

Feminist Pedagogy and the Socratic Method: Partners in the Classroom or a Disaster Waiting to Happen?

Rita Shah¹ & Kyle C. Kopko²

¹ Department of Sociology and Anthropology, Elizabethtown College, Elizabethtown, PA, USA

² Department of Politics, Philosophy and Legal Studies, Elizabethtown College, Elizabethtown, PA, USA

Correspondence: Rita Shah, Department of Sociology and Anthropology, One Alpha Dr, Elizabethtown, PA, 17022, USA. Tel: 1-717-361-1351. E-mail: shahr@etown.edu

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Abstract

This article presents a case study analyzing the relationship between the Socratic method and feminist pedagogy in a team-taught undergraduate classroom in the United States. Specifically, we analyze the feedback provided by our students to determine the ways in which the Socratic method conflicted with, but also complemented, feminist pedagogy. Data were collected through two online surveys and an in-class open-ended response. The results suggest that the Socratic method is compatible with feminist pedagogy as it improved critical thinking and consideration of diverse points of view. On the other hand, the results suggest that students felt discomfort when analyzing and discussing their own views, as opposed to the views of others. This discomfort potentially undermines the benefits of a feminist pedagogical approach to classroom discussion. We suggest several ways to improve compatibility of these techniques in undergraduate courses and suggest avenues for future research to better understand the relationship between these pedagogical approaches.

Keywords: feminist pedagogy, socratic method, gender, public law, team-taught course, undergraduate course

1. Introduction

In the Spring 2014 semester, we—two faculty members from different departments—embarked on a pedagogical experiment; we team taught an undergraduate honors course cross-listed in Political Science and Women and Gender Studies (WGS) entitled “Gender and the Law.” As part of this course, we wanted to determine the effectiveness of a feminist pedagogical approach to the study of law compared to other courses the students took as part of their undergraduate career. While conducting this study, an interesting finding emerged: although students liked many of the techniques used in class, the Socratic method seemed to cause some consternation. The question arose, then, as to the compatibility of the Socratic method and a feminist pedagogical approach. On one hand, the Socratic method seems inline with two key aspects of feminist pedagogy: 1) the use of discussions as a means of validating personal experience and helping students develop confidence (Lee, 1989; Stake & Hoffman, 2000), and 2) the questioning of ideas that may be taken for granted or assumed to be settled matters (Boxer, 1982). On the other hand, students reported feeling uncomfortable with and attacked by the Socratic method, thus undermining the feminist approach.

As such, this article presents a case study analysis of the relationship between the Socratic method and feminist pedagogy in an undergraduate classroom. Specifically, we analyze the feedback provided by our students to determine the ways in which the Socratic method conflicted with, but also complemented, the other techniques utilized. First, we look to prior research to understand the role of discussion within a feminist classroom, the use of the Socratic method within a legal education, and the feminist critique of this methodology. Next, we discuss the particularities of the course under investigation. Then we describe the initial study planned and the follow-up survey that focused specifically on the use of the Socratic method. Finally, we discuss the findings, including lessons learned on how to improve the relationship between the Socratic method and feminist pedagogy.

2. Feminist Pedagogy, Classroom Discussions, and the Socratic Method

Within a feminist classroom, class discussions accomplish several goals. First, they break down traditional power hierarchies by creating a space in which students and professors are equal contributors to the learning process (Webb, Allen, & Walker, 2002). Second, discussions provide a way for students to validate personal

experiences and connect them to class concepts (Lee, 1989; Stake & Hoffman, 2000; Webb, Allen, & Walker, 2002). Third, by creating a safe space for students to express their views and challenge the claims of the professor and fellow classmates, students develop confidence in themselves and their abilities (Stake & Hoffman, 2000). Finally, discussions allow students to question the taken-for-granted and dissect “settled matters,” especially those that are socially constructed (Boxer, 1982; Pereira, 2012). As such, students become “empowered knowledge-producers” rather than “passive knowledge-consumers” (Chow, Fleck, Fan, Joseph, & Lyter, 2003, p. 260).

