

A theoretical approach to gender studies course in terms of feminist pedagogy

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Abstract. The article studies how feminist pedagogy in gender education is used to transform the mindset of students, their families and ultimately society. Brazilian theorist Paul Freire describes the oppressor-oppressed (discriminatory) relationship in society in the *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. According to Freire, education is a direct political act and can transform society as well as a libertarian style of pedagogy where everyone speaks, expresses their opinions and attains their rights. In feminist pedagogy inspired by Freire, the structures and systems that sustain the discrimination against women are identified as early as the school level and are subsequently transformed to minimize negative attitudes toward girls.

Feminist pedagogy, started to take its place in academia as a field that supports the critical thinking structure after the 1980s in Turkey. It aims to strengthen the student's self-esteem, independence and questioning abilities, especially to criticize the patriarchal social structure and to promote the gender equality. Feminist pedagogy is applied in the state and private universities in Turkey. The paper focuses on the author's teaching experience of "Gender Studies" course with 348 Turkish and foreign students in a private university in Istanbul between 2019–2022. Feminist pedagogy was applied in terms of the content and method in the classroom and the survey that was conducted to measure the impacts of the method in terms of transformation. The paper contributes to gender studies of scholars with a feminist perspective on how to apply that methodology. Based on a study of the effectiveness of teaching the mentioned discipline, recommendations for improving the pedagogical content were made.

Keywords: feminist pedagogy, gender studies course, gender equality, feminist praxis, feminist classroom, critical pedagogy, SDG No 5, gender lens

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Теоретический подход к курсу гендерных исследований с точки зрения феминистской педагогики

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Аннотация. В статье исследуется, каким образом феминистская педагогика в гендерном образовании используется для трансформации мышления учащихся, их семей и, в конечном счете, общества. Бразильский теоретик Пол Фрейре описывает дискриминационные отношения в обществе в «Педагогике угнетенных». По мнению Фрейре, образование является прямым политическим актом и может трансформировать общество, а также либертарианский стиль педагогики, где каждый говорит, выражает свое мнение и обретает свои права. В феминистской педагогике, вдохновленной Фрейре, структуры и системы, поддерживающие дискриминацию женщин, выявляются еще на уровне школы, а впоследствии подвергаются трансформации с целью минимизировать негативные установки в отношении девочек. Феминистская педагогика начала занимать свое место в академических кругах как область, поддерживающая структуру критического мышления после 1980-х гг. в Турции. Она направлена на укрепление самоуважения, независимости и способностей учащихся в области критического мышления, в особенности на критику патриархальной социальной структуры и пропаганду гендерного равенства. Феминистская педагогика применяется в государственных и частных университетах в Турции. Основное внимание в статье уделяется преподавательскому опыту автора в рамках курса «Гендерные исследования» с участием 348 турецких и иностранных студентов в частном университете в Стамбуле в 2019–2022 гг. Феминистская педагогика применялась в период обучения с точки зрения содержания и методики, а также был проведен опрос для измерения воздействия этого метода с точки зрения результатов трансформации. Этот документ вносит вклад в гендерные исследования ученых с феминистским взглядом на то, как применять эту методологию. На основе изучения эффективности преподавания упомянутой дисциплины составлены рекомендации по совершенствованию педагогического содержания.

Ключевые слова: феминистская педагогика, курс гендерных исследований, гендерное равенство, феминистская практика, феминистские классы обучения, критическая педагогика, цель устойчивого развития № 5, гендерный подход

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Introduction

Feminist pedagogy first took its place in academia in the 1980s as a field that supports critical thinking. This branch, which is based on *participatory learning*, is a teaching style that focuses on the critique of the patriarchal social structure and advocates gender equality in this context. The influential name of critical pedagogy, Brazilian theorist Paul Freire, describes the oppressor-oppressed relationship in society in *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. According to him, education is a direct political action and can transform society.

There are *Women's Studies*, *Gender Studies Institutes* and master's/doctorate programs that apply feminist pedagogy in private and public universities in Turkey. This article analyzes a lecturer's "Gender Studies" course experiences with 348 Turkish and foreign students at a private university in Istanbul in the years 2019, 2020, 2021 and 2022. Feminist methodology was used in this course, where the content was mainly determined by the instructor in parallel to Freire's pedagogic ideology. The impact was measured with a survey and the results were analyzed.

This paper examines, with first-hand experiences, that teaching feminism and raising awareness about gender literature by using feminist pedagogy methods have positive impact on students. With feminist pedagogic methodology, students were able to question the patriarchal structure and critically review events through a *gender lens* and contribute to a change in the society in the long run.

