

Sarah Smith Rainey: Connection, Coalition, and Creating Capacity

I l-o-v-e what I teach—love it! Everyone in my classroom can feel my passion. Enthusiasm is part of my teaching philosophy because if I am excited about my subject, my students will be too. Such contagious energy is important because it helps students connect to the material. I tell stories—sometimes about my life, other times about people I know—linking the material to daily life, encouraging them to make the connections too. Quickly, things start to “click” and they start to see concepts like “compulsory heterosexuality” and “objectification” all around them.

To make these emerging connections sustainable, I also facilitate connection to current research in the field and to community outside the classroom. One of the defining features of the college experience is interacting with professors engaged in innovative research; therefore, I make an effort to engage students in my own research and the work of my colleagues, as well as encourage their own original research projects. For example, I have co-written a book review with an undergraduate student, and I have mentored several honors research projects. I have also assigned texts I have written, including “works in progress,” so that students can have the opportunity to engage directly with the researcher, providing feedback and critique. Students give important and valuable criticism. Based on student feedback, I recently completed revisions on an article that was accepted for publication in the *Journal of Literary and Cultural Disability Studies*.

Community connection is another vital part of my teaching methods. Women’s Studies grew out of activist efforts; therefore, I believe it is important to help students apply what they learn to the “real world.” Civic engagement, or “service learning,” has become a major component to many of my courses. I have worked with students to organize a “Girl Power” conference for area teens, collect oral histories of local lesbians for the Gay Ohio History Initiative, and work with youth in a summer program. My philosophy toward civic engagement is that my students should work *alongside* community members. In other words, I work hard at dispelling the “victory narrative” in which volunteers swoop in and fix the problems of individuals in need. For example, in “Critical Pedagogy for Feminist and Anti-Racist Leadership,” my students design workshops for a teen center and then attend their classmates’ workshops alongside area teens. This community learning model disrupts the expert/amateur binary. Inside the classroom we reflect on those experiences and study the social institutions that create and sustain inequality.

All this connection can be draining, and it is very common for students to look toward the classroom as a “safe space.” While well-intentioned, the desire to find safety—to feel at “home”—in the feminist classroom is misguided. Such “safe spaces” can create an illusion of sameness that marginalizes those who are different from the dominant group. When those difference emerge—and they always eventually do—the “safe space” feels violated and individuals feel threatened. In response to the perception that the feminist classroom is a “safe space,” I have adopted the principle of coalition which brings together different individuals working on a shared goal. In coalition, differences between students are made salient, not suppressed, and those very differences can be put into service of the group. To be sure, the experience of coalition can be disorientating. As Bernice Johnson Reagon says, coalition work “is some of the most dangerous work you can do.” Confronting one’s own privilege and learning how to build coalition across difference is challenging. But coalition work is essential to helping students begin to truly understand how difference, privilege, and oppression operate in our world. Such learning does not happen at home, in our safe spaces; therefore, it is my job to ensure that students are respected, but not necessarily safe.

Finally, I believe strongly that *all people* have the ability to learn and understand the material in my class. If they are not “getting it,” it is because the teaching method is failing, not them. Thus, it is my responsibility to create capacity by utilizing teaching methods and tools that can reach all learners. This approach is rooted in my commitment to Disability Studies, and draws on “Universal Design for Learning” strategies which aim to reach different types of learners by employing flexible assessments and assignments and through multiple methods of communicating information. Thus, my major in-class activity is the discussion-based lecture that employs concise, but visually appealing PowerPoint presentations. *Seeing* images and text while, simultaneously, *hearing* and *discussing* the new material taps into different learning styles. I have also used interactive handouts, group work, “minute-papers,” and other pedagogical strategies to help students engage with the materials on multiple levels.

These three principles—connection, coalition, and building capacity—guide my daily interactions with students inside and outside the classroom.