One of the key benefits of discussion in a feminist classroom is the ability to create a community of learners (hooks, 1994; Shrewsbury, 1993). Discussions build this community as they require participation and collaboration within the classroom (Stake & Hoffman, 2000; Webb, Allen, & Walker, 2002). It is through this collaboration that power hierarchies are dismantled, which allows students to be participants in their own education. This also allows professors to move beyond the role of “expert” and serve as learners (Welde, Foote, Hayford, & Rosenthal, 2013; Hammer & Giordano, 2001). Finally, collaboration and discussion allows for a more nuanced discussion of class topics, which often requires pushing students past their comfort zones. These discussions create what Pereira (2012, p. 129) calls didactic discomfort:

i.e., intellectual and/or emotional discomfort felt by students, which is triggered directly or indirectly by the material covered and/or methods deployed in the course, and is perceived by teachers (and often also by students themselves) as an experience that can enable or generate learning.

As Boler (1999) and Linkon (1992) argue, these moments of discomfort can lead students to reexamine their own views, the basis of those views, and the power embedded in existing knowledge creation. Arguably, the Socratic method could be a technique used in a feminist-oriented classroom, particularly in a classroom centered on legal discussions.

It is no secret that the Socratic method is a significant pedagogical tool in law schools throughout the United States that is supposed to help law students develop the skills necessary to be effective lawyers (Garner, 2000). In its simplest form, the Socratic method, as practiced today, is a form of discussion in which the professor directs a series of questions, usually aimed at one particular student, “in an attempt to lead the student down a chain of reasoning either forward, to its conclusion, or backward, to its assumption” (Williams, 1993, p. 1573).

Its application, however, has been criticized for several reasons. First, as numerous studies show, the implementation of the Socratic method can alienate female law students and create an unwelcoming classroom environment. Specifically, studies find women law students often feared being put on the spot and rarely volunteered to answer questions compared to men, often because their responses were ignored or not taken seriously by professors when they did respond (for a review of these studies, see Garner, 2000). Second, the traditional use of the Socratic method reinforces the hierarchical and privileged relationship between professors and students, where the professors are in possession of the answers and the students must seek it out through unidirectional question and answering (Garner, 2000; Williams, 1993). Hence, the traditional practice of the Socratic method seems incompatible with feminist pedagogy.

As some scholars argue, however, it does not have to be, particularly as the original Socratic method, as practiced by Socrates and the ancient Greeks, is compatible with feminist pedagogy if used properly (Garner, 2000; Williams, 1993). Garner (2000) suggests one of the problems of the Socratic method is not its use as a pedagogical technique; rather, it is the possibility of the technique becoming abusive. Thus, a careful use of the method with a focus on checking sexist and abusive language by faculty members and other students can help reduce, or even eliminate, the historical ways in which the Socratic method creates a hostile classroom environment. Also, realizing that knowledge creation happens in a variety of ways, Williams (1993) argues faculty should embrace emotional responses in addition to rational analysis. The combination of the two enables an in-depth route for knowledge creation. In this way, all discussion points become a valid form of engagement and are not dismissed in possibly gender-biased ways. At the same time, it may be necessary to openly discuss the use and purpose of the Socratic method to alleviate some of the anxieties around its use (Garner, 2000).

Additionally, Williams (1993) argues that the kinds of questions asked need to be modified. Rather than focusing on questions that assume a correct answer can be found, questions should be asked that “requires the student, in attempting to answer it, to create knowledge she did not have the moment before you asked it” (Williams, 1993, p. 1575). This can be accomplished by changing two aspects of classroom discussion: first, professors should ask questions to which they do not necessarily know the answer; second, students should be encouraged to ask questions of each other and of their professor. Doing so would “revive the ideal of Socratic dialogue, in which knowledge and challenges to knowledge flow in both directions” (Williams, 1993, p. 1575). Similarly, Garner

(2000) argues that encouraging students to acknowledge their areas of ignorance and their desire to obtain the missing knowledge enables the Socratic method to “embrace many aspects of feminist theory, particularly the ethic of care, which has traditionally been lacking in the average law school classroom” (Garner, 2000, p. 1646).

Yet, in order for the Socratic method to be used in a feminist way, one must recognize its limitations and be careful about when it is used. Garner (2000) raises two key points to keep in mind. First, he notes that not all moments of ignorance need to be expanded upon. Rather, a true Socratic dialogue allows for moments of “full-blown dialogue” when they are necessary. By triaging the key conversational moments, the professor shifts the balance away from focusing on the students’ ignorance and towards focusing on their desire to learn. Second, the Socratic method is not appropriate for every classroom and should be limited to classes where the method is compatible with course objectives (Garner, 2000). Ultimately, the goal is to use the Socratic method to empower students rather than as a tool to privilege certain voices and reinforce certain “truths”.