Feminist Pedagogy in Turkey

Feminist pedagogy in Turkey first came into effect when the *Women's Studies Application and Research Center* was established in Istanbul University in 1989. Here, a feminist pedagogy practice has been initiated with master's programs that teach women's history, feminism, economics, gender, law, women in literature and media. With this new discipline, a new literature was created, research areas, theory, methodology, epistemology were discussed. In recent years, these departments have increased in both public and private universities, research centers have been opened, and feminist pedagogy continues to be applied here. Feminism and gender issues, which were previously included in different disciplines such as anthropology and sociology, created a completely different discipline. Since then, the number of Turkish publications and translated books covering the field has increased, and symposiums, conferences and panels have been organized [Asena 2008].

Feminist pedagogy does not include a traditional method of teaching and learning. It is open to interpretation, critical thinking and analysis, not memorization; It includes demanding elements such as equality, democratic rights. It is about leaving yourself and your knowledge open to other views, perceptions and experiences of the world. It is a form of learning that encourages dialogue and action-oriented practice [Stopford 2020; Chick, Hassel 2009].

An academic from Turkey describing her experiences in gender class is inherently different from, for example, academic experience writings from Russia or African countries. It contains data that we have experienced or have never encountered. Reading them allows us to see intersectionality, how similar problems actually arise despite cultural differences. There are many similarities with us in inequalities within society and family, ingrained traditional norms and attitudes.

Feminist Pedagogy in Freire's Footsteps

Inspired by Freire, feminist pedagogy analyzes the current situation of women, opposes injustices and inequalities, and seeks to transform structures and systems that perpetuate women's oppression. Together they create solutions for equality. According to him, education is a direct political action and can transform society a liberal pedagogy style should be applied in which everyone speaks, expresses their opinion and seeks their rights.

Feminist pedagogy talks about the liberation of oppressed women. This method, which includes many personal experiences, differs according to the changing socioeconomic and cultural dynamics of the place where it is applied. It uses a methodology that pushes the individual and society to change. It depends on an individual's capacity for empathy and experiences. It is socially constructed and political.

According to Freire [Freire 2000], "the core of education is the practice of freedom", while feminist pedagogy is based on the assumptions of power and consciousness raising, accepting the existence of oppression and the possibility of ending it, and emphasizing emancipation. The Gender Studies course also has a political aim to raise awareness, contribute to democratization through equality and transformation.

Feminist pedagogy does not have a teaching style that requires us to make standard practices, we can create thousands of applications with different content in each classroom with different narrators. It is a fact that students are free to question, evaluate and make decisions, therefore students are important "subjects" playing a role in the development

of the lesson. I prefer to provide a classroom environment where each of us participates equally, talking and discussing together. “It is argued that this pedagogy strives to reshape and strengthen the relationship between professor and student, build community, privilege the individual voice, respect personal experience in its diversity, and challenge traditional theory and teaching views” [Webb, Walker 2002]. An effort should be made to create a sincere atmosphere in the classroom, not only to teach, but to bring the subject to the classroom, to open a sharing space for students by asking questions, to think together, talk and discuss about the comments received from the students, to define and enrich them when necessary.

What the lecturer tried to do was to destroy the power relationship in class. Sometimes I give examples from myself and my family in class. I prefer to build horizontal relationships in the classroom rather than being an authoritarian lecturer. This encourages students to share their own experiences and feelings. In addition, I find it important to open an area where all students can visit me and ask questions individually after the lesson. “Feminist pedagogical perspectives contributed to developing a theoretical framework and method for teaching aimed at reducing the rigid hierarchical relationship between teacher and students in order to empower students. It is a teaching view where personal experience is also important for knowledge” [Lundberg, Werner 2012].

A Challenging Journey Course Evaluation & Satisfaction Survey

Gender Studies Course is an elective course of 3 credits, lasting 14 weeks, 3 hours per week, open to undergraduate students from all faculties. I conducted evaluative research and wanted to measure the impact of the Gender Studies Course taught with Freire’s *participatory learning* style. At the end of each semester, I applied a questionnaire to my students using the self-administered technique, using a structured questionnaire. My sampling frame was undergraduate students coming from different field of study who took my course in the 2019–2020 fall and spring semester, the 2020–2021 fall and spring semester, and the 2021–2022 fall semester. Sample size is a total of 348 Turkish and foreign students who attended the survey. 80% of the students were between the ages of 21–23. And 75,6% of them were women. I e-mailed the survey-Google Forms to each student. I set a deadline and automatically received the result.

