

**Women's Ways of Knowing, Learning, and Understanding:
Educative Issues in the Classroom**

Ellen Lockwood Powley, EdD

Associate Lecturer, Women's Research Institute

Brigham Young University

INTRODUCTION

From my library window I see the grandeur of the mountains and they inspire me as I work. Daily, my teaching and learning are influenced by their presence. I live at the base of Rock Canyon, Provo, Utah in the Wasatch Mountains. As I considered an introduction to this paper, I pondered the mountains influence on me, not just today but throughout my life. They represent a journey toward respect and understanding, central values of my teaching philosophy. Contemplating the conference theme, “Women of the Mountains,” I reviewed influential experiences that shape my teaching style. This narrative serves, not only to introduce my paper, but also to introduce my belief in the descriptive narrative as a way of understanding the emerging self in an education environment.

It is difficult to remember a time when the significance of the mountains has not affected me. Some of my earliest memories were on a lake in the Adirondack Mountains in New York State. I could not have been more than five years old, yet I remember the experience clearly. I was in a small boat at dusk and we were looking at the beautiful mountains that surround the lake. Without hesitation, my mother pointed out the majestic mountains casting their gentle purple shadows in the late afternoon. It was here that she taught me *America the Beautiful* and to sing about the mountains and their majesty. During summer excursions as a young child to the mountains, whether hiking, canoeing, boating, or on road trips, I remember looking up at the peaks and realizing that their grand formations represented expectations. As I grew older, on an extended day hikes, I recognized these mountains as challenges.

In college years I hiked the White Mountains of New Hampshire. I remember gazing upward to see a fire station lookout tower precariously perched on the top of a stony precipice. Then I set out with determination to conquer the mountain and reach the tower. Arriving at the destination was not the only accomplishment. It was the journey that gave significance to attaining the goal. One only needs to remember to be steady and sure-footed, with one foot placed carefully in front of the other on the trail as it winds up and around the mountain. For me, these and others hikes not only offered respite from daily chores and projects, they were times to reflect and consider my life’s goals and mission. But such hikes were not easy, free time activities. They required commitment and strength to achieve the goal just as my

life's journey has required persistence and strength to develop new ideas and to arrive at new understandings.

I began to think about teaching and learning as a young music student at the Eastman School of Music. Asking questions was paramount to improved performance. I spent several summers in the mountains practicing for auditions. After several hours of practice each morning, I would refresh myself physically and emotionally by walking, hiking, swimming, or canoeing. Always in pursuit of new ways to solve questions, I found that the mountains were inspiring and provided a place for me to reflect. Returning to practice after a break, I had renewed energy and now a new look at the music. The pattern of practice and study followed by reflection became natural for me. Without a teacher present during my practice time, I had to think critically about each next step, just as a mountaineer or rock climber considers the path forward. I would look at problems and solve them in a similar manner. For me, each day was a teaching and learning experience.

More recently, my husband and I have enjoyed hiking in the Austrian Alps during summer trips to Europe. These hikes often last all day and usually require the use of mountain gear. The hiking shoes, day packs, layers of clothing, rain gear, food, water, and hiking poles appear to be only props and tools. Once on the trail, you realize that everyone is prepared in the same way—these “props” naturally become part of our identity. When rain clouds hide the sun and it begins to rain, you are glad that you packed the extra gear. Many days as I walk on soft dark earth, I can hear myself think and I take time to enjoy the scenery, consider new ideas, and solve puzzles in my mind. The mountains give me the gift of solitude, inspiration, and peace. I usually return to the *gasthof* knowing more about myself, eager to eat a good meal, read a great novel, and discuss ideas with friends. I know that as a woman I have learned much from the mountains. Each time I meet a mountain the experience brings me to a point of introspection and intersection, where my ideas merge only to form new ones that reach beyond my initial thoughts and impressions.

The conference title evokes a special meaning for women and education. The very presence of the mountains in my daily life has deepened since I began to think about the subject. I appreciate those

responsible for considering this topic. This is a noble experience, a time of contemplation, reflection, and learning from other participants from mountainous nations around the globe. As a participant, I wish to offer my remarks with respect to those who have researched, written, and practiced these ideas before me. The issues that I present are continuously emerging as I consider my students and their individuality. Hopefully, the ideas discussed at this conference and the publication that follows will be a model for others who seek to understand women's ways of knowing and learning. As individuals brought together to listen and learn from other's ideas, there is a construction of knowledge by integrating our voices. This paper recognizes current educative philosophy and practice while suggesting new perspectives.