3. The Course Context

The course was taught at a small, regional, comprehensive liberal arts institution of nearly 1800 students who are approximately 64% female and 88% white/Caucasian. “Gender and the Law” is an interdisciplinary honors course open to all majors that integrates readings from diverse academic fields. The course was designed as an historical study of how legal systems and societal institutions have influenced the legal rights and privileges of gendered groups within the US (Note 1). Beginning with a discussion of the social construction of gender and a break down of the gender binary (Note 2), we analyzed legal cases from the mid-1800s to the present and addressed subjects such as voting rights for women, reproductive health, sexual assault and rape, equal pay, and women in the legal field. Students developed case briefs, discussion questions from the readings, and a research paper on a topic of their choosing that explores an issue at the intersection of gender (broadly defined) and the law.

The students shared three key similarities. First, all of the students were either Political Science, Legal Studies, or Sociology/Anthropology majors. Second, eight of the 10 students were members of the Mock Trial team, and intended to pursue additional studies in law school upon the completion of their undergraduate degrees. As such, the majority was accustomed to arguing hypothetical cases in an adversarial environment. Finally, the majority of the students was enrolled in the college’s honors program and was accustomed to taking courses characterized by small class sizes (capped at 15 students) with an emphasis on open discussion among students and faculty. The course also fulfills a Women and Gender Studies elective, which provides the opportunity to introduce the students to a feminist pedagogical approach.

Given the course content and connection to the pre-law program on campus, the Socratic method seemed like a natural fit as a technique for encouraging class discussion. We modified our implementation, however, from its application in traditional legal classrooms. Specifically, our goal was to use the Socratic method to help students unpack their views and opinions on the topics discussed. We used the Socratic method to help students understand legal reasoning; however, we also made it clear that we were not seeking a “correct” answer and highlighted the reasoning of both concurring and dissenting opinions of cases and asked students which side they agreed with and why. We encouraged our students to question both of us (as the “experts” in the room) and each other. At times, this meant we would take a view opposite our own to help those outnumbered in the classroom to advance further inquiry and critical thought. Finally, when the questioning was the traditional one-directional format, we typically focused on asking “why?” At times, we did so with the traditional goal of understanding where that argument will lead or to understand the root from which the argument stems (Williams, 1993). At other times, the goal was to help students understand the missing knowledges that would either strengthen or change the students arguments. Ultimately, the goal was to help students break down and defend their own argument while providing avenues for students to adjust their arguments as new knowledges were gained.

4. Methodology

This study began as an inquiry into the use of feminist pedagogical methods in an honors course. Using a modification of Stake and Hoffman’s (2000) survey of feminist pedagogy in women’s studies courses and drawing on Webb, Allen, and Walker’s (2002) overview of the basic principles of feminist pedagogy, we created two surveys (both administered anonymously through SurveyMonkey). The pre-survey was conducted at the beginning of the semester. This survey asked students about their overall experience with the application of feminist pedagogy in their college courses to date. Students were asked to rate the truthfulness of various statements using a five-point Likert scale that ranged from definitely false (coded as 1) to definitely true (coded as 5). The statements asked about two categories of courses: general education courses and courses within a student’s major. The survey also asked open-ended questions about the students’ views on feminism and the

classroom environment in courses campus wide.

The post-survey used the same statements and five-point scale, but focused on the “Gender and the Law” course specifically. In this survey, students were asked to determine how well the statements about pedagogical methods were reflected in the classroom and how well it was reflected in the classroom compared to all other courses the students have taken. The same open-ended questions were asked, but the classroom environment questions were specific to “Gender and the Law”.

Table 1. Respondent demographics

	Pre-survey	Post-survey
Age		
18	1	1
19	4	3
20	0	1
21	1	1
Sex		
Male	2	1
Female	3	5
Prefer not to say	1	0
Gender identity		
Masculine	2	1
Feminine	3	5
Transgender	0	0
Other	0	0
Prefer not to say	1	0
Academic Year		
Freshman	3	2
Sophomore	2	0
Junior	0	1
Senior	1	1
Prefer not to say	0	1
Major		
Political Science	3	4
Legal Studies	2	0
Prefer not to say	1	1

While the class was composed of 10 students, only eight took both the pre- and post-survey. Of those eight, six completed the demographic questions. As Table 1 shows, the students were between the ages of 18 and 21, with the majority identifying as female or feminine. This number is consistent with campus demographics. Most students were freshmen or sophomore and all who identified their major were Political Science or Legal Studies students.

