

# Adult education and postmoderism



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# Using Feminist Learning Theories to Enhance the room Experience Using a feminist framework when teaching adult learners is one of several ways to combine an instructor's personal values and institutional values to best teach students. Feminist theories look at the role of women in the culture in a number of ways. All focus on the experiences of women as valid and important, and most tend to come from a stance that women have been, and continue to be, oppressed by male-dominated cultures. All feminist theories would like to empower women to accept themselves and their experiences as valid, as well as challenge male-dominated culture to readjust its thinking on the role of women.

Knowledge is often constructed by men, and so women may have difficulty accessing it. Most knowledge is facts, figures, and well-thought-out theories (produced by men), which leaves learners, both male and female, out of the picture. Personal experiences become secondary to memorizing a set way of doing things and demonstrating how well the learner memorized it through tests and quizzes. When learning is disconnected from learners, it's difficult to apply to everyday life or understand where the learner fits into the process. When learning is constructed by a male-dominated culture, that removes it even one more step from women learners.

Women may feel they have nothing to add to the knowledge base or the learning experience. If the knowledge base is constructed by a male-dominated structure, it affects the learners and instructors, even if those are all women. Creating connections between each individual and the learning, and each individual and every other individual in the learning environment, promotes understanding of the lessons and allows learners to both make it personal and to add to it as they see fit. Seeing each person in the classroom

as unique and valuable enhances how much is learned, and changes the dynamic process.

Another thing feminist theories are trying to overcome is the idea that women must construct identities to deal with life situations, rather than simply being themselves. When women learners have to construct a false identity in order to participate in learning environments, much of the impact of the knowledge can be lost for them. If we have to concentrate on supporting other group members during a group project, for instance, our own thoughts and feelings on the subject matter become secondary to cheering each other on. The teacher can also experience tension in the learning environment when there are conscious or subconscious authority issues. If a teacher sets himself/herself up as an authority figure rather than as an instructor, students must adapt and are displaced from the learning environment. Feminist learning theories aim to create a learning environment where experience and emotion contribute to learning, and add to the facts and figures being presented.

A synthesis of feminist theories looks at how women have been conditioned by the greater culture to be seen as nurturers, and points out that this is not necessarily conducive to the learning experience. Nurturing interferes with the learning process for women because they are then less likely to see their personal stories as important, or to speak out in class during discussions.

When women learn anything, they tend to see the learning in the context of nurturing, rather than seeing learning as an end unto itself or as promoting their own well-being.

It's important for teachers to acknowledge that politics and power plays happen in the classroom, and to guide women learners beyond simply being

passive receptors in the learning process. Encouraging women to absorb knowledge, connect it with their personal experiences, and add that synthesis back into the learning process boosts everyone's learning. A synthesis of feminist theories goes beyond simply supporting and equalizing women, and supports and equalizes everyone in the classroom. Each person's unique experiences and inputs have a place and are valid.