THEORETICAL CONSIDERATIONS

The educative theory I will discuss here is the process of developing an interpretive paradigm that views the social world as an emergent social process created by concerned individuals. This social reality is often a network of assumptions and shared meanings. The theory frames emerging issues relative, but not limited to women's issues, such as Afro-centric, ethnocentric, lived experience, dialogue, caring, accountability, race, class, gender, reflexivity, praxis, and emotion.

In such a classroom ethos, students write reflections and narratives that respect their own voices and others. The notion of self-reflection is central to understand critically grounded qualitative research. Narrations are also valid in feminist theory as they honor their subjects, while respecting their thoughts, experiences, and feelings. In addition, feminist education issues draw upon critical social theory to help them engage in a personal understanding of their position in gender-defining institutions.

When students understand the value of an interactive pedagogy, they begin to realize the importance of their education in a community of teachers and learners. In *The Feminist Classroom*, Maher and Tetreault (2001) suggest four analytic themes: Mastery, Voice, Authority, and Position. They encourage women educators to revisit academic knowledge from a feminist perspective. These educative principles in an emerging interactive classroom filled with ideas, debate, and often differing voices, will

draw the richest reflections, narratives, critical thinking, and understanding from students. This occurs because students are encouraged to process information and connect new information to past experience.

As we seek to understand women's issues and look for possible solutions, a discussion of theory is important. The theoretical assumptions that underpin our education form the basis for the topical classroom discussions and the design of research. Together these enable thoughtful connections between women's lives and the interdisciplinary concepts addressed in class. Whatever women's circumstances may be, these overarching theoretical assumptions eventually shape the women's lives we teach. The theoretical and research paradigms often associated with this type of research are those of Positivism, Post-positivism, Critical Theory with its related theories, and Constructivism.

To consider my initial question, What are Woman's Ways of Knowing, Learning, and Understanding? we need to look at the types of research that are used to discover possible answers. Research based on the *positivist* and *post-positivist* ideas are often assembled from the outside by disinterested scientists as informers of decision makers, policy makers, and change agents. Whereas, a critical theorist finds materials that are "*transformative intellectual*" and may offer advocacy and activism from within. Often through surveys and interviews, the inquirer expands consciousness and is then in a position to confront ignorance and its apprehensions. Change can be made as individuals develop greater insight into the existing state of affairs, the nature and extent of their situation, and are encouraged to act on it.

This educative theory is the process of developing an interpretive paradigm that is framed by emerging issues relative, but not limited to women's issues, such as, race, class, gender, reflexivity, praxis, and demographics. Accordingly, I ask my students to write reflection papers because they are a part of the learning process. The notion of self-reflection is central to the understanding of the nature of critically grounded qualitative research. When we draw upon critical social theory it helps us to understand our location in gender-defining institutions. Narratives are critical in this educative theory because they honor the individual or subject, their thoughts, experiences, and feelings. Essays, stories, experimental writing, and interviews are ways to respect the individual. They tell more than statistics may

indicate and create an environment of knowing, learning, and understanding. Narratives and reflections honor the other, and keep us responsible to their stories. Emmanuel Levinas reminds us, “Responsibility is what is incumbent on me exclusively, and what, humanly, I cannot refuse. I am I in the sole measure that I am responsible, a non-interchangeable I. I can substitute myself for everyone, but no one can substitute himself for me” (Levinas, 1985, p. 101). I propose that as teachers and learners in an educational community, interaction and relationships are central to learning, knowing, and understanding—and they are indispensable for any treacherous mountain climb. Teachers stand in as guides, not authoritarian figureheads; consequently teachers mentor learners and teach them patterns that enable them to see multiple ways forward.

Frances Maher, feminist educator, writer, and professor said, “We need an interactive pedagogy, a pedagogy which integrates student contribution into the subject matter, just as the subject matter integrates the new material on women” (Mayer & Tetrealt, 2001, p. 2). In the mid-1980s, feminist theorists began to articulate *epistemologies*, or ways of knowing, that recognized women’s positions in society as a source of legitimate claims to knowledge, which before was difficult to see and understand. “These theorists used the vast difference in the world’s experienced by men and by women to expose and explore the political and social construction of all knowledge” (p. 2).