The responses to the post-survey suggested the need to better understand the impact of the Socratic method on creating a safe space that valued the opinions of everyone in the classroom. As such, we created an, in-class survey that asked the following:

A few of the comments in our post-survey indicated the professors sometimes questioned the opinions of the students in a one-sided manner. Do you agree or disagree with this assessment? Did the use of the Socratic

method impact this perception? Why or why not? Do you have suggestions for how to breakdown and analyze the views without accidentally (or even purposefully) singling out a viewpoint?

This survey was typed onto a sheet of paper with the rest of the paper remaining blank. To maintain anonymity, we handed this paper out to each student then went to our respective offices. When we returned, the surveys were completed and collected in one pile.

It is worth noting two limitations of this study. First, the sample size is small. The class enrolled 10 students, with only eight completing the pre- and post-survey. Second, the sample is homogenous in nature, generally mirroring the student population. A larger and/or more diverse respondent pool could yield different results. As we discuss below, however, this study provides insights into the relationship between feminist pedagogical approaches to discussion and the Socratic method and suggests the need for future research in other course contexts.

5. Findings

As part of the pre/post survey, we sought to compare the classroom environment across campus generally with the classroom environment in this particular class. In the pre-survey, we asked, “Generally speaking, are your classes safe spaces to voice your opinions, thoughts, and questions without being disrespected? Why or why not?” In the post-survey, we asked, “Was this class a safe space to voice your opinions, thoughts, and questions without being disrespected? Why or why not?” In general, students were divided on the classroom as a safe space in the pre-survey. Two of the five respondents indicated they always felt their classrooms were safe spaces to speak up without feeling disrespected. Three of the five, however, had a more mixed view. For this group of students, it depended heavily on who was in the classroom. As one student articulated, “It really depends on the class and who is in the class. Some classes are very safe spaces; others are more hostile.” As the other comments indicated, this hostility may come from professors whose opinions are well known or from other students. In either case, the students indicated such a classroom environment either led to their voices being attacked or a rethinking of what they say in order to not be attacked.

In “Gender and Law” specifically, the majority of the students felt they were able to voice their views without being disrespected, though one student highlighted the judgmental views of other students limiting class participation. That said, two of the six respondents raised critiques about the way the discussions were led. Specifically, a respondent noted that one professor “would try to tease out an answer to a (perceivably opinionated) question with an answer that was either correct or incorrect” and the other respondent noted that some opinions were questioned more than others (though this student also notes these opinions were never disrespected), suggesting only one-side of the issues were questioned.

Curious as to why these two students viewed the discussions as potentially one-sided, we returned to the Likert scale questions to determine the classes’ perceptions of the various techniques used in the course. Specifically, we reviewed the post-survey questions as presented in Table 2.

The post-survey responses indicate that while most students felt the implementation of the Socratic method led to positive outcomes, there were some students who did not benefit from the Socratic method as we had hoped. The two questions that received the highest average ratings were Question 3 and Question 6, which had a higher average rating than the pre-survey results (3.5 and 3 respectively). We credit the use of the Socratic method in achieving these outcomes. The two questions with the lowest reported average ratings were Question 1 and Question 2, which were inline with the pre-survey results (3.67 and 3 respectively). While both of these questions resulted in an average score above three out of five, these questions resulted in a larger number of negative responses compared to the other four questions listed in Table 2.

Overall, the findings indicate the “Gender and Law” course fostered an environment that led to the consideration of diverse perspectives and opinions, and promoted critical thought during course discussions. Questions 1 and 2 presented in Table 2, however, suggest that something about the teaching technique was unsettling to some of the students. These questions related to the promotion of self-esteem and encouraging students to express their opinions in class. The responses seem to suggest a slight disconnect between students considering diverse viewpoints in the abstract and their willingness to offer their own personal viewpoints. Again, not all students responded in a negative manner to questions 1 and 2, but a small contingency did so, suggesting that our implementation of the Socratic method did not make all students feel comfortable and able to engage in discussion as we had hoped.

What makes these findings particularly intriguing, as noted previously, is that so many of the students in the class were pre-law students and had significant mock trial experience arguing hypothetical cases in an

adversarial environment. We originally thought this type of academic experience would allow students to feel a greater sense of comfort when engaging in Socratic dialogue. Perhaps this is true in the abstract when discussing the ideas of others, but when it comes to their ideas, which presumably could influence their self-esteem, the survey responses were slightly more negative. We hypothesized that when the Socratic method focused on the individual student, didactic discomfort (Pereira, 2012) did occur. Rather than viewing this discomfort as a moment to reexamine personal views, however, they perceived the individual focus as personal rather than an attempt to push students past their comfort zones. In doing so, the perception of personal attacks could have impacted the students' personal self-esteem, which led to the negative responses.

