

'Philosophy of Human Sexuality and How I Teach It'

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J'ai de la chance! Je suis féministe.
Je suis philosophe professionnelle.
Et je donne un cours d'études de la femme
à un groupe d'étudiants enthousiastes . . .



Illustration by Monika A. Uesson

I am a fortunate individual: I am a feminist. I am a professional philosopher. And I teach enthusiastic students in courses which combine my political passions, my commitment to philosophy and my research interests in philosophy of sexuality and feminist theory. While noting the intense pleasure to which this situation gives rise, I must also acknowledge how privileged a woman this makes me in this culture.

One of these courses,

the Philosophy of Human Sexuality, was introduced into the philosophy curriculum at the University of Toronto in 1977 along with several courses in Medical Ethics. I interpreted this curricular move to signify the resurrection of the body in the eyes of the official philosophical establishment. The body has had a bad philosophical press. For example, Plato devalued the body because it belongs to the domain of the perishable, the decaying,

the ephemeral. He saw it as the origin of passions and appetites (such as carnal lust) which interfered with and could permanently derail the properly human projects of disembodied reason such as mathematics and philosophy.

For approximately 2,500 years, philosophers have concentrated on the acts of disembodied egos or consciousnesses, throwing in the occasional somatophobic remark for good measure. Now, disembodied egos do not

agonize over the moral dimensions of abortion, euthanasia and involuntary sterilization. Nor are disembodied egos thought of as experiencing orgasm, loss of erectile potency, genital mutilation or being punished for appearing intellectually nude in public places. Courses in medical ethics and philosophy of sexuality *do* focus on those sorts of experiences, and implicitly suggest that it is the *embodied* human being who lives and dies and who is individuated

along gender lines, who is philosophically significant.

Since the Philosophy of Human Sexuality course was introduced and I have had the opportunity to teach it, I have taught approximately 700 students (and I am not the only philosopher in the department who teaches it). At present, next to the basic introductory courses, Logic and Philosophy of Human Sexuality are the two courses with the highest enrolment in the Department of Philosophy.

In this article, I do not pretend to dictate how every course of this nature should be taught. I teach a distinct group of students who, generally, tend to be middle-class, white and Canadian. Second, I teach this course as a philosophy course which has a strong discipline focus. That is, I stress the ability to master critical philosophical methodology as central to the intellectual focus of the course and to the forms of assessment which I use. While one of the consequences of this focus is the clarification of values on the part of the students, it would be a mistake to interpret this course as part of a Values Clarification curriculum (with value impartiality or agnosticism as an assumed pedagogical posture on the part of the teacher). Nevertheless, these qualifications aside, I do believe that the curriculum materials and issues can be profitably explored in other contexts such as Women's Studies, Family Studies, Ethics, Values Clarification, Sex Education, Political Science, and so on.

MY VALUES

As a teacher, I found that it was a mistake to think that my values would not permeate the classroom. Selection of materials, pedagogical style, choice of classroom dynamics, patterns of interaction with individual students — all these aspects of the manifest and 'hidden' curriculum indicate to the sensitive observer and participant what my values are as they take concrete form in the classroom. Because I am a feminist philosopher, I tell my students this right from the start, indicating that the course will be taught from a feminist perspective. Quite rightly, many of my students ask what this means and whether this means that the course will be biased rather than 'objective'. I reply to the first concern by saying that it means that I will *argue* for the following claims in the course:

- (1) that, like racism, sexism and compulsory heterosexuality are morally bad, profoundly crippling sexual ideologies to inflict on human beings;
- (2) that like other domains of life labelled as 'personal', human sexual interactions can be perceived as a political domain and analysed in terms of power categories;
- (3) that the contemporary stereotypes of femininity and masculinity are oppressive for both women *and* men;
- (4) that the violence directed at women's sexuality is systematically integrated with a social

system which perpetuates and celebrates male dominance; and

- (5) that the sexual ideology into which we are socialized in the name of 'natural' is essentially phallogentric.