An interactive pedagogy requires that we listen and understand women as individuals with unique experiences, feeling hearts, curious minds, and sometimes challenging backgrounds. Throughout my years of teaching, I think this point is often neglected—it is the equivalent of leaving a hiker stranded on a mountain path without guidance and direction. We can discuss commonality easily, but in knowing the individual we honor uniqueness. In the hierarchal classroom teachers may fail to recognize the individual student, their questions, and their discussion points as valid contributions. In contrast, when I allow time for students to ask questions and to bring issues to class, they practice thinking together, not in competition, but with an urgency to find solutions. I recognize in my students their potential to improve each other’s situations and to look at future problems the world faces.

Interaction alone does not necessarily serve as a guide. Students learn as they integrate theoretical models by listening, respecting, and honoring each other. In this way, knowledge is constructed in the classroom. For many years, I would come into class with my lecture that included a list of important questions for the students to answer. I always knew which way I wanted the discussion to move and I would expect certain answers from them. We know this method well; it is the Socratic teaching method, top down, hierarchal, and teacher driven. At the time, I saw this as very manipulative and not the way I wished to empower the students to experience learning, especially on the university level. The students felt comfortable with this method because they expected to be told how to reflect instead of being shown how to consider other options. Such an approach might be too risky. Imagine that they may come up with a different answer! That had been my experience as a student in the classroom. Then I realized that it was not the case as I studied music. Here I found common ground with teaching, learning, cooperative collaboration, and critical thinking.

In the early part of my journey in the late 1970s, I began to search for ways to empower women to know, learn, and understand their potential. I realized that I wanted them to experience my own private teaching and learning experiences. It was easy in a music studio where the teacher student ratio was one-to-one, but it is more difficult in a classroom setting. The question then became a matter of research, to see if other teachers had experienced the same problems and asked similar questions. I did not find myself alone.

Feminist pedagogy, a new developing field, has evolved from many different sources: the consciousness-raising practices driven from the women's movement, the progressive tradition in American education created by John Dewey, and the more general forms of "liberatory teaching" espoused by Paulo Freire and others (Maher & Tetreault, 2001). Grounding our educative ideas in a theory that meets the particular needs of women students is the basis for a multidimensional view, which will help the construction of knowledge in the classroom.

While reflecting on the transitions in teaching and learning from hierarchal to community classrooms, I had the following experience.

I came prepared with all my amazing insights. When students brought up new and relevant ideas to their world, I began to see a new classroom emerging. Students spoke out and offered opinions, ones who had never participated in a class discussion. I saw their enthusiasm for new information because they were connecting it to their lives. Their minds were better than computers as they made their own connections and listened intently to other class members. I began to trust them to take a discussion in a different way than I had prepared to take it and the class didn't miss all the wonderful insights that I was going to offer. . . . Most of the time their views were new and refreshing. They were not afraid to see the world from another's point of view. The more I encouraged them to think through the issues, and discuss, even debate the ideas, their thinking and critical thinking evolved throughout the semester until it was a natural process for them. At the end of the course, many students comment to me that they have learned to think and be confident in their thinking because of this new classroom experience. (Powley, 2002-06).

At different points, I saw the classroom as communities of learners, where we learn from each other, while respecting differing points of view. I take women students and their education seriously so I seek to find the best ways to tap into their inquisitive nature. I further recognize and understand the differing educational needs of various student groups, and must be adaptable to enable each individual.

Inspired women of the past serve as guides for learning. These are women who spoke out, accomplished significant goals, and made a difference for our generation and our students' generation. Examples include: Emmeline B. Wells who wrote an admonition to women in Utah's early days, "I believe in women, especially thinking women;" Susan B. Anthony, a woman suffragette and an advocate for women's education at the University of Rochester, Rochester, NY; Virginia Woolf, novelist who broke from the past and recreated the novel; Mary McLeod Bethune, a woman educator and political activist who turned a small school into what is now Bethune-Cookman College; Rosalind Franklin, scientist now recognized for her essential work in revealing the double-helix structure; and Jill Ker Conway, from the Australian outback to MIT, committed to women's education she served as the first woman president of Smith College.

