structural change since its inception" (Cooper, 2019, p. 98). The challenge is "not restricted to the UK [or any other country] and is recognised across the globe" (p. 93). In recent years, however, online

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learning has served as a fundamental structural change to the way in which millions of students access higher education and will continue to do so (as projected numbers of online learners continue to rise) (Allen and Seaman, 2017).

Changes to the structure of higher educational systems (both those that offer online learning as well as those adapting in response to competitive implications of burgeoning online programs) yield wonderful opportunities for access and shifts in long-standing practices (Allen and Seaman, 2017). The resulting structural changes and implications of this new form of access support the argument that online learning is both a feminist endeavor and a feminist opportunity. Adichie (2015) writes of deliberately choosing not to pretend that “it was not women who have, for centuries, been excluded” (p. 41). Similarly, it is important not to pretend that systemic exclusions have not been a part of higher education for decades, but rather to intentionally acknowledge the role that online learning serves in expanding access to those long excluded from higher education.

This transformation, however, is not without its challenges. Much like Adichie (2015) writes of the stereotypes that limit interpretations of the word feminist (a word “so heavy with baggage, negative baggage”) as well as “the idea of feminism itself” (pp. 3, 11), stereotypes limit interpretations of online learning, as well. The phrases “online learning” and “online learners”, for example, are often subject to similarly limiting stereotypes and dangerous negative baggage such as for example, “not real school”, “easier”, “so what, you don’t ever have to go to class?”, and more (Dennis, 2016). Moreover, COVID-19 has necessitated the rapid adoption of (and adaptation to) remote/emergency learning which does not always result in an online experience that is the same as online learning. As a practical strategy, online educators might be especially mindful of language used in online classrooms (beginning with course syllabi and extending to language used in grading feedback) so as to intentionally work to counter and address persistent stereotypes.

Despite the challenges, the online learning endeavor is real and growing. The numbers are telling and also reflective of the opportunities that women have seized in online learning options. For example, a 2015 survey found that in the Spring of 2015, 70 percent of online students were women (Haynie, 2015). This same survey found that 72 percent of online graduate students were female (Haynie, 2015). Online learning, like feminist theory, is committed to “changing the conditions” of individuals (women and others) for the better (Kohli & Burbules, 2012, p. 73). Neither “neutral [n]or objective”, online learning seeks to disrupt the status quo and long-standing patriarchies embedded and reflected within our systems of higher education. Structural movement and changes are fully underway.

Gaby Weiner (2014) writes often on identifiable and varied connections between feminism and education. Relatedly, just as Kohli and Burbules (2012) argue there is no distinctive feminist methodology, I would argue there is no one approach to online teaching and learning. However, there are common themes. Online learning, for many, is considered an “alternative mode” for learning just like many scholars have acknowledged and embraced “the possible uniqueness of feminist inquiry as an alternative mode” (p.

76). Moreover, online learning has its roots in the notion of emancipation and expanded access to education for those otherwise shut out – whether due to gender (and persistent gender norms), race, class, or any other characteristics. Just as “[f]or centuries, the world divided human beings into two groups and then proceeded to exclude and oppress one group”, online learning seeks similarly to rectify the longstanding division between those groups with access to higher education and those groups denied such access (p. 41). As Adichie (2015) writes, “[i]t is only fair that the solution to the problem should acknowledge that” (p. 41). To deny recognition to online learning as a feminist endeavor seems unfair, as well.

In Chapter 5 (Feminist Educational Research), Kohli and Burbules (2012) also acknowledge some of the commonalities and appeals of education to feminist researchers. For example, Kohli and Burbules write that feminists:

have long seen education as a particularly fertile site for interesting and important research (Acker, 1994, pp. 18-19). This reflects, of course, the wider feminist concern with provoking critical reflection and consciousness raising, overlaid with the field of education as an area of special concern to women both as teachers and as parents. (p. 83)

Challenges faced by feminist theory researchers confront online education advocates, as well. After all, as Adichie (2015) writes, “changing the status quo is always uncomfortable” (p. 40) and “[f]eminism is, of course, part of human rights in general” (p. 41). In connection with both gender and education, “[w]e have evolved. But our ideas of gender [and education] have not evolved very much.” (p. 18).

As earlier noted, and by way of example, negative stereotypes about online learning persist (Dennis, 2016). Further, in higher education, myths (including claims that online learning is less effective or easier) also persist (Lynch, 2018). It is important, however, to not let stereotypes dictate future paths and opportunities to disrupt the status quo. I would argue that just as education appeals to the feminist researcher, feminist theory and research analogously appeal to the educator and the online educator, in particular. Moreover, not only do I believe online learning is a feminist endeavor, I also believe it is a feminist opportunity.