Given the focus on the Socratic method as the main teaching technique, we wanted to understand if this method was, indeed, the core problem for some of our students. This then led to the additional, in-class open-response survey described in the methods section. The first part of the in-class response asked students if they agreed with the following statement: "A few of the comments in our post-survey indicated the professors sometimes questioned the opinions of students in a one-sided manner." All 10 students responded, with one responding "do not agree," one responding "not necessarily," one responding "at times," and 7 responding "yes".

Student #8, who answered "do not agree," indicated they felt comfortable expressing their view and that we—as the professors—created an "equitable educational environment" and "served as effective ideological counterbalances at points where one was needed." Student #7, who responded "not necessarily," noted the class was discussion based and "that controversial question[s] are what successfully fulfill that purpose." Student #10, who responded "at times," suggests the one-sided questioning occurred only when talking about "race/gender/orientation" and that one specific professor (who one was not named) "seemed to question the students morals when questioning the legal cases." Thus, these three students suggest that the perception of one-sided questioning may be linked to students being uncomfortable with a class environment that relies solely on expressing/defending their views rather than on the questioning technique. These findings seem to echo those of the post-survey.

Table 2. Survey response frequencies and average ratings

Question	(1) Definitely False	(2) More False than True	(3) In Between	(4) More True than False	(5) Definitely True	Average Rating
1. <Professor 1> and <Professor 2> encourage students to express their opinions in class	1	1	0	2	3	3.71
2. Through their teaching approach, <Professor 1> and <Professor 2> seek to foster feelings of self-esteem and self-respect in students	0	3	1	2	1	3.14
3. <Professor 1> and <Professor 2> encourage students to think critically about what they are learning rather than always accepting the opinions of experts in the field	0	0	0	3	4	4.57
4. One of <Professor 1> and <Professor 2>'s goals is for students to be open-minded about perspectives differing from their own	0	1	1	2	3	4
5. <Professor 1> and	0	0	3	1	3	4

<Professor 2>	encourage students to be open to diverse opinions								
6. <Professor 1>	and <Professor 2>	0	0	2	2	3	4.14		
	encourage students to consider issues from a variety of perspectives								

Of the seven who answered yes, only one did not elaborate (#4). Two students (#3 and #9) felt that the one-sided questioning occurred only when we questioned students with whom we disagreed or when offering a contrasting view from the majority. Neither response indicates whether such one-sided questioning was a positive or negative aspect of the course. Two students noted the one-sided questioning was a positive aspect of the course. Student #6 felt it was a good way of helping students better explain their positions and see all sides of an argument “because the questions would usually challenged [sic] the student’s opinion.” Similarly, student #5 found the one-sided questioning helped “reinforce the views of a student” and that such questioning helps move the conversation along. Two students found the one-sided questioning to be negative, with one noting they felt intimidated (student #2) while the other said, “I felt that the professors were ready to argue any point in order to point out that the students were wrong, or to attack only one specific aspect of a student’s view” (student #1). While the majority felt the questioning was one-sided, it is unclear whether such questioning had a positive or negative impact on the classroom environment. It is possible those who felt negatively about the questioning limited their participation in class. It is also possible they were the most vocal and, thus, the most likely to be questioned on a consistent basis. In any case, the negative perception of the questioning technique could have altered the classroom environment over time.

When asked if the Socratic method affected this perception, three students did not answer this question and two stated they were still not clear on what the method is. The remaining five students were split on how the Socratic method impacted the perception of one-sided questioning. Student #3 took a somewhat neutral position, noting, “both professors tended to answer and pose questions from the same side, so yes the method used did impact this. When professors played devils [sic] advocate they seemed to do so much more often with students they disagreed with.” In this case, the student seems to be suggesting the Socratic method was used to parse out an opposing view. Students #1 and #7 argue that this parsing out may have led to a perception of unfairness, rather than an actual intent. For instance, while student #1 felt the questioning seemed to attack students and the Socratic method impacted this feeling, they also said it was likely due to the student’s perception. Student #7 added the Socratic method could make a student feel uncomfortable. Both stated that these personal feelings could cause students to perceive the questioning to be one-sided. But, student #7 also stated they did not “feel that anyone should be offended.”