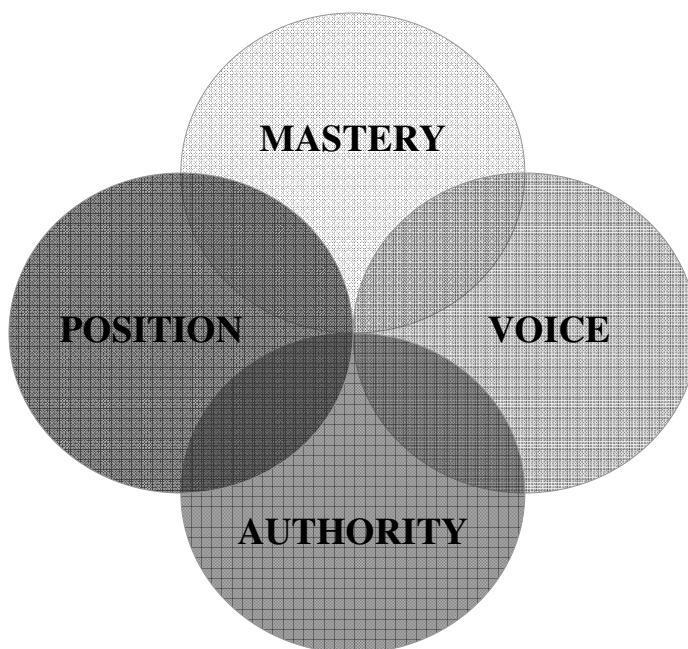
I often think of Emily Dickinson's world and the promising words, "I dwell in possibility" that she wrote in one poem, ending her verse with:

For Occupation—This—
The spreading wide my narrow Hands
To gather in Paradise—

"Her poetry speaks directly to the heart of American women's triumph in this country. Like Dickinson, women worked tirelessly over the centuries without recognition, but they constantly spread their hands—widened their horizons and that of the nation—to help create a better society. They influenced every facet of American life, regardless of the restrictions placed upon them. They dwelt in possibility—and made it a reality. Women truly built a nation" (Lucey, 2001, p. 17).

Do we imagine women's education in these terms? This question led me to discover the four analytic themes that I use in my classroom. I revisit these principles often and I refer to them as educative issues in the classroom. To understand the significance and equality of these themes: Mastery, Voice, Authority, and Position, I represent them as interconnected ovals in the diagram.

Figure 1. Analytic Themes



MASTERY

Laurie Finke (Maher & Tetreault, 2001, pp. 16-17) at Lewis and Clark College, who has been central in the evolution of this methodology and looks at the relationship between literary theory to the construction of knowledge in classrooms said to her class:

I'm asking you to think in a very different way from the way you have been thinking in most of the courses you have been taking. . . . But I don't expect you to master everything all at once, and one of the things you sort of have to do is put aside those neurotic compulsions that we have to always be the master of whatever materials we are reading and sort of immerse yourself in it.

When I explain this to students, I ask them if they can change their way of learning to make complex interpretations rather than definitive conclusions. As students continue to read during the semester, I suggest they jot down questions in the text margin or in a separate notebook. Then, when they finish the reading, choose a few of the questions that interest them and try to find answers from the reading. They are usually worried that they will come up with the wrong answer, but after bringing the questions to class for further discussion, they realize how much they can learn from multiple perspectives offered by class members, as if the students together journey through terrains of questions, opposing ideas, and thorny issues. Learning becomes interesting as they are empowered to ask questions, as well as the teacher. As they combine questions, answers, and information with others they often come up with more complex questions, and even some additional answers. This becomes a natural process for the students to immerse themselves in the subject matter. I always recommend my students collect copies of articles and all their work in a portfolio for future reference. This is important because they will be adding to their own body of knowledge that will be available when they need ideas to write class assignments. When I talk about mastery, I encourage my students to think outside the box!

VOICE

How can you find your “inner voice?” Soprano Renee Fleming (2004) asks us to consider our voice. Where and how is it found? As an opera singer, it is natural for her to use the idea of “voice” not only as a way of performing, but also to herself.