In this survey, in which I measured the course achievements of the students, I asked the following questions; Were the course materials sufficient for you to explain the feminist theory? Was the content of the lesson interesting? Would you recommend this course to another friend? Will you apply the lesson outcomes in your future life? Did you learn new concepts in the lesson? Did you express yourself in the lesson? Did the course meet your expectations? Did you talk to your friends about the subjects in the lesson? Did you talk to your parents about the subjects in the lesson? Do you think watching the movie helped you understand the theory?

According to the questionnaire consisting of 30 multiple choice and 3 ranking questions, there is no bias as students' names are not asked. In this private university student profile, the fact that I did not have any difficulties in practice due to the educated family structure and socio-cultural mentality, the students' being open to change and the ability to express their ideas easily made it easier for me to apply feminist pedagogy.

Student Profile

It is not easy to fit a multidisciplinary ideology into fourteen weeks and explain feminism and gender equality by attracting the attention of a heterogeneous group. While preparing the course content, I wanted the students to see the inequalities, I created the content based on *Gender Equality SDG Goal 5*. While preparing the rights-based and egalitarian content and conducting the studies, my goal was to contribute to social transformation.

There is a heterogeneous group in the course in terms of academic discipline and academic level. There are students at every grade level from the faculty of engineering, the faculty of economics, faculty of administrative and social sciences, faculty of medicine and the faculty of law. As such, it is a multi-layered floor. Those who come from social sciences such as sociology, psychology, pre-school education and law are more familiar with the course terminology, on the other hand, those coming from the engineering faculty or the faculty of medicine hear the subjects for the first time.

Each week, the topics are transferred with interdisciplinary exchanges. A student who is passive one week can be active while dealing with the other week's topic; For example, a law student may attach importance to CEDAW (Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women) because it is an international contract, and may want to learn more.

Carrying Knowledge Across Continents

The culture in which foreign students grow up and the luggage they carry is different from that of Turkish students. Differences in religion, language and race bring along the difference in mentality. Experiencing examples from other countries is valuable in terms of diversity. I have students from Africa (Morocco, Tunisia, Egypt, Republic of South Africa), Arab Peninsula (Palestine), Uzbekistan, Ukraine, Syria. Most of them come from patriarchal societies.

The student compares their country with Turkey, envying that there are such laws in Turkey, while they look with horror at the news of violence against women that happens every day. Sometimes they are amazed to see that Turkey is forward and sometimes backward. They are questioning what they would like to change in their own country, perhaps they will carry the knowledge they gained in this course across continents.

Much of the Gender Studies course material asks students to re-think their ideas and assumptions about their experiences with their culture, society, family, or even their body. In this process, it can be both affirming and alienating for the student to open a curtain that has not been opened before, to find a phenomenon that has never dreamed of, in a way has never thought of. The student may not want to change his/her mind because there are stereotypes of gender roles, traditional norms, expectations. In my teaching experience some students 'get it' very quickly some of those students like the view, some do not. Learning feminism can be a difficult challenge.

My Teaching Style & Course Contents

I recommend classical feminist theory books (Anne Philips, Carole Pateman, Josephine Donovan, Silvia Federici, Richard Sennett, Carol Adams, Hanna Arendt, Beauvoir) for pre-class reading. Discussing the course literature that everyone reads and thinks about in class, although it is very difficult to fit into short courses, strengthens the capacity of students to present their own perspectives and make analysis. In addition, writing some of your thoughts through assignments is as supportive as reading and discussing. I read passages from Virginia Woolf and Duygu Asena (a pioneering Turkish feminist writer) in class, and let students to discuss. The underlying purpose of these discussion sessions is to develop students' *critical thinking*, as Freire suggests. In the contents of women in literature, J.K. Rowling was included, the author

of the *Harry Potter* book series. I explain why she does not use her real name even in the 21st century. When students are approached with a topic, they are familiar with, they become attached to the subject and respond more enthusiastically.

I have my students watch and critically engage with films such as *Suffragette* (2015, S. Gavron), *Iron Jawed Angels* (2004, K. Garnier) and *Hidden Figures* (2016, T. Melfi). The best way is to stop the movies at important scenes, discuss their connection with the lesson, and let the students comment. In the case of movies, for example, this allows students to see the theory behind the scene. Thus, you can convey the result you want to achieve in a single frame rather than telling for hours.

The course content focuses on concepts such as; the public sphere, private sphere, power, authority, patriarchal system, the relationship between gender and sex, LGBTI definitions, masculine and feminine identity formation, gender roles, stereotypes, and sexist language. For example, sexist toys (Legos, Barbies etc.) and fairy tales became a section that attracted a lot of attention and was discussed at length. Seeing how children are coded in a biased gendered manner aroused curiosity and interest. Students realized how beneficial it would be if the gender lesson started to be taught from pre-school onward.

