

Leadership, Feminism, and Classroom Politics—  
OR, HOW I GAVE UP THE FIGHT  
AND LEARNED TO LOVE  
RESISTANCE

*Most of us resist learning to some extent or another, so it's not surprising that students do as well. But as professionals who bump up against this resistance in our students every day, whether in a class, workshop, or special program, what's our best recourse?*

*How can we help students get beyond their resistance?*

*The author's answer? Don't even try.*

BY LEE BURDETTE WILLIAMS

**I**N THE YEARS I've spent in the classroom, both as a student and as a teacher, I have come to realize that resistance is a key ingredient in learning—the yeast, perhaps, that makes the dough rise when the heat is turned up. Resistance to radical ideas, resistance to parameters and expectations, resistance to competing viewpoints—all of these have existed both in myself and in my students. This is not to say that I (or

my students) approach ideas with the kind of closed-mindedness that makes learning impossible. Resistance is not closed-mindedness. It is more a defense that one uses almost as naturally as one's own body uses white blood cells to fight infection—quickly, without thought, and with a power that can be remarkable.

But as with any powerful force one wishes to use to one's advantage, one must find ways to

harness the resistance—to use it in that jujitsu way of turning it around and upending your opponent (or in this case, your students), to your own advantage. Or to follow through on the white blood cell metaphor, one must find an effective antirejection treatment that prevents the body from inadvertently rejecting something it needs.

In his 1994 essay “I Won’t Learn from You,” Herbert Kohl writes about the concept of “not-learning,” a purposeful effort to refuse to learn (as opposed to *failing* to learn, an entirely different dynamic). Kohl writes,

Not-learning tends to take place when someone has to deal with unavoidable challenges to her or his personal and family realities, integrity and identity. In such situations there are forced choices and no apparent middle ground. To agree to learn from a stranger who does not respect your integrity causes a major loss of self. The only alternative is to not-learn and reject the stranger’s world [p. 6].

Respecting my students’ integrity when their resistance challenges my own is no easy feat, but remembering Kohl’s words reminds me that I am initially a stranger in their lives, one without many privileges. Like a guest who has arrived on their doorstep, I must bide my time and act with impeccable manners before I can expect them to be truly open to my presence and ideas. Patience, though, is not a virtue I possess in abundance. Like many who spend time in the classroom, the resistance I encounter in my students is a source of frustration for me. Like many of us, I have noticed the exchanged glances between two or more students who find my comments naive or ill-informed, or worse, unyielding. I’ve watched the eyes of a student glaze over, as if her brain was being physically transported out of the room, unable or unwilling (or both) to listen to my interpretation of the material. I have read their journals and listened to their comments, seeing through their attempts to “play the game” with me, that is, to agree with me in a most obsequious way, humoring me as a strategy both to avoid being challenged and to receive a good grade (and I’ve been taken in, I’m sure, more often than not).

For the past four years I have taught an undergraduate, interdisciplinary course, “Women and Leadership.” Enrollment is limited to sixteen students of any class, and there is no prerequisite. It is cross-listed as a women’s studies class and is also listed under leadership courses offered by the Center for Student Involvement and Leadership. It is simultaneously the hardest and most enjoyable thing I do: hardest because I feel compelled to engage each member of this diverse group through both content and style, and enjoyable because I feel completely at home sitting at a seminar table of students talking about something that matters to me (and hopefully to them). But what I’ve found that makes it both uniquely challenging and especially enjoyable is that the course is built around two themes that seem to engender, at least initially, a great deal of resistance: feminism and leadership.

### CHOOSING (AND RECHOOSING) LANGUAGE

RESISTANCE to the label *feminist* is hardly new. One can find reference to it in historical documents written at the time of the earliest suffrage efforts (see Ellen Carol DuBois’s *Elizabeth Cady Stanton—Susan B. Anthony Reader*). It is, after all, a label, and labels always encounter resistance because they usually refer to those individuals at the extreme end of what is likely a much broader spectrum of opinion and behavior (for example, *Republican*, *evangelical*, *NASCAR fan*). The reality of this broader spectrum doesn’t make for good press, nor does it lend itself to the shorthand descriptions people seem to prefer using in order to make quick work of others. *Feminist* is not different from other labels. Just as did their predecessors of the mid-1800s, many uninformed individuals associate *feminist* with the extremes of that exceedingly broad spectrum: antimale, humorless, judgmental of women who don’t share their views, determined to rid our society of the nuclear family (whatever that truly means).