This is the story of how I found my voice, of how I worked to shape it, and of how it, in turn, shaped me. The story of my singing has a plot not unlike those of the horse novels I loved in my youth: A child finds a wild horse whose true potential only she can see. She loves it and cares for it, trains it tirelessly. The girl and the horse have a commitment to each other than no one else can get in the way of. She sticks by the horse through injury and doesn't believe anyone who says the horse is all washed up. When the horse is thriving, she turns down all offers to sell it off. In the end, the horse proves to be a winner, and in return for her work and devotion, it takes her to victories she had never dreamed possible” (Fleming, p. xvii).

In the classroom, “voice” originally meant the awakening of the students’ own responses, of their ability to speak for themselves, to bring their own questions and perspectives to the material. It may give significant meaning to the connection of one’s education to one’s personal experience, a connection that members of marginalized groups must often give up when they seek mastery through the dominant discourse. I encourage my students to learn the art of interviewing so they can hear another person’s experiences, so they can hear their voice and seek to understand women’s lives. That is why I always bring books to class for students to understand what you can learn from reading. I know that students today spend evenings glued to the television or the computer. I point out that reading helps us to see life from other perspectives. Autobiographies are helpful because they often reveal how women have been silenced through gender-defining institutions.

In class I play music of Billie Holiday, that unforgettable voice of jazz. When we discuss her life they see the similarities between her voice and her experiences. Students usually see this connection very clearly, especially after viewing a movie, where she plays a character much like her true self. Then they

hear how she expresses sadness through her voice. It is a poignant example of the voice echoing the inner feelings of our hearts.

Classrooms may be seen as *spaces* in which teachers and students “fashion” their voices rather than “find “ them. When students bring their own questions and perspectives to the formal textbook material, they are shaping their voices, while using the language of the discipline. The concept of voice helps us to evaluate how different individuals and groups relate to each other within the context of these cultural convergences. In my classes, I encourage a process of constructing multiple voices that emerge through group discussions and class participation about the subject matter. They learn to listen to each other’s cues and negotiate rocky trails that lead to new vistas of understanding. The students support their ideas with the underlying theories presented by Virginia Sapiro (2002), the societal-level women’s theories, the individual-level theories, and the commonality and differences in women’s lives. I encourage students to understand how their emerging ideas are remade through each other’s perspectives, comments, ongoing conversations, data, and experiences.

AUTHORITY

I see myself as a teacher that is committed to improving the lives of women. By empowering students to think through, rather than just act upon the words they read, is perhaps the most important object in teaching women. When students begin to look at their world through the lenses of history, economic, social and cultural situations, they become engaged in the subject. Combine these with understanding the influence that gender-defining institutions have on women’s lives, and you have an interesting subject. At this point, most students see themselves as possible to look creatively at critical problems and to see solutions to women’s issues. I respectively see my students as sources not only of my motivation but also for my own authority to work with them and perhaps influence their thinking and actions in the classroom and beyond. Creating personal awareness and self-knowledge in my students is central to my personal teaching and learning theory, made practical through the classroom experience.

Such a learning process raises the question of how to engage students in the thinking process. Often you find teachers who create the impression that they have authority over a designated body of knowledge. As the student enters the class they expect to get that information from them. Sometimes, you have to ask them “What does this mean?” instead of saying, “I’ve know this or that.” The former has the potential to invoke frustration and confusion while the student waits to be told the meaning; alternatively, the latter engages the student and professor in a mutually causal learning dynamic where both experience new insights and knowledge together.

Many times I go out on a limb and take a risk, I don’t know how the class will respond. Being prepared and immersed in the theories, issues, and current research, is part of that authority. I never ignore their ideas and their debates with each other. I do this because I don’t think there are any real solid answers until they are expressed, researched, and deliberated. Similarly, scientists continue to think about, experiment, and discuss questions or phenomena throughout the research process. They have not arrived at all the answers. Students need to know that their questions, ideas, and discussions are valid ways to solve concerns.

This classroom community ultimately involves teachers and learners eager to share, find solutions, and thoughtfully refine their ideas. There is the possibility that such a class can emerge with new possibilities, some significant ones that may change evolving societal ideas. This might mean that teachers may need to be willing to give up certain aspects of their authority as professors, so that students will accept personal responsible for their own learning. The creation of knowledge depends on the uses of authority, both inside the classroom and within an institution.