I point out that I do not hold these views as a *priori* dogmas but on the basis of evidence and moral argument. I further point out that I do not expect that my students will agree with me, at the beginning of the course *or* at the end, and that I would take universal agreement as alarming evidence of indoctrination rather than education. Just as I am entitled to demand that my students provide evidence, reasons and sound arguments for the views and values they support. I regard myself as accountable to my students in this respect. I also state that being a feminist does *not* automatically mean that I hate my male students. This association of man-hating with feminism is, I maintain, one of the most carefully cultivated and vicious dimensions of the patriarchal stereotype of 'the feminist woman'.

In response to the students' second concern, I argue that if someone has studied the forms of racist oppression in all their cruel historical and cultural 'splendour', and claims to be 'neutral' with respect to this oppression, that individual is a racist. I believe the same with respect to sexist oppression. Either you are in favour of sexual equality or sexual inequality. There is no neutral third position to hold. Thus, *anyone* who teaches a course in

philosophy of human sexuality would bring to the course some important set of values.

I further suggest that it is a mistake to equate objectivity with value neutrality in this context. Human sexuality is a powerful, complex dimension in peoples' lives and is the point of origin of personally experienced taboos, repression, fear, anxiety and guilt. On a social level, gender is a power-laden principle of social organization. To think or hope that philosophy of human sexuality be taught in an 'objective, value-neutral' way is to contribute to precisely those forms of repression already operative in the culture.

Where objectivity *does* enter the course is in the assessment of the students' performances as philosophy students. I believe there *are* objective criteria for evaluating students which are the same criteria that I would use in any philosophy course: clarity of exposition, understanding of and fair documentation of the material, definition of central terms, the use of illuminating examples, general originality, and, most significant, the ability to provide coherent, independent reasoned justification for one's own views along with being able to assess critically the arguments of others holding different views.

THE TEACHER

When I began teaching this course, I encountered problems I had never faced in a classroom before. I learned important lessons which continue to help me understand some of the fears and

concerns of students who enroll in the course. (Some of these students dare not tell their parents that they are taking a course in sexuality. However, apparently informing your parents or friends that you are taking a 'philosophy course' tends to bring all discussion immediately to a halt, presumably in the name of 'hopeless untranslatable obscurity', a useful tactic if you want to avoid confrontations over taking the course!)

First, I found myself having to search for a vocabulary with which to teach the subject matter — technical jargon seemed out of place (although the temptation to use it was strong) while 'street language', though immediate and vivid, sounded ridiculous when transported into the classroom as an everyday dialect and detached from its expletive context. After a certain amount of blushing, 'stammering' and experimenting, I finally learned and became comfortable with a suitable dialect, but it took time. And I continue to experience tremendous sympathy with a class when, in response to my question, 'What are the male external genitalia?' complete and total silence falls over the class. As this has happened in three separate classes, I have had to assume that more was at work than ignorance of the names for male external genitalia (or, possibly, the erroneous assumption that males had none!). When I respond to this silence by writing 'none' on the board and the class breaks into laughter, I

know that a taboo against speaking and naming has been recognized and experienced by an entire class.

A second important lesson I learned in those initial classes was the importance of being present to the class as a believable, comfortable, sexual human being whose authority in the classroom is derived not only from 'book learning' but also, in an important sense, from 'bed learning'. I have come to believe that it is absolutely crucial for whoever teaches this course to experience themselves as a sexual human being, as someone who is (still) capable of blushing, of laughing at the often absurd dimensions of human sexuality, who is aware of the hesitancy and anguish involved with becoming a sexually active human being in this culture, who perceives some of the sexual pressures built into contemporary stereotypes and definitions of sexual liberation, who understands the complexity of creating satisfying sexual relationships and who is aware of the powerful potential of sexual experience to create pleasure, communication, emotional bonding and human integration. While I personally still have much to learn, I believe that if this personal sexuality is coupled with research expertise in this area, maximum learning will result.

Ideally, I believe this course should be team-taught by a woman and a man. Such an arrangement has not been available to me. I have tried to deal with the present situation by

having male guest lecturers and male teaching assistants whenever possible. Students have responded well to this mixed arrangement.