Postadolescent women—and by this I mean most of my students, who are straddling that liminal space between being teenagers and becoming adults—seem especially concerned that such extreme behaviors and opinions will relegate them to the fringes of the social

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pods in which they seek membership. They struggle with calling themselves “women” instead of “girls,” so it has begun to seem a bit importunate of me to even broach the more heady matters of institutionalized sexism, glass ceilings, and wage inequities. Which is not to say I don't do this. I just do it differently than I used to (but more about that later).

I've come to understand more clearly the pejorative interpretation that many college-age women give to the label *feminist*. Despite whatever dictionary definition one might purport, to many students (indeed, to many people in general), the word *feminism* connotes all sorts of negative things. This response is not new, nor is it likely to change in the near future. I have changed, though, in my need to have students embrace the label. Some of my thinking on this has been informed by a very good book by Jennifer Baumgardner and Amy Richards called *Manifesta: Young Women, Feminism, and the Future*, which has helped me see the way my students view this label, and why their rejection of it is neither without reason nor representative of an outright rejection of feminism itself.

Baumgardner and Richards cite the media's portrayal of feminism as a simple idea embraced by a monolithic group, pointing to headlines like “Feminists Support Clinton” or “Is Feminism Dead?” (from a 1998 *Time* magazine cover) over photos of Susan B. Anthony, Betty Friedan, Gloria Steinem, and Ally McBeal. (That the television character attorney Ally McBeal, who appears to be far more concerned with her love life than with working on behalf of her paying clients, would find herself in the heady company of Anthony, Friedan, and Steinem is evidence enough that *Time* and

other media don't have a clue about the meaning of feminism, not to mention the obvious—that *McBeal's not real*.) While it doesn't seem to matter to the mass media, feminism is a complex set of principles that are contextual and individual. Adherence to feminism does not require one to hate men or cease wearing lipstick or adopt a dour disposition and rail constantly against The Patriarchy. But this is what many of my students begin the semester believing, and for me to quickly disabuse them of this would be an abrupt challenge to their “personal and family realities,” as Kohl has said (p. 6). It would not be, in the metaphor of the guest on their doorstep, good manners. Better, I think, to bide my time, earn their trust, and let them figure this out for themselves.

I've also found, at least among my students (and granted, most are women, and all are enrolled at a pretty decent but not highly selective public regional university), a similar resistance to the term *leader*. I think it's for similar reasons. In their minds, they've told me, leaders are those who, sacrificing an alliance with the “commoners” in a group, set themselves apart for questionable purposes, not the least of which is self-aggrandizement. The students' experience with leaders has been both global (an admittedly untruthful and adulterous president, nationally known church leaders imprisoned for misdeeds, history books full of follies brought about by the incredible hubris of world powers) and local (high school principals who aren't always fair, town council members arrested for embezzlement, and their own peers—student government leaders engaged in backstabbing, self-important, and selfish activities). Small wonder, then, that for them the study of leadership requires skepticism, maybe even cynicism, if it is to be honestly, academically pursued.

When I think back to earlier leadership courses I have taught, and even to the first two years I taught this course, I'm pretty sure I taught about leadership the same way I viewed it—with high regard and a belief

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that effective leadership could solve the world's problems. In doing so, I now see, I failed to embark on one of a leader's most important journeys: the one that allows him or her to see the world through the eyes of others. My enthusiasm for leadership and leadership education blinded me to the fact that many of my students felt alienated from leaders and any study of them. I wanted my students to embrace these ideas as I did, but they preferred to view them from a distance, studying leadership as dispassionately as they might study NATO.

