



## Towards an emancipatory practice: Incorporating feminist pedagogy in the creative arts therapies



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### ABSTRACT

This article explores the use of feminist pedagogy in higher education and considers how educators in the field of creative arts therapies (CATs) can incorporate this theory. It outlines the emergence of feminist pedagogy as a response to the lack of equity in higher education and explores feminist pedagogy's evolution as part of the grassroots women's movement to promote social change for oppressed groups, as well as the pedagogical shift towards education for the emancipation of oppressed people. Drawing on literature from the creative arts therapies regarding gender issues, race, and social change, this article offers theory about how creative arts therapies can incorporate feminist pedagogy as a foundation for their teaching in higher education. This suggestion has wide implications for revising curriculum and content; teaching strategies; de-programming the pedagogical banking system; and advocating for social change.

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*To educate as the practice of freedom is a way of teaching that anyone can learn. That learning process comes easiest to those of us who teach who also believe that there is an aspect of our vocation that is sacred; who believe that our work is not merely to share information but to share in the intellectual and spiritual growth of our students. To teach in a manner that respects and cares for the souls of our students is essential if we are to provide the necessary conditions where learning can most deeply and intimately begin.* (hooks, 1994, p. 13)

### Training in creative arts therapies

The field of the creative arts therapies (CATs)<sup>1</sup> developed with a focus on training students to utilize creative arts modalities—art, dance/movement, drama/psychodrama, music, and poetry—in therapeutic settings to promote healing and wellness (Atkins et al., 2003; Atkins & Williams, 2007; Levick, 1989; Lusebrink, 1989; McNiff, 2009; Rogers, 2011). Individual modalities developed during the 1950s through 1970s in the United States (Lusebrink, 1989) and as an interdisciplinary practice in the 1970s and 1980s (McNiff,

1987, 2009). Ellen Levine (2005) notes that “training is the crucible for [creative arts therapies] practice” (p. 171). And yet, educators are reminded that “the challenge of using psychodramatic methods demands much more than the knowledge of many techniques” (Blatner, 1973, p. 131). I would contend that this same challenge, raised by Blatner regarding education, extends to all of the modalities within the creative arts therapies. However, much of the literature on education in the creative arts therapies (Levine, 2005; McNiff, 1986, 2009) is focused on teaching strategies and/or curricular decisions as opposed to foundational theories regarding pedagogy—a “theory of teaching,” from which various teaching strategies may be based (Davis, 1993a, p. 87). I argue that the creative arts therapies could benefit from deepening their concerns regarding training to incorporate foundational teaching theories, from which the teaching strategies and curricular decisions could organically emerge. In this paper, I will argue that feminist pedagogy is a theoretical foundation that would be appropriate within the field of creative arts therapies. Before exploring ways in which creative arts therapies educators can incorporate a feminist framework into their classrooms, it is important to understand the history of higher education.

### History of higher education

First, it should be noted that higher education was never intended to educate everyone in society (Bowen & Hobson, 1974), nor was it free of bias (McClelland, 1992). Limitations on the distribution of education were historically encouraged based upon class (Bowen & Hobson, 1974), gender (Nye, 1988), and race (Karabel,

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<sup>1</sup> For the purposes of this paper, the term creative arts therapies will be used to indicate both clinicians who practice within individual expressive modalities—art, dance/movement, drama/psychodrama, music, and poetry therapy—as well as clinicians who identify as expressive arts therapists and practice intermodally. When a distinction between these two areas is needed, the author will indicate this by using both terms.

2005). More recent educational theorists, such as Dewey and Freire, have been critiqued for their omission of such issues as gender and race in their theories (Mahler, 2001; Weiler, 2001).

In addition to the historical limitations of access to education, the content of higher education was never intended to freely teach ideas. Universities in Europe and the United States were highly influenced by the Church, which in turn influenced curricular content (Morison, 1935/1995). In addition to the strong religious affiliation of universities, schools in the “liberal [arts] tradition were also clearly associated with elitism and class structure” (McNiff, 1986, p. 21). This is what feminist theorists refer to as the “hidden curriculum”—the passing on of patriarchal ideals and norms cloaked in the grandeur and status of academe (Apple, 1990; Bailey, 2010; Margolis, Soldatenko, Acker, & Gair, 2001). The professor standing behind a lectern, then, is perhaps more symbolic of power and privilege, given this historical context, than it appears at first glance. Given this history, feminist theorists have advocated for changes to the higher education system that remove this hidden curriculum from the university classroom through adaptations to pedagogy. One way in which Bailey (2010) worked to make visible the invisible curriculum was to create two syllabi: “To make visible some of the forces shaping instructors’ choices in what might otherwise appear to be an individually-determined, authoritative, seamless, objective course syllabus and curriculum” (p. 143). The author also found that bringing issues related to the hidden curriculum to the attention of her students helped everyone in the classroom to become mindful of the “social and institutional hierarchies in which we are all situated” (p. 146).