A Feminist Opportunity

As previously described in this essay, feminist theory is flexible and wonderfully amendable to our daily work and lives (Adichie, 2015; hooks, 2015; Kohli & Burbules, 2012). As I think of ways to incorporate feminist theory into my own teaching and work in online educational spaces, a variety of strategies – all opportunities to be better for more students - come to mind. The strategies are not surprisingly feminist in nature. Examples include adopting problem-posing questioning that encourages critical thinking in all aspects of a course (Institute for Habits of Mind, 2020). Doing so is an intentional act and, most of all, a way of maintaining constant reflection and a commitment to continued emancipation and the connection of “theory with practice and action” (Kohli &

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Burbules, 2012, p. 73). Intentional use of problem-posing question might be applied in online discussion forums, class-wide announcements, and individual student feedback. For example, instructors might structure online forums in ways to promote analysis of all sides of a posed topic. Students might also be encouraged to adopt counter positions, respectfully pose inquiry-driven questions in peer replies, and incorporate research that challenges conclusions made in individual posts.

Online feedback, too, can and arguably should take a feminist approach. Extensive research on feedback has identified specific characteristics of quality feedback. Many of the characteristics reflect and embody feminist qualities. For example, and while phrasing differs depending upon the researcher-writer, in general, quality, effective feedback is actionable, specific, timely, goal-oriented, shared clearly for the purpose of personal growth, and presented in a manner that intentionally involves learners in the process (Stenger, 2014). Intentionally involving learners or others in a process intended for growth resonates closely with Adichie's (2018) urging – on how to raise a child as a feminist – that parents engage in the work “together” and also “reject the language of help” (pp. 11, 12). Applied to grading feedback, instructors might look at their online grading feedback comments as more of a conversation in which one engages students in a dialogue. By way of example, I might also be more mindful of language and offers of “help” as compared with, for example, “insights”, “follow-up recommendations”, or “suggestions”, phrasing that intentionally adopts a more active and participatory stance on my involvement in the teaching and learning experience.

Further, Chapman and King (2012) describe feedback as the written or verbal comments that are shared by an evaluator in response to student work and which are intended to motivate learners as well as share specific suggestions for revision and improvement. Suggestions that feedback should motivate and prompt reflection on options for revision resonate with Adichie's (2018) urgings on the power of motivation and choice in connection with supporting feminism. For example, Adichie discusses the importance of providing choice and alternatives so as to empower children of all genders and share an understanding that there is no one “right” in a world of “difference” (2018). My own grading feedback might adopt, where appropriate, a deeper appreciation for, and acknowledgement of, choice – whether in terms of content, perspective, and/or execution (for example) in assignment submissions.

In online learning environments, where feedback is primarily, if not always, text based, the written word takes on both powerful implications and opportunities. In my own work, I might more actively strive to provide feedback that promotes reflection, thinking, and awareness of alternatives. I might also ensure my feedback clarifies and reiterates that there is no single way to think or to be (Adichie, 2018). Supporting audio and/or video feedback might be used to actively and intentionally encourage ongoing dialogue and discussion in bi-directional and reflective ways. When doing so, issues of accessibility and ease of navigation should always be considered and addressed. Feedback might also be anchored with contact information and an invitation to further dialogue and discussion.

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Feminist theory also teaches us what online feedback, and feedback more broadly, should not be. For example, in *Men Explain Things to Me*, Rebecca Solnit (2015) explores how conversations between men and women often go terribly wrong. Solnit describes contexts in which flawed assumptions and long-standing patriarchies and modes of oppression both perpetuate oppression and, sometimes, create moments of opportunity that “slither out of the grass and are so obvious as, say, an anaconda that’s eaten a cow or an elephant turd on the carpet” (p. 3).

Educators (online and face-to-face) providing feedback in written form (and thereby engaging in text-heavy conversations dependent upon choice of language and tone with learners) might benefit from reflecting on the potential negative impact on students of flawed assumptions. Doing so might help address related questions of equity (distinct from equality) and bias, as well. Research has consistently found that grading practices vary, often significantly, from school to school, program to program, and teacher to teacher (Feldman, 2018; Kohn, 1999). Feminist theory’s reminders to reflect and question assumptions extend associated opportunities to do better for and with students, as well (Adichie, 2018).

In sum, and as I reflect on feminist theory, I am struck most by its broad application to almost all aspects of online learning environments. Adichie (2018) writes:

The problem with gender is that it prescribes how we should be rather than recognizing how we are. Imagine how much happier we would be, how much freer to be our true individual selves, if we didn’t have the weight of gender expectations. (p. 34)

These words can be posed in the context of learning expectations as well. Imagine how much freer to learn in the ways we learn best we would be if we did not have the weight of ideal models of learning upon us. Feminist theory, as a “challenge to mainstream research” (Kohli & Burbules, 2012, p. 74) and ways of thinking, can help us achieve the freedom to learn authentically and genuinely.

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