The two students who felt the questioning was a negative aspect of the course, however, believed it was caused by a mixture of the Socratic method and the implementation of that method. For instance, student #10 noted that the while the “Socratic method did facilitate this [questioning of morals], it would seem the professors took it a step too far.” While this student did not elaborate on how, student #2 added the Socratic method accomplished the goal of making the student think, but did so in a way that was intimidating and “the profs using this method seemed like they were pointing [out] who is the weakest student in the class which is wrong and defeats the purpose of learning.” For these two students at least, the Socratic method created an unsafe atmosphere, which could explain the low average response to questions 1 and 2 (as presented in Table 2) in the post-survey.

Six students offered suggestions for how to break down and analyze the different views without accidentally or intentionally singling out a viewpoint. The suggestions most compatible with feminist pedagogy included 1) using the Socratic method “evenly for all students and all opinions” (student #9) and 2) asking questions “in a less intense way” as the questions were asked in an “almost rude way” (student #1; unfortunately, the student did not elaborate on why the questions felt intense or borderline rude). The remaining suggestions, however, underscore the difficulty of incorporating the Socratic method and feminist pedagogy, particularly in a team-taught class.

First, student #3 suggested eliminating one professor. This student felt the two of us were often on the same page, so “having only one professor may eliminate the perception in the that [sic] only opinion is acceptable.” As such, this particular student felt the various backgrounds we brought to the course were not useful and worked to create a sense of being outnumbered. Both of us feel our opinions on topics discussed in class were varied,

though perhaps in subtle or nuanced ways that may not be apparent to students who are encountering these issues for the first time. This suggestion indicates a need to better clarify the role of the professors as both learners and experts so that, even if our opinions are similar, students feel comfortable contradicting us.

The need to clarify our role is also implied by Student #10, who wrote, “My suggestion is for the professors remove themselves from their own opinions to listen to student’s perspectives.” This and the prior suggestion both imply the students do not view us as either experts in the field or as interlocutors. Rather, there seems to be an expectation among some students for us to serve as neutral moderators of the discussion. This expectation negates the benefits of discussions in a feminist oriented classroom. It removes the ability for faculty and students to learn from each other; for faculty to highlight how personal experiences link to class topics; and for faculty and students to work together in building a safe classroom environment (Webb, Allen, & Walker, 2002). Thus, clarifying the role of professors as knowledge producers and learners, and the value of personal experiences needs to occur throughout the course and not just at the beginning of the term.

Student #4 suggested, “Make all students feel valued for sharing opinions and make a clear distinction between opinionated questions and fact-based yes-or-no questions.” This suggestion raises two key points. First, it echoes the need for a feminist classroom to ensure that all students’ views are valued and that this value is clearly known throughout the course. Second, it also indicates a belief that a distinction between opinion and fact always exists. Legal interpretation often includes gray areas where fact and opinion can and do overlap. While our use of the Socratic method attempted to highlight this overlap, this suggestion makes clear that we were not always successful at accomplishing this goal. It also suggests our attempt to unsettle “facts” was not always successful. As such, it may be helpful to mindfully (and sometimes, bluntly) highlight these moments to make it explicit how even yes or no questions can vary from one interpretation to another.

Finally, student #7 argues, “if more students were willing to vocalize their opinions then they wouldn’t feel that way [offended], because right now not many students actually voice their opinions...This is an academic environment [and] no one should feel so compelled to not support their own views.” In essence, this student implies the sense of one-sided questioning comes from only one side being expressed. Again, this suggestion implies a disconnect between our goal of valuing and encouraging all views and accomplishing this goal. As such, there needs to be a more concerted attempt to clearly encourage student participation throughout the term.

6. Lessons Learned and Future Studies

While the findings of this study are mixed, they do suggest a useful link between the Socratic method and feminist pedagogy in a pre-law undergraduate class. If the Socratic method and feminist pedagogical approaches to discussion are effectively utilized, the implications for both students and faculty are many. As the post-survey results indicate, the Socratic method did help students think more critically about their own views and allowed for a consideration of diverse views. For faculty, it provides a new avenue to engage students in discussion. Specifically, it provides a means of exploring the underlining assumptions of arguments made by faculty and students during discussion. As courses focusing on the law also raise “hot topics” and controversial issues, it also provides an avenue for investigating these issues in a thoughtful manner that is responsive to individual knowledges and experiences.