### Can feminist theory fix the problem?

Feminist theory is a lens through which critical analysis occurs (McFadden, 1997). Feminist educators, therefore, use the practice of critique and reflexivity to examine assumptions and constructs in order to raise consciousness regarding these issues and dismantle these systems to allow for a more egalitarian system of higher education (Crabtree, Sapp, & Licona, 2009; Macdonald & Sánchez-Casal, 2002; Villaverde, 2008). It is important to note that feminist theory can be understood in many ways to many people—there is no single definition of feminism. This is why some authors use the term “feminisms” to refer to the diversity of theory and practice from this perspective (Enns, 2004).

So, how do we as creative arts therapy educators address issues limiting freedom and equality in higher education? Can feminist theory “fix” the problems of patriarchal theory? It depends on how we choose to view theory in the creative arts therapies. “Theory is not inherently healing, liberatory, or revolutionary. It fulfills this function only when we ask that it so do and direct our theorizing towards this end” (hooks, 1994, p. 61). Yet, within the field of creative arts therapies, there has been some hesitation to focus on theory, in terms of educating creative arts therapists, as described by Levick (1989):

Nevertheless, within our ranks there still lurk serious vestiges of the myth that indepth knowledge of theory, the understanding and pursuit of research may contaminate, or somehow alter the unique aspect of the art in art therapy. We must learn to walk a little firmer and excise this myth. The education of the professional arts therapist does not begin or end with being one. It is an ongoing and indepth process of becoming one. (pp. 59–60)

In fact, if we are not able to create our own theories for creative arts therapies—for education, research, and clinical work—there is concern about the ability of the field to sustain itself and grow (Lusebrink, 1989).

If we are committed as a profession to developing theory for the creative arts therapies to use to make the classroom a safe space for all people regardless of gender, race, age, ability, sexual orientation, socioeconomic class, or religion, then yes, feminist theory can be an important way to dismantle the systemic discrimination that occurs within the sacred halls of academe. If these theories are collaboratively developed in a way that honors the “intersections of race, ethnicity, gender, class, sexual orientation, geography, language, ability, and a multitude of other social factors and roles” (Villaverde, 2008, p. 55) then, yes, theory can be helpful.

Why, then, do we need *feminist* theory? Feminist theory critically examines systemic oppression and works to dismantle this system (McFadden, 1997). If we truly wish to create social change, then it is important that we develop theories to lay the foundation, structure, and support for such transformation—addressing the larger cause of the problem. Otherwise, we are implementing teaching strategies haphazardly with the hope that we are working towards social change. Theory, such as feminist pedagogy, provides the underpinnings through which many creative arts therapies educators, together, can work towards dismantling systems of oppression as part of a grassroots movement. I would argue that without theory, we cannot systemically dismantle systems of oppression. Yet having theory alone is not enough—we need action as well. A feminist teacher must actively put into practice concepts such as the personal is political to create changes within the classroom and in society. I believe that our history of incorporating activism within the creative arts therapies makes feminist pedagogy a good fit for the field (Levine & Levine, 2011; Rogers, 2011).

### Feminist pedagogy and the creative arts therapies

Feminist pedagogy emerged as part of the grassroots women’s movement to promote social change for oppressed groups as well as from the pedagogical shifts in education that were occurring as a response to oppressed and marginalized groups (Patai & Koertge, 1994; Villaverde, 2008). It should be noted that feminist pedagogy, as with feminist theory, does not have one singular definition or meaning as it is an approach to teaching that values the diversity and complexity of multiple voices. It can be defined as “a particular philosophy of and set of practices for classroom-based teaching that is informed by feminist theory and grounded in the principles of feminism” (Crabtree et al., 2009, p. 1). Feminist pedagogy incorporates feminist values such as the personal is political, egalitarianism, reflexivity, social action, debunking of the banking system of learning, analysis of power differentials, challenging traditional assumptions regarding sources and/or definitions of knowledge, incorporating lived experience into the classroom, and giving voice to those who have been marginalized (Crabtree et al., 2009; Hadley, 2006; Macdonald & Sánchez-Casal, 2002; Villaverde, 2008). It is within this theoretical framework that feminist pedagogy is put into action in an attempt to dismantle systems of oppression and is used within the classroom to create a place for transformation and emancipation (hooks, 1994; Macdonald & Sánchez-Casal, 2002). One way in which this commonly occurs in a feminist classroom is through a critical examination of assumptions and constructs based upon patriarchal cultural norms, or decentering (Hunter, 2002; Villaverde, 2008).

An examination of the literature in the creative arts therapies shows emerging interest in the incorporation of a feminist framework(s) within creative arts therapies as well as in the education of creative-arts therapists (Barbera, 2011; Chávez, 2009; Hadley, 2006; Hahna, 2011; Hahna & Schwantes, 2011; Mayor, 2012; Sajjani, 2012). Sajjani and Mayor advocate for the inclusion of a critical race theory within the creative arts therapies. The

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