So what is good teaching in such a classroom? Is it engaging lectures, authoritarian teaching, effective discussion practices, or a combination? Basically, as the teacher, I want to ask you to come with me, on a journey to discover truths, risk a little, be challenged, listen to each other, talk to one another, and discuss your ideas that have been generated through the class readings—in the same way a mountain hike in the Alps produces new insights and thoughts through introspection and reflection.

As an educator, I have shared teaching experiences with my colleagues and how I have struggled with the boundaries of mastery, voice, authority, and position in my own classroom. I believe with Jill Tarule (Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger, & Tarule, 1997) that learning is constructed not only in individual minds but also through the interaction of a community of knowers. Around mid-term, I tell my students that I want to review with them their motivations in class, encourage them to expect more from themselves, and push them out of their initial comfort zone to take additional control of their learning process, because if one doesn't do that for themselves, who will?

POSITION

Finally, there is the theme of position with its emphasis on evolving and relational views. This perspective allows us to revisit data, both quantitative and qualitative, and perspectives over and over again. Data changes, situations change, the world changes, we all change in our relation to basic beliefs and truths. There is a constant need for us to understand one another and thus we must seek to understand another's position. When I consider position, I see a group thinking and discussing elements of knowledge as important, taking into account one's specific position in a context defined by gender, race, class, geography, and other socially significant dimensions. These will prove to be critical skills employed throughout their lives.

Consider this, what is perceived as marginal at any given time depends on the position one occupies. One needs to see centrality and marginality, in addition to oppression, oppressor, and oppressed as relational concepts. Therefore, what I encourage the students to do is to remember that meaning derived from experiences continuously shifts and that they must be open to seeing those shifts and understanding their origins. Such a process enables them to understand differences between their position and others.

At Spelman College, an African-American women's college, an African-American undergraduate woman said:

And also I think it is interesting that we read books by white social scientists, there is a distinct difference and that the passion is just not here. And then I wondered, is it possible, is it possible for a white social scientist to write passionately about my experience, or my people's experience?

Question number one! And question two, if passion is not there, is their work relevant?

We need to ask ourselves, what do we think about when we are asked to do something from a different position than before, even though it is new and strange at the time? This means taking a different position. It suggests honoring another and their point of view. As students discuss theoretical perspectives and apply them to gender-defining institutions and their personal experiences, they find their own positions. Then, when they feel comfortable about where they are, I encourage them to learn more, to reflect more, to read more, to understand another perspective more clearly. By widening their learning experience, I hope that they may come to understand and respect with honor their neighbor, the other.

CONCLUSION

As we look at the four analytic themes of Mastery, Voice, Authority, and Position, I imagine invisible lines interconnecting these themes. As teachers encourage students to seek an understanding of women's lives and their educational opportunities, there is a natural space created between these themes and procedures in the classroom. This is a liminal space, a threshold between the known and the unknown. It is a place where one is enabled to prepare for greater knowledge. Encouraging students to think before speaking, writing, and acting is not easy. Realizing this space as a time before the initiation of ideas, allows students to recognize the importance of knowing, learning, and understanding.

I recall one summer backpacking with our children in Utah's Uintah Mountains. My husband and I had studied the maps with important information about the trails, the steepness of the climb, the lakes, the campsites, and mile markers. We knew the hike would be challenging but worth the effort. When the children would appear tired, we would guide them on, encouraging their forward movement up the path. Naturally, they experienced a fear of the unknown but they persisted, counting their steps until they reached the next place to rest. It was more than an adventure; it was a learning experience still

remembered today. At one point, a sign directed them to another location, to take an easier path; however, we steered them back on the path. Near the end of the climb, we told them there would be a beautiful lake at our destination and they could go swimming to cool off after the hike. They would be rewarded for their hard work.

That summer the mountains taught me a great deal. More than beautiful vistas, fresh air, rushing breezes through tall pines, and the subtle sounds of the mountains, this vacation was a team effort filled with memories and discovery. My experience in the mountains is not a long journey to the classroom as I serve as a guide for students and connecting the students in a classroom community were students learn to think about ideas and discuss together possible solutions. The essential educative elements that are proposed in this paper have significant connections for me. In addition, I propose the issues of knowing, understanding, and learning may guide us to recognize that we dwell in possibilities beyond our current vision.

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