And so my course has evolved in the four years I've taught it, in large part because I see that students' resistance is not a wall but a path between us, and my role is to help us both travel it.

### THE COURSE CONTENT

THE COURSE begins with an introduction to the study of leadership. As I mentioned, this topic is not always positively received among my students. Thus I am fairly critical of leadership studies as I present to them a short history of the evolution of leadership theory. I remind them that, like much of what they study, leadership has been viewed almost exclusively through a western, white, male lens. But as I also mentioned, I am sensitive (especially this early in the course) to their concern that they have stumbled upon a radical, women's studies, male-bashing class, so I am careful to assure them that this western, white, male mode of leadership is not entirely without merit. For this part of the course, I find that chapters one and two from *Exploring Leadership* by Susan Komives, Nance Lucas, and Timothy McMahon, which cover some of this history, are easily understood and fairly comprehensive for this purpose.

We then move to several readings that cover women's leadership styles. Sally Helgesen's *The Female Advantage: Women's Ways of Leading* is a key text for this course, with a careful reading and discussion of chapters one and two especially crucial. The ideas of nonhierar-

chical leadership and the "web of inclusion" will become themes throughout the semester, and students must feel they have an adequate grasp of these concepts.

It's interesting at this point to discuss the evolution of "leadership studies," specifically the business-oriented literature that emerged in the 1990s that presented a different style of leadership, and how that evolution has recast "women's leadership styles" into a "new," genderless leadership style. Ideas of inclusion and flat, open structures as well as relation-based leadership have become the current trends in leadership literature.

The two leadership styles that students need to understand for this class are *transformative*, as described by leadership scholar James Burns, and *generative*, a concept developed by Mary Ann Sagaria. It is these two philosophies or styles of leadership that we will revisit repeatedly as we delve into the next sections of the course: women's psychological development and two periods in history—the suffrage and abolitionist era (from approximately 1840 to 1870) and the civil rights and women's movement era (from approximately 1960 to 1975). While a number of texts are helpful regarding these topics, for the former I use Carol Gilligan's *A Different Voice* and Jean Baker Miller's *Toward a New Psychology of Women*. For the latter I use the *Elizabeth Cady Stanton—Susan B. Anthony Reader* by DuBois; *When and Where I Enter: The Impact of Black Women on Race and Sex in America* by Paula J. Giddings; and Lynn Olson's *Freedom's Daughters*.

A critical part of the course is a service-learning component, in which students are required to spend twenty hours (about two hours a week) in an agency that either deals with issues of special concern to women (domestic violence, family legal services, education for high school-age mothers) or is directed by a woman. While the opportunity to learn about these issues and to observe a woman in a leadership role is important, it is a more covert goal that I have in mind: the chance to see both leadership and feminism at work, in ways that do not reinforce the negative stereotypes that students often have of these two labels. Sub-

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versive teaching activities, after all, are the perfect complement to learning resistance. It is fascinating to read the guided journals my students submit as they observe and work with these women, both the agency staff and their clients, and see the effects of sexism in ways that the students, many of whom are from privileged backgrounds, never see in their own lives.

In a recent speech at my university, feminist writer Katha Pollitt commented that, on the basis of her observations, “third wave feminists” (those under thirty, it seems) are spending too much time in the classroom learning feminist theory and not enough in the field doing the hard work of activism. A young woman in the audience challenged this assertion, and a number of faculty took exception as well, feeling, not surprisingly, impugned by Pollitt’s implication that they were ivory tower-isolated feminists and were not doing their part to further the struggle on the streets. Baumgardner and Richards’ *Manifesta* provides a thoughtful exegesis of this argument, which I won’t go into here, but I will admit that it was Pollitt’s remarks that led me to add this service-learning component to my class, and I’m grateful for her rebuke. Let me illustrate why with an example.

