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Breaking the taboo: an exploration of female university students’ experiences of attending a feminist-informed sex education course

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This article presents the results of a qualitative interview study of nine young women who attended a feminist-informed human sexuality course as undergraduate students at a US university located in the ‘Bible belt’. The course focused on messages of desire and empowerment, rather than romance or fear, and was designed to encourage students to think critically about current sexual discourses. Results indicate that participants’ information on sexual issues prior to taking the course was limited and largely negative. Experiences of the course are described in themes including owning sexual desire, improved body image, reduced guilt and fear, and increased confidence as a woman. It is concluded that sex education may be used to help empower female students and enrich their quality of life; current educational practices should therefore be examined for ways in which they are oppressive to development.

Introduction

Sex education in the United States has tended to focus on risk prevention (Mellanby et al., 1996; Kirby & Coyle, 1997). This preoccupation with sex as a high-risk behavior is reflected in studies of educational practices (for example, Zelnik & Kim, 1982; Feigenbaum et al., 1995; Grunseit et al., 1997). Sexuality literature in general also tends to assume a risk focus, as illustrated by the reduction of adolescents and young adults to issues of sexually transmitted diseases, unwanted pregnancy and sexual coercion (di Mauro, 1997).

This risk focus in sex education is a cause for a concern among feminist researchers who claim young women’s development is inhibited as a result of the reinforcement of narratives of fear of disease and pregnancy (Fine, 1988; Thompson, 1990). Fine (1988) argues that sex education fails rather than protects

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its students, as it does not attend to the development of the sexual self. Further, she claims the withholding of thorough sex education for females is unethical. While there have been calls for these concerns to be addressed (for example, Tiefer, 1995) there has been scant research examining the effects of feminist-informed sex education on young women at any education level, particularly where the data provide insights from the students' perspectives.

This article presents the results of a qualitative interview study, which examined young women's experiences of a human sexuality course offered to undergraduate students at a university in the United States. The course was taught using a feminist-informed approach (Baber & Murray, 2001), which brought non-traditional issues such as sexual desire to the classroom, and encouraged the development of critical thinking abilities about current constructions of human sexuality. The aim of the study was to explore the experience of such a course from female participants' perspectives; the data provide an insight into these experiences, and underscore messages participants received about sex and sexuality prior to taking the course.

**Sex education in the United States**

Sex education in general has long been a source of debate and controversy (Weis et al., 1992). In the United States the conflicting views on sex education, resulting from conservative administrations and competing social and religious agendas, are no exception.

The history of sex education in the United States has been well documented by Moran (2000) and Irvine (2002) as a series of reactions to issues such as rising rates of teen pregnancy and sexually transmitted diseases. Efforts to organize a more comprehensive system of sexuality education have repeatedly been opposed by social conservatives who have 'helped to inflate the sense of danger' (Moran, 2000, p. 181) and promote right-wing agendas into policy and law. This sense of danger has been fueled by views that sex education will not only corrupt young people and incite them to be sexually promiscuous by providing them with a 'how to' manual (Irvine, 2002), but it will also undermine conservative Christian family values where women should subjugate their own needs and desires (Trudell, 1993).

One of the most noticeable results of conservative campaigns has been the creation of major sources of federal funding for states that are willing to adopt abstinence-only education programs (Irvine, 2002); these campaigns not only pressure young people to postpone sexual activity until marriage, they also prohibit the giving of comprehensive, factual information on human sexuality (Levine, 2002). In 2002, a total of $119 million was committed to Abstinence-Until Marriage Programs (Republican Study Committee, 2002), despite the lack of credible evidence that such programs achieve their aim of delaying the onset of sexual behavior (Roosa & Christopher, 1990; Di Clemente, 1998; Kirby, 2003). In spite of years of such policies and programs, rates of pregnancy, abortion and sexually transmitted infections among adolescents remain extremely high in the United States, and are in stark contrast to figures from countries such as The Netherlands
where policy is aimed at educating and empowering young people in their sexual decision-making (Schalet, 2004).

A further concern about these abstinence-based programs is that they appear to lack support from the general public. A recent poll (NPR, 2004) found that while 15% of Americans supported abstinence-only education, the majority believed educational practices should reflect a reality where young people are unlikely to abstain totally from sexual interaction until marriage.

A final interesting development in the literature on the history of sex education has been the differential treatment afforded to men and women (Moran, 2000). Curricula have tended to focus on men as sexual creatures who are at the mercy of uncontrollable urges, while women are not thought to be troubled by problems of desire; they, by contrast, only require information on menstruation, sexually transmitted diseases and the need to be gatekeepers against male lust. Moran cites the case of a state employee in Alabama who admitted there was no certainty about *what* girls should be taught about sex. While these descriptions of sex education may sound current, they do in fact date back to the early 1900s. It is, perhaps, disconcerting to think that views of gender equality may have shown so little progress.

