

A No-Teacher, No-Text, No-Syllabus Class?

A Reflection Paper on WD 225 (Seminar on Gender, Culture and Ideology)

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If there is a way to summarize the WD 225 class I took this semester, the closest I could probably come up is that it opens up a box of contradictory experiences. While it was obviously experimentation because of the unique framework around which it was run, the class members apparently took to it like to water. While it ostensibly delved into gray areas, it elicited from us the stark black-and-white biases or conceptions that have long held sway in society and which we might have unknowingly embraced as our own. While it allowed us to assert our own personal feelings or ideas, it made us see on a very personal level how they mirrored that of many other women.

While the class sought to tread into the realm of The Unsaid, no other class perhaps encouraged us more to take the floor and tell our stories as much as we wanted. Before I go on and on about these on-the-one-hand-but-on-the-other-hand explanations, one final word. While WD 225 created a laid-back and very relaxing atmosphere in class, it managed to be a very absorbing experience. You will either love it or hate it to a great degree. If you think I'm done talking, so sorry. See below for more details.

1.

Among all my WD classes so far, none has been as true to the spirit and calling of the feminist creed as WD 225, chiefly perhaps because of the novel methodology it employed. By handing over the power usually held by the teacher to the learners or students, it succeeds for at least some three hours every week to reverse the way the universe runs, so to speak.

Honestly, having been in and out of traditional classroom settings since I started my education, my first reaction to a no-teacher, no-text, no-syllabus affair was: Hello! Translation: 1. Paano? 2. Ano ka, hilo? 3. April Fools Day ba ngayon? 4. Anong ek-ek yan? 5. Ginu-good time ba tayo ni Guy?

But, although my brain went into overdrive as it processed all of the above reactions, externally, I kept my poise. Although every part of me- the quintessential student who enters a classroom and surrenders to the wishes of the expert who is the teacher—was mounting an instant revolt, my smile masked the violent internal responses.

The introductory lecture on the first meeting, which laid down the rationalization for the framework, helped to calm me. From an incredulous "Hello," I shifted to a more calm "Ahh, ganun ba? O sige subukan." It was not yet total acquiescence, but at least, thankfully I didn't reach out for a dropping slip or a change mat. On the first day of class, I gave my teacher, or rather the coordinator, an A for sheer talent and energy in making the first day interesting. I thought to myself: With my low blood pressure, this was a welcome jolt. What a way to start a semester! I couldn't help but recall my usual first days of class where the teacher, in a self-important tone, enumerates the class requirements and the students nod or groan in unison, and both teacher and students seem to be in a hurry to get out of each other's way. On my way out of this class, I actually began thinking: What could she be up to? Verde interesting!

2.

Because of the focus and directions the class discussions took, this class takes the cake in terms of extracting a whole range of emotional responses. Although the old romantic me refused to completely capitulate to the theory about romantic love being another patriarchal tool for subjugation of women, I did feel disconcerted when the discussion turned to how the males kept women captive through the illusions of romantic love. I felt guilty about how most women, me included, have not fully appreciated their mother's efforts of dealing bravely, in their own way, with their subordinated status in the family. Through the stories we shared, I felt rage at how blatantly some men have abused the trust and kindness of the women in their lives, and felt helpless too about how some women continue to allow the men to do so with impunity. I felt relieved in knowing how many women, in their own little ways, try to reclaim the turf that rightly belongs to them.

3.

In terms of the learning in this class, it would perhaps be more accurate to describe it in this manner: My notebook for this class is barely written on but I can bet that, well into the future, when I think back of all the courses I attended, my recollections and impressions and learnings from this class would outnumber and perhaps outlast those of others. Perhaps this is because the course zeroed in on a very personal level while my other courses in the WD program painted the big picture, this course allowed me to locate myself in this big picture and get a sense of where I stand in relation to the rest. By giving space and time to our insignificant little voices and making it the centerpiece of the discussion, the class taught us, women, to value better our own experiences and insights.

One of the more important things I have learned would probably be the perspective to look for what is unsaid in order to find out what is really being said. In short, to sharpen further one's critical eye. This cliché ceased to be one in this class, what with the hands-on training on deconstructing long-held premises and assumptions.