That said, the open-ended responses suggest the Socratic method can exacerbate feelings of discomfort at analyzing the students own views and positions. Thus, the Socratic method and feminist pedagogy can be compatible, but a concerted effort must be made to ensure compatibility. These findings suggest compatibility could be improved by 1) clearly laying out the goals of the Socratic method and 2) clearly articulating how the Socratic method serves as a feminist pedagogical tool. This is especially true for students who have not been introduced to the Socratic method before.

First, as Garner (2000) notes, those wishing to use the Socratic method in a feminist classroom need to make clear the goals of this method and how it will be utilized. While our goal in using the Socratic method was to move beyond the traditional use of leading students to a “correct” answer held by the professors, the responses suggest that we did not do an adequate job of explaining what the Socratic method is and how we intended to employ it. Hence, the use of the Socratic method, particularly in ways compatible with feminist pedagogy as highlighted by Garner (2000) and Williams (1993), must be fully explained to students. Specifically, we need to highlight the kinds of questions that will be asked (uni-directional “why?” questions or questions to which even the professors do not necessarily know the answers), how these questions will be used, and when they will be used. We should also explain how the method would be used to breakdown or even check sexist or abusive language. Students should also be informed that they are encouraged to ask similar questions of and check abusive language by each other and the professors and that it is acceptable for all members of the class

community to acknowledge when they do not have an answer to a question. While we attempted to do this at the beginning of the term, the findings of the study suggest the need to remind all classroom members of these discussion premises throughout the term.

Second, we need to make clear how this technique fits within the larger goals of feminist pedagogy. As the findings suggest, the use of the Socratic method in and of itself was not the source of discomfort or of the perception of one-sided/biased questioning. Rather, this technique seems to have highlighted the students' discomfort as it relates to defending or questioning their own views (and, at least in one case, their own morals). Yet, this discomfort is often a component of feminist pedagogy (Pereira, 2012). At its core, challenging settled "facts" and asking students to defend their views will inherently cause discomfort as students and the professors are required to critically analyze themselves. This discomfort is an essential educational moment as it "can help students identify, and reassess, the taken-for-granted" (Pereira, 2012, p. 131; see also, Linkon, 1992; Boler, 1999). Through this process, moments of discomfort allow for a critical analysis of existing systems and structures and how they underpin oppressive ideologies (Welde, Foote, Hayford, & Rosenthal, 2013). As the findings of this study suggest, however, many of the students are not used to defending their views or the basis of those views. While the Socratic method seems to be an effective technique for helping students critically analyze the views of themselves and others, students need to be aware of how this analysis will lead to and likely produce discomfort. Thus, students must first be made aware of the goal of feminist pedagogy in unsettling accepted "facts", the discomfort that can come from this, and the ways in which such discomfort can be productive. Then, it must be made clear how the Socratic method will be used to accomplish this unsettling.

Several scholars note, however, that such discomfort must occur under the right conditions, including within a safe space (Spencer, 2015) and with enough time (see Pereira, 2012). According to Spencer (2015), creating a safe space was one of four key practices in feminist classrooms. The current literature notes that because students often face discomfort and strong emotions during discussion, it is necessary to ensure a safe environment to confront that discomfort and those emotions (Spencer, 2015). The main technique we used to create this space was the creation a list of rules for discussion (e.g., must be respectful of each other's ideas) as suggested by the students. Were we to do this class again, we would consistently check in with students regarding the classroom climate. One option is to use Brenda Allen's (n.d.) guidelines for discussion a way to begin the conversation of how to create a safe space and check-in as to how well the class was doing at maintaining each guideline.

Second, the structure of the class was quite tight with several cases and concepts discussed at each meeting. Were we to do this class again, we would need to build in more time for students to reflect upon and discuss their discomfort with each other and with us. Doing so would also enable an incorporation of an ethic of care and acknowledgement of the role of personal emotions in knowledge creation that is often missing in the traditional Socratic method (Garner, 2000; Williams, 1993). While we encouraged such discussions both inside and outside of class, they were not directly built into the class schedule or assignments. That said, they could be. For instance, future renditions of the class would incorporate anonymous journaling that ask students to reflect on the discussions and how they impacted their personal views, which are then used as a basis of classroom discussion. We could also utilize online discussion forums to extend in-class discussions and extend the time devoted to each topic. Finally, it would be helpful to incorporate discussions where the faculty member(s) "checks-in" with students to ask how they are progressing in the class, how they are responding to the conversations, and address any concerns or discomforts they may have. The journaling and classroom discussions would also provide opportunity to engage with discomfort, process that discomfort, and ensure a safe space was maintained. Thus, a merging of the Socratic method and feminist pedagogies must find ways to incorporate time to address the fact that discomfort will occur—and is expected—to be effective.