**A feminist perspective of sex education**

These concerns about sex education and its impact on female students have not failed to attract the attention of feminist researchers. British feminists such as Stevi Jackson (1982) and Sue Lees (1986) were among the first to openly critique the effects of sex education on young women. In her interview study, Lees comments that more traditional sex education imparts such little useful knowledge as to leave many women feeling sexual experience is a ‘heavy load’ (1986, p. 151) to carry.

Fine’s (1988) paper was the landmark American feminist critique. As an advocate for change in the sex education curricula of females, she argued that the reinforcement of grand narratives on fear and silence as they relate to sexuality are detrimental to the ability to fully develop a sense of sexual self, and in this way she claims education fails rather than protects its students. One method of effecting change, Fine suggests, would be to introduce a discourse of desire into the formal agenda of public education, as it has until now remained only ‘a whisper’. This discourse would ‘release females from a position of receptivity, enable an analysis of the dialectics of victimization and pleasure, and would pose female adolescents as subjects of sexuality, initiators as well as negotiators’ (Fine, 1988, p. 33).

Instead of desire, romance appears to have become a primary pedagogical strategy for girls and young women. According to Thompson (1990, 1995), sexuality curricula have ‘replaced realism with romance’. This escape from reality leads to a ‘place where girls wait for love and get it and boys love the girls who want them before and after a pair has intercourse; a place where femininity tames the beast’ (Thompson, 1995, p. 44). These romantic expectations are problematic, as they can
lead to disappointment and inadequate preparation for the realities of sexual interactions (Thompson, 1990).

Tolman’s (2000, 2001, 2002) research has added weight to the concern about discourses of romance. Her results echo Moran’s (2000) historical descriptions, where girls are not considered desiring of sex, only of love. Tolman argues for a change to the sex education system that currently depends on ‘the erotic silence of many girls’, girls who should instead be taught ‘of the ways in which our sexuality can make us more resilient and more alive and about our entitlement to an erotic voice’ (2000, p.78). Levine (2002) states that education on desire should additionally be gender specific so young women are enabled to discuss and recognize their desire and arousal and, importantly, to own it rather than project it all on to one person. For Levine, this is a vital component of helping young females to form independence.

In summary, there is clearly much debate about the role and content of formal sex education. In the United States, ‘the Right has all but won the sex-education wars’ (Levine, 2002, p.91) and government funding supports an abstinence-based approach, despite the lack of support from a parental majority. Furthermore, research has demonstrated that limiting information does not significantly reduce or delay sexual behavior; in fact, the opposite appears to be true and it may actually be detrimental to the development of a healthy sexuality, particularly for females. As a result of these conservative practices, the primary pedagogical strategies for the sex education of girls and young women appear to focus on basic biology, fear and romance. In terms of preparing females for the realities of adult life, these strategies ‘don’t work to prevent sexual disappointment’ (Tiefer, 1995, p.73).

The lack of positive changes in young people’s sexual health or empowerment, suggest this is an opportune time to investigate new perspectives, particularly those that allow students’ voices to become part of the research process. As yet, much of the extant research has focused on the sex education of adolescents, although none of this has taken a feminist-informed approach. While feminist courses on women’s sexuality may be available at the university level, no studies have yet been undertaken to demonstrate their effect on female students. The aim of this present study, therefore, was to focus on the experiences of young women who had attended a feminist-informed sex education course, in order to offer new views of the role such education can play in women’s lives.

**Methodology**

This study took place over one semester, at a large public university with an enrolment of about 35,000 students, in a southern state in the United States commonly referred to as part of the ‘Bible belt.’ Human sexuality classes are typically offered to students in three departments on campus, and such is their popularity that the classes are invariably over-subscribed. The enrollment for this class was 53 students, and 96% of these students were female. Attendance in the class is always a mixture of those taking the department’s minor, where sex education is mandatory, and those who are taking the class as an elective, sometimes
from other departments. Students do not take this class until they are in the final stages of their undergraduate degree.

Recruitment for the study took place towards the end of the semester, as the course was nearing completion, when the instructor (the study's author) explained the aims of the study to the class and invited female students to contact her via email if they were interested in participating. The nine students who volunteered are described in Table 1. It was decided that the instructor would conduct the interviews since she had already established a trusting relationship with the students, which would increase their comfort levels when talking about intimate issues (Reinharz, 1992). Human subjects' approval was obtained from the Institutional Review Board of the university.