I was at a birthday party for my friends’ twin five-year-old boys, sitting near two other children, one about three, the other five. The five-year-old had a handful of small toys, and the three-year-old grabbed one. The older child immediately complained to his nearby mother. My unspoken reaction was to think, “Oh, come on, kid. You have about six toys there. Let him have one.” The mother’s *spoken* reaction was, “Which one of his toys would you *like* to share with him?” The older boy looked thoughtfully at his cache, chose one, and handed it to the younger child, who smiled and waddled away contentedly. I looked at the mother as one looks at those posters that becomes a three-dimensional image when you stare at it long enough. I was stunned at the simplicity of her suggestion, but then realized it was perfect: it gave control of the situation to her son and completely distracted him from the resistance he felt to this interloper.

That is what this service-learning project does, I think. It distracts my students from their resistance to both feminism and traditional leadership, and allows them to step into this new world with some sense of control (they have chosen their site from a list of potential sites, chosen their hours, and negotiated their intended work). During the semester they are able to observe the work of the agency and the supervisor—vital, difficult work fraught with ethical and practical ambiguity. At the end of the semester they present a report to the class, which according to my instructions must consider this work through a lens of feminist leadership. By then the theories make sense. Ideally they have seen transformative leadership, generative leadership, and feminist activism at work. Their resistance has ebbed perceptibly and they can now bestow the titles *leader* and *feminist* on these women themselves.

### THE COURSE PROCESS

I’VE LEARNED numerous other techniques from my students, most of which will be familiar to anyone who has tried to create a connected classroom: small group discussions led by the students, negotiation of the questions they must answer on their midterm exam, and regular admissions by me that I don’t know everything and that their comments are often quite instructive to me. (One of my favorite moments was when we were discussing possible midterm questions and one of my upper-class students suggested, I think facetiously, that it be just a true-false exam. “Why, Sarah,” I said, in mock seriousness, “that would imply that I actually know the truth.” She threw her pencil in the air, sighed deeply, and put her face in her hands. The other students, I’m relieved to report, laughed at the exchange.)

Unlike many of my colleagues, who, though they’ve created connected, feminist classrooms, don’t often have occasion to discuss their pedagogy with their students, I am given ample opportunity by our content to discuss not just feminist leadership, but also feminist

politics, feminist health care, and of course, feminist pedagogy (all under the category of theoretical constructions, of course—not as feminist rhetoric from a feminist professor). The great moment comes at the end of the semester when we evaluate, out loud and as a group, the entire course. We discuss the content and the process—the teaching and learning techniques I’ve employed. Inevitably one student, usually the one most capable of meta-thought, will comment, “So, like, this was a feminist classroom, wasn’t it?” The others’ faces are like hurricane lanterns when the wick is being turned up gradually. “Well, yeah, actually,” I say. “So, have you liked being taught in a feminist way?” Generally they have, especially when they step back and compare it to some of their other classes. This then leads to a discussion of feminist leadership in the classroom, in organizations, and in politics, and of how such leadership can truly empower, strengthen, challenge, and encourage others. At that moment, I like to think, whatever resistance to feminism and leadership they might still harbor shifts elsewhere, perhaps in the direction of sexism, autocracy, and stifling learning environments. The jujitsu move is complete. Not only do they not fear these feminist labels or these leadership methods, but they begin to seek them out, and then it’s just a small step toward practicing them themselves. The academic has become personal, so the personal can then become the political. (I have a feeling it’s the reverse of this that Katha Pollitt fears.)

It is certainly an imperfect process, as is all teaching. There are always students who remain holdouts despite my best efforts, and to them I silently say as they file out the door, “Your time will come.” I suppose I’m a bit like an evangelist in that way: assuming that the timing of conversion is out of my control, but that it will happen eventually, and that Truth will be revealed to this resister. But then I think, what a cop-out that is, a feeble attempt to excuse a failure to win a convert.

This, however, is the great paradox of both feminism and leadership: they both require freedom of choice to engage or not engage, to convert or not con-

vert, as a key to their effectiveness. If I am as dedicated to honoring students’ resistance as I want to be, as I say I am, then I have to love all students equally. More than that, though, and much harder than that, I have to leave myself open to the possibility that *they* could be onto something that *I’ve* yet to see for myself; and allowing them to lead me down that path is perhaps the most feminist behavior I can practice, and the best leadership I can provide.

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