THE IDEAL CLASSROOM

Were I to construct an ideal classroom in this course, I would keep the group small, no larger than 25 students. (Some of my own classes have numbered more than 100 and I believe that the size significantly undercuts the effectiveness of my teaching.) If it were possible to interview the students prior to this course, this, too, would be ideal. Such selectivity is usually not possible in public educational settings. Ideally, my classroom would contain an equal number of women and men drawn from as many age groups and cultural backgrounds as possible. The more variation there is in the sexual histories of the members of the class, the more exciting the class becomes, and I would try to include lesbian women and gay men in the class who would be willing to 'come out' to the other class members. (I know of no more powerful way of combatting the powerful homophobia which many straight (and closeted gay) students often manifest.)

Since interviewing and selection procedures have not been available to me, I canvass the students at the beginning of the course. I ask them what they want from the course, what they fear might happen in the course, what other relevant courses they have had, what non-academic

experience they have had that they consider relevant to their being in the course and how they would like the classes to be run. This way I find out what the students' expectations and fears are and try to arrange classroom dynamics in such a way as to meet these expectations and allay these fears. One early mistake I made in teaching the course was to assume that the classroom atmosphere would be identical to other more detached philosophical classrooms. I soon learned that genuine critical understanding of sexuality can only be produced when feelings of ambivalence about sex itself, feelings of hostility between women and men over sexual issues and feelings of homophobia are brought to the surface, acknowledged and analysed. This means that the potentiality for psychological turbulence in this type of classroom is much greater than in other settings. It is important to be aware of this, to be prepared to deal with this, and to analyse it as an important teaching instrument. It also means that in the heat of small group discussions, the teacher will be called upon to mediate the passions of the group members as well as confer lucidity on the conceptual controversies and disagreements.

In keeping with expressed preferences of large numbers of students, I have divided my classes into lectures and small group discussions. I try to keep my lectures porous in three ways: by encouraging student questioning and comment during the

lecture, by suggesting that students bring other interested individuals to lectures of particular interest to them and by bringing in events and happenings 'in the real world' which are relevant to the course. (Fortunately (?), given the unceasing labours of the Metropolitan Toronto Police Department, the Censor Board and the RCMP, this is not difficult to do in Toronto.)

The lecturers are supplemented by small group discussions led by four or five students who are jointly responsible for planning one particular discussion/tutorial during the course. I strongly encourage students to use whatever imaginative means they can think of (within the bounds of the *Criminal Code*) to generate discussion and to focus on the particular issues for which they are responsible. In the past, students have selected

films, constructed slide shows, role-played situations, had mini-debates, small panels, used questionnaires and made up illuminating anecdotal problems. In the small groups, I encourage debate, discussion, openness and participation in an atmosphere of toleration and trust. I regard these small group discussions as central to the course. In course evaluations, students have consistently remarked on how different and useful these tutorials are when compared with more 'free-for-all' unstructured tutorials in other courses. Often, students who work together as leaders on a particular topic form friendships which survive the ending of the course.

STUDENT RESPONSE

Enrolment in the course has continued to grow. More and more students are taking the course because they

have heard, *via* the grapevine, that, although it is a lot of work and is very hard, it is a genuinely rewarding course to take. One student who initially came to me wondering if she was suitably 'qualified' to take the course (it took a while for this special sense of 'qualification' to penetrate my dense sensibility), bounded up at the end of the course, saying that she now felt much more prepared for life. Another student, a graduating engineer, declared that this was the most interesting course he had taken in his four years at university. A third student dropped by my office to report that she had just called a former lover of two years past because she wanted to tell him that now she understood what had gone wrong in their relationship.

For a copy of the detailed syllabus and Handout Packet (\$7), write to the author, c/o the Department of Philosophy, University of Toronto.

In general, students report that the course has powerful effects in the following areas: it helps them understand their own sexuality more clearly; it renders them articulate in areas in which they had previously felt shy and mute; it opens their eyes to aspects of their own socialization which they have never noticed or questioned before; it makes them more tolerant; and it alerts them to the sexually repressive role the State continues to play in Canadian culture. Intellectually, the course is claimed to help them sharpen their critical skills in cutting through bias, prejudice and fallacious arguments in the area of human sexuality both with respect to their own views and those of others. Any course that accomplishes all of this has got to be good! ☺



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