Each individual's interview took place in a private room on campus. The consent process was explained first in class, and again before each interview commenced. Participants chose fictitious names to protect their identities. Interviews were audio-taped and then transcribed. Following this process, participants read their transcripts and then attended a second, brief, interview. This provided a member check of the data, in addition to offering participants an opportunity to alter or add to their words.

**A feminist-informed approach**

The approach to this human sexuality course was based on a feminist pedagogy, as described by Baber and Murray (2001). This entailed the avoidance of a pathological approach to sex that primarily focused on the risks of disease and pregnancy. Additionally, all course material was presented through a feminist lens where gendered stereotypes of female and male sexuality were challenged in class discussion. From this perspective, for example, the act of heterosexual intercourse was described in terms where the woman's body is active in creating pleasure and enhancing reproductive viability, rather than more traditional views where the man is dominant as he enters the vagina, while the ovum waits passively for his sperm to find and penetrate it.

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<tr>
<th>Name (fictitious)</th>
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<th>Self-identified socioeconomic status</th>
<th>Race/ethnicity</th>
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<tr>
<td>Madison</td>
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<td>Caucasian</td>
<td>Episcopalian</td>
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<td>Amy</td>
<td>21</td>
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<td>White</td>
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<td>Kelly</td>
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<td>Nicole</td>
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<td>Victoria</td>
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<td>Liz</td>
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<td>Ashley</td>
<td>20</td>
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<td>Andrea</td>
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<td>Marie</td>
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The class was taught in an open, relaxed environment where students were encouraged to explore and challenge existing cultural norms about sex and sexuality. This was achieved through a mixture of brief lectures, discussions (large and small groups), student presentations, debates and the chance for students to examine personal reactions to class topics in private individual journals. Particular attention was also paid to 'the political climate of the classroom' (Baber & Murray, 2001, p. 28), as students represented a mixture of those with very traditional Christian values and those who were more liberal in their views. In keeping with this approach, the material for the class was chosen carefully so that it would inform without alienating students.

The syllabus covered topics that might be included in any comprehensive sex education class, but importantly it also included topics such as desire, arousal and masturbation. At all times the students were encouraged to consider issues of power, diversity and context: for example, where the human sexual response cycle model and the diagnostic criteria of sexual dysfunction were presented, students were also exposed to critiques of the human sexual response cycle model and its supporting research (for example, Tiefer, 1991).

The core text (Westheimer & Lopater, 2002), additional readings (suggested by Peggy Kleinplatz, University of Ottawa, personal communication with author) and exercises (for example, Tiefer et al., 2003) were chosen to foster critical thinking abilities about constructions of human sexuality, both currently and historically. Guest speakers for the course were selected for their ability to expose students to sexuality issues in diverse populations such as those who are transgendered, homosexual, disabled or aging. The class instructor and author of this study is a sex therapist and researcher specializing in women's sexual and reproductive health, and she was therefore able to model a relaxed and open approach to students on human sexuality.

Analysis

The author and a professor from the university (both women) read the transcripts independently. Both identified descriptions of participants' prior learning about sex, in addition to themes that described the participants' experiences of the human sexuality course. Some themes were developed from the existing literature, and others were generated inductively from the data (Kvale, 1996). While the sample was small, the number of participants that confirmed each theme was counted so the reader could judge how typical the experiences were for the group as a whole. The coding of the interviews was carried out using N6 software (QSR) to assist in the management and retrieval of data.

Results

Previous sexual learning

It was considered necessary to gain some sense of the information that participants had received about sex and sexuality prior to taking the university-level course.
These early messages were overwhelmingly negative and could be summarized as: abstinence until marriage, guilt and fear, double standards, suppression of desire, reliance on male partners, and lack of information. Brief quotes from participants are used to illustrate this prior learning:

*Abstinence until marriage.*

If we did have a sex talk at school, like I said, there were two or three rare speakers we had, it was always about, you know we would sign contracts saying ... you know everybody would get a contract after the speech and they would say 'I will not have sex until I am married'. (Liz)

*Guilt and fear.*

And there are still times I feel guilty, you know and I will turn to my boyfriend and be like 'do you think I am a whore, do you think I am a whore for sleeping with you?'. (Madison)

Well I guess the biggest message was just my mom being like 'sex is really bad and you can get pregnant, and boys try to use you for sex'. (Kelly)

*Double standards.*

Because I was talking to my boyfriend about it and he said that they showed them condoms and how to put them on and all that kind of stuff, and they didn’t show us anything like that at all. We didn’t get sex, we got puberty. (Ashley)