During this course, where I mainly use power point slides, I make use of various videos to ensure the full concentration of the students. Basically, I use BBC's documentaries, EIGE (European Institute for Gender Equality)'s gender stereotypes short videos and statistical data from UN Women website.

The universal comparisons that are made frequently throughout the course both become the focus of attention of foreign students and give students a vision. While examining the *Global Gender Gap Report*, foreign students are surprised to see that Turkey is in the 133rd place out of 149 countries (2021data). They see examples of different countries and compare them with their own countries, this adds diversity to the class dynamic.

UN Women, International Women's Conferences, CEDAW and The Council of Europe Convention on Preventing and Combating Violence Against Women and Domestic Violence (the Istanbul Convention), UN Sustainable Development Goals NO 5 Gender Equality are the subjects of our women's rights and law part of our course. The content of this multidisciplinary course is a broad scope that ends in international relations while describing a sociological phenomenon that we entered from the economy and exited from political science. Beyond explaining feminism, this course also emphasizes that violence against women is the result of gender inequality. While teaching the students by underlining these in bold letters, it is necessary to make

them understand that they are all parts of a whole. Gender studies are intertwined and almost blended with sociocultural, political and economic conditions.

*“Now I will look through
gender lens”*

I read in the exam paper how one of the male students, who said “men cannot be feminists” at the beginning of the semester, changed his mind. My married student said that she started to pay attention to the toys she bought for her baby in order to break the gender stereotypes. The Egyptian student wondered and looked at the number of women in her country’s Parliament and talked about it in the classroom. The student thanking me for the new concepts he learned at the end of each lesson and many others. Students show us that they can prepare for social change through feminism and gender education.

I used a *word cloud* application for students in the first lesson. Students were asked to write down the association they make when they hear the words “female”, “feminine”, “male”, “masculine” in one word. I repeated this work at the last lesson of the semester. Later, the words in the cloud changed. These students led to the awakening of their critical consciousness by exploring themes of great importance to their daily lives. They saw where, from whom and for what reason the oppression of women in society originated. As students reach their critical consciousness, they can break the oppression and transform society in an egalitarian way, as in Freire’s liberal pedagogic style.

In the survey conducted, students stated that they discussed these course topics with their families. They question the relationship between their parents, for example, they become aware of domestic labor, they try to change it in their family. This is a good sign that the social transformation that begins in the classroom develops in turn in the individual, then in the family and finally in society.

The student feedback was as follows: “You opened different windows in my brain”, “This course taught me concepts that I did not know”, “It was a lesson beyond my thoughts”, “I could express myself for the first time”, “Now I will look through gender lens”, “I will apply these in my life”. When I looked at the feedback written by my students at the end of the year, I saw some words being repeated; “groundbreaking”, “opened my eyes”, “increased my awareness”, “transformed me”. The positive feedbacks I received from my students and the administration show that I was successful in applying the “Gender Studies” course with feminist epistemology and methodology.

It is crucial to make women's experiences visible and historical in feminist pedagogy. I am convinced that my students are now able to wear *gender lens* while watching commercials, news, movies and TV series, and they are ready to challenge the dominant patriarchal definitions and restrictions.

In my feminist pedagogy experience at a private university in the center of Istanbul, the profile of students with high socio-economic status provided a positive result in my work. But this is not generalizable. This needs another research for instance; the impact of Gender Studies Course using feminist pedagogy methods in a public university outside Istanbul. It is also necessary to make a comparison between the foreign students and Turkish students. If an equal number of male and female students answered the questionnaire, the result might have been different. These could also be a reason for further research.

Conclusion

Learning Gender Studies is a challenge to students. Feminist teaching practices seek to promote a classroom environment that supports transformation. In this paper, I defined the concept of feminist pedagogy through Freire's libertarian style of pedagogy where everyone speaks, expresses their opinions and seeks their rights. Secondly, I explained the gender studies course history in Turkey and explained how I applied the feminist methods and used feminist content in my Gender Studies course at a private university located in Istanbul. I measured the impact and contribution of the course by conducting a survey to 348 Turkish and foreign students and analyzed the results.

I think that my exploration of these methods has far reaching implications in Turkish education system. Based on Freire's theory, I concluded that the course produced with feminist methods was successful and could be applied in gender studies courses that will be given in a similar university location and student profile, by looking at the survey results and student feedback. I found out that if the course is taught using this method; it will transform the student and help to bring a social change. My journey exploring Freire's theory in Gender Studies classes gave me the opportunity to create a liberatory experience.

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