Although I don't recall class sessions where the discussions on the floor did not capture my interest, the way some of our discussions proceeded were not exactly the most enlightening experiences. I felt this way especially during our discussions on the family, and consciousness, that on the political economy of pleasure. Sometimes it felt like we couldn't grasp the many concepts that related to the discussions on hand. Perhaps, it is because we needed to brush up on the theories we had learned in previous classes. (I look mine some nine years ago.) If I remember correctly, we might have raised more questions than gave answers. To try to answer our questions, we went back in time, or at least Guy did with her efforts to ground the discussions in theory and other philosophical formulations, and then fast-forwarded to our own life experiences. Sometimes the discussion went round and round, perhaps because our experiences were inadequate to explain the questions we raised.

4.

Some questions relating to the framework and methodology followed by this course have been gnawing at the back of my mind. Below, I shall discuss how I tried to answer these questions:

Is the method effective? Does it stimulate learning?

Oo naman. Considering the objectives of the course as well as the subject matter, I think that the method is not only appropriate but also most innovative. How else to best impress on the students the importance of deconstructing, of breaking things apart to see how they work, than by starting with the structure governing the teacher-student dyad?

I agree too with an earlier observation made in class that this setup might prove unwieldy for a bigger class size. Our limited number of eight learners allowed us to maximize the potentials of this unusual method.

On the question of whether the method stimulates learning, my answer is that, at the very least, I have thus far scored 100 percent on the attendance. Of course, if you know that I don't have a habit of absenting myself from any class I enroll in, you might say I am just being true to my nature. The difference lies in the fact that with this class, I did not have to drag myself to the class sessions. The method certainly helped because I knew that I did not have to listen to a boring discussion because I had a hand in determining what to discuss. Secondly, there was no pressure or tension that was usually created by a terror of a teacher. Thirdly, since the class decides from the get-go that we would draw from our own personal knowledge and experiences, each class meeting somehow served as some form of therapy with many of us releasing our own anxieties with the personal disclosures we made. Fourth, there was food, glorious food! (On second thought, this could be the most important reason for looking forward to each class. Saan ka ba naman nakakita ng klase na bago magsimula, ang inaasikaso ng mga estudyante ay ang paghahapag ng mga dala-dalang pagkain, kung saan kukuha ng tinidor at plato para sa lasagna, kung saan kukuha ng tasa para sa kape? Of course, this disorganized running around happened only the first few meetings. Later, we all came prepared for our dining pleasure and the transitions to and from our eating and discussing flowed ever so smoothly.)

By not relying on text, did we somehow not become overly dependent on the most learned member of the class who must have gotten her own knowledge from the text that we took great pains to avoid?

The semester is almost over but honestly, I somehow still feel an aching need to pore over some text, brought on no doubt by force of habit. Of course, I welcomed the no-text approach although at some points I did feel the need to read up (which I did) on what we were discussing in class to try to understand it better. This is not to underestimate the value of the personal experiences we brought to bear on our understanding but I could empathize with Guy's frustrations during some of the discussions when it seemed like she was only the one trying to think through what we were discussing. On hindsight, I feel that we might have had more substantial exchanges and perhaps more insightful discussions had we read up on topics to be tackled. Of course, given the general framework of the course, the readings should still not be required but those who wanted to could have been guided towards a selection of materials that could help in the discussions.

Did the flexible and negotiable nature of the structure make us complacent and lacking in discipline in our learning goals?

My experience in this class somehow made me see the importance of learning in an atmosphere devoid of the competitiveness that characterizes the usual classroom setting. Some may argue by saying that if we presume to be equal to men, we must be able to beat them in their own game, or win under the same conditions. I have a better sense now of countering this argument by showing how the playing field is not at all that level, of how the odds are stacked up against women. Further, some may argue that this experiment with new ways and standards of learning is tantamount to changing the rules of the game to fit our own ends. To this I can now say: Whose rules are these anyway? If you set them, go play by them alone. If you want me to play the game, I should have a hand in determining the rules.