But most guys I know are like ‘no my parents just say don’t come home with a baby’ and that’s all. So when guys are getting that and girls are getting ‘wait until you are married’, that’s a huge gap you know? (Madison)

*Suppression of desire.*

And because I knew I was a sexual being and I knew that was going to be an important part, I felt like I couldn’t think about it, like I had to just cut that part of me off, like anything besides kissing was not okay because I felt that once it was turned on there was a fear that I wouldn’t be able to stop it. (Madison)

*Reliance on male partners.*

They didn’t even teach us how to put a condom on. The first time I learned was here in college, and I mean we had been using them but I always depended on the guy to know what in the world that was and how to work it, and I just trusted that they knew what was going on. (Marie)

*Lack of information.*

My mother sat down and gave me the period talk but that was about it. Never about sex or anything. (Liz)
I had three different sex education classes, I guess elementary through middle school, and it was basically just about biology and sexually transmitted diseases. (Madison)

Like how do you know what to do? How are you supposed to know, how are you supposed to figure it out, other than like *Cosmo*? (Kelly)

In summary, the participants in this study described experiences of receiving limited information on sexual issues coupled with messages that induced guilt and fear, thereby conflicting with feelings of desire. Even where a minority of participants had been raised with more liberal views of sex, they were still exposed to negative or confusing messages from other environments, such as church and popular culture. All of the participants in this study described themselves as heterosexual and had been sexually active with male partners by the time they enrolled in their university human sexuality course.

**Experiences of the class**

After the participants had described early influences on their sexual learning, they were asked to talk about their experience of the class. The themes for coding were chosen around the central category of ‘female empowerment’ and were drawn from the existing literature as well as participants’ own words. So, for example, the theme of ‘owning sexual desire and pleasure’ was drawn from the feminist literature, while other themes such as ‘improved body image’ were issues that participants raised during their interviews. A final list of six themes that reflect female empowerment is presented here, and quotes from participants are used to explicate and illuminate each theme.

**Comfort level.** This theme arouse out of participants’ own words as it was noted that seven out of the nine participants brought up the subject of how much more comfortable they felt with sexual issues since taking the course. Comfort seemed to refer to their increased knowledge, the opportunity to consider previously taboo topics and new learning about their bodies. As one participant, (Nicole) noted, it is empowering to feel at ease and informed about a topic.

I feel like I am becoming more comfortable with it, and I feel like sexuality is such an important thing that if you are not comfortable with it, it can get you into a lot of trouble, because you don’t really know what is going on and you don’t know what you believe, and I think it is something that you should enjoy you know? (Madison)

Well I would say that first of all the class has made me, I don’t know why, but it has made me feel more comfortable just talking to other people about sex. But I would say in general this class also has just helped me understand my body more, I would say, so it has made me actually feel more comfortable being sexually involved with people. Not that it has influenced me to go out and be any more sexually active than I was before [laughs], but I am just saying I was going to do it regardless of whether I took the class or not, and it has made me definitely just feel more comfortable with myself, and made me understand more of why I felt this way or whatever. (Liz)
Becoming comfortable with the topics in class was not always easy, particularly where it involved exposing students to issues that had previously been off-limits. However, breaking some of these taboos was an important part of helping them to feel more at ease.

I mean I think part of the class that I like is just that we talk about stuff, because like the first day in class when you gave us a word [exercise to increase comfort with correct sexual terminology], I was so embarrassed, like my face turned bright red. I was like, this is going to be so embarrassing, I am gonna die, I can’t sit here and talk about this kind of stuff. And I just knew that it would be good for me to talk about it without turning red, you know, even though I don’t talk that much, but I listen. (Kelly)

Owning sexual desire and pleasure. An important theme identified from the feminist critiques of sex education was the lack of attention devoted to helping females own their desire and pleasure. As described previously, this sex education class particularly focused on sexual desire, and six of the nine participants talked about their experience of this, and in particular how it empowered them in their personal relationships.