As some of the suggestions for improvement imply, there was also a disconnect between the role of the professors in a feminist classroom and the expectations of the students. Specifically, the ability of professors to also function as learners (Welde, Foote, Hayford, & Rosenthal, 2013; Hammer & Giordano, 2001; Webb, Allen, & Walker, 2002) and to model the linkages between personal experiences and the classroom (Lee, 1989; Stake & Hoffman, 2000; Webb, Allen, & Walker, 2002) needs to be made clear. As part of this discussion, it may be useful to note that professors are more likely to question the views they do not understand. In doing so, we can make clear to the students that our intent is not to discredit or attack one view. Rather, the intent is to better understand a view that we do not share to better understand another side of the issue. This way we can show students that professors also have knowledge gaps and can learn from the students (Welde, Foote, Hayford, & Rosenthal, 2013; Hammer & Giordano, 2001; hooks, 1994). Then, a discussion can be had as to how the Socratic method can be a tool for helping to highlight the knowledge gaps of all participants (professors and students alike); how it can be used by all participants to question their positions and better understand diverse views; and

highlight the ways that personal experience can impact those views and link to class topics. In this way, students may still feel comfortable at having their views challenged in the positive ways raised by students #5 and #6, but will hopefully avoid the sense of being intimidated or attacked as raised by students #2 and #10.

At the same time, we need to be cognizant of the dynamics created by having two professors in the room. For instance, it would be easy for the faculty members to sit together and appear to be “tag teaming” students, creating the impression the professors are always in support of what each other is doing or saying. These dynamics must be consciously addressed. One solution is to ensure the faculty members are interspersed with the students and not sitting at the front of the room (the traditional seat of power). Periodically changing seating arrangements could also symbolize a constant shift in power dynamics. It will also be necessary to make it clear to students that while the faculty may trade off leading parts of the discussion or jump in when the other gets tired, the goal is not to show a united front in terms of opinion. Rather, the goal is to help keep the conversation going. Students should also be reminded that they may challenge our views and question us as part of the trading off.

While this case study offers insights into the use of the Socratic method in a feminist classroom, more needs to be done to understand how the two work together. First, a larger study that analyzes the Socratic method in a variety of classrooms using feminist pedagogical techniques would be useful. As this particular course was aimed at a small cross-segment of students, it highlights the need to understand the link between the two among a variety of students. Studies that include non-honors, non-pre-law, and non-WGS students in a feminist classroom would be useful, perhaps also in a way that compares these students to their counterparts to determine if participation in a particular major or academic division has an impact. Such studies would also increase the sample size, thus providing a more nuanced view on the Socratic method and the use of the method as a feminist pedagogical technique.

Second, studies that include a demographically diverse student population (e.g., in terms of age, race, gender identity, and class, to name a few) would also highlight the ways in which this technique functions in non-homogenous settings. Given the goal of feminist pedagogy and the feminist movement broadly to disrupt unequal and non-inclusive systems and structures, it would be interesting to see how well the Socratic method enables the personal experiences of these diverse backgrounds to become a part of the conversations.

Finally, for pre-law courses and courses with a heavy use of the Socratic method but not feminist pedagogy, it would be helpful to know how the incorporation of feminist pedagogy impacts the use and effectiveness of the Socratic method. Pre- and post- inclusion studies could highlight the ways in which feminist pedagogical techniques functioned with or against the Socratic method. While we have focused on the undergraduate level, the findings of this and future studies would be helpful in adjusting classrooms in graduate and law schools to more effectively use the Socratic method, particularly in feminist classrooms.

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Notes

Note 1. Admittedly, the majority of the course focused on the gender binary, as that has been the subject of the vast majority of gendered legal disputes throughout US history. That said, we centered the conversations around these legal decisions and issues on the idea of gender as a social construction and we maintained gender as a broader construct at the forefront of class discussions, even though the legal decisions analyzed maintained a narrower view.

Note 2. This conversation was facilitated by the Genderbread Person, which is often attributed to Sam Killermann (see <http://itspronouncedmetrosexual.com>). While not without its critics (see <https://storify.com/cisnormativity/the-genderbread-plagiarist>), it is a useful tool for beginning to discuss gender as a social construct.

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