I have known that women are allowed to experience sexual pleasure, but to hear it from a teacher or from a book! It is kind of like oh, okay. But I guess it makes me think that, well it’s a good thing. And I guess now I am a little more selfish in my own sexual pleasure [laughs] and I’m like okay, it’s my turn. (Amy)

Well I think in the interview that I had already said that in our culture you are taught that the man is all knowing about sex, more so than the woman, and please your man, and that type, I just feel that our culture ... in any magazine you look at is saying a hundred ways to please them. And so it is almost like I feel that I have just as much of a right to get this pleasure, or you and I are 50-50, and it is almost like now I am looking out for myself too, more so than I feel like I did in the past. Just knowing that you are partners in this and you don’t have to just completely please, which I think a lot of young girls go into, and you think about a lot of young girls’ first sexual experiences and it is all they are doing favors for the guys basically. And I think that taking a course like this kind of helps you realize that is not what it’s about, there is a lot more to it, your body is going to respond a lot differently if you are getting the same attention that you are giving, and you deserve it, and I think a lot of girls are taught to please the guy first, to get his attention and show him what you can do, and then eventually he will come around and start doing it for you too. (Liz)

So I just think that it makes what I was thinking okay, to think that I can have these desires, you know what I am saying? [Interviewer asks: 'It’s interesting then, it sounds like it has done something for you as a woman?'] Definitely. [Interviewer asks: 'What words would you use to describe that?'] Probably knowing that it’s okay that I have an orgasm, and knowing that it’s okay that I don’t have to have a partner, and that it’s okay that I can be the dominant one in a sexual relationship and I don’t have to be submissive. (Marie)

Challenging guilt and fear. This theme arose as it was noticed that participants were starting to question negative values they had received prior to attending this class. One participant in particular (Kelly) was beginning to form a healthier view of
relationships than the one she had learned from her mother. Six of the nine participants talked about this issue.

Just the fact that in the class you always stress that girls are as sexual as boys or whatever, 'cos really a lot of times, like my Mom was always like 'boys are bad, they just want to have sex' and then it's like I shouldn't feel like I ever want to have sex. So it is good I guess to hear that, that girls have as much right as boys. And it has just made me more open-minded about it, 'cos I have always thought that obviously boys aren't all bad, and sex isn't horrible because some people like it, like you know, the way my Mom talked about it. (Kelly)

So I feel like I am starting to deal with some of those issues and a lot of the guilt that maybe I felt because of being raised in the church or whatever, I am starting to resolve some of those issues. (Madison)

**Call for improvements to sex education.** A further theme arose when seven of the nine participants moved the interview on to talking about sex education in general. Taking the course appeared to have given them heightened awareness and dissatisfaction about the level of information generally available in schools and colleges.

I mean I knew stuff, I knew about sex and oral sex before I had done it, but that didn't make me go out and do it. And just knowing about it, the knowledge doesn't affect your behavior necessarily. I think we have a right to know it, why shouldn't we? But now we have the knowledge and all the facts and the truth, and that is really important, when you don't have to go the roundabout way to find out. They should have taught us that stuff. Yeah, it makes me mad that we weren't taught this stuff. It is really biology and sex is human nature, so why don't they teach us that? (Andrea)

But I think if I had been educated a little bit better I probably would have waited a little bit longer, and I wasn't really curious, it wasn't like I wanted to know what it was about ... I don't know I guess ... I was probably very dependent on the opposite sex and I wish maybe ... it wasn't just about sex, it was about my self esteem and stuff like that, so it is deeper than just sex, but I think if I would have been more aware of what sex means, and what it meant to me I might have known myself a little bit better or maybe had better self-esteem about myself or something like that. (Marie)

**Body image.** An issue that was not raised in the literature about sex education, but which is obviously an important feminist concern, was that of body image. Three of the nine participants talked about how the course had helped improve their body image, and they gave important insights into their growing awareness that healthy sexuality is not based on having a perfect body.

It has actually for some reason made me feel more comfortable with my body in general. Like if your body is not ... you know, how big your boobs are or how skinny your legs are, not that I really ever thought that had an influence or an impact on whether or not you could have sex, but just about it is nothing to do with that or how sexy you are or whatever. (Liz)

**Confidence as a woman.** As with the theme of body image, this theme was less common as only three of the nine participants discussed it. It was considered
important, however, that the experience of the class had clearly helped to empower some participants in other areas.

And it will be a lot easier to be able to give my opinion on something and not think oh god should I have said that out loud? (Nicole)

Well it has raised my confidence, this entire class, like my confidence as a woman, just feeling like I am capable of having good sex just as anyone else is. (Liz)

Discussion

The aim of this study was to focus on the experiences of young women who attended a feminist-informed sex education course, in order to offer new views of the role such education can play in women's lives. The course was designed to begin to rectify some of the problems of more traditional approaches to sex education, particularly those that emphasize topics and values that inhibit the development of young women.

The study participants came to this class burdened with overwhelmingly negative messages related to sex and sexuality. Despite receiving formal sex education in school and having sexual experiences with males, they remained largely ignorant and confused about their bodies and sexual values. While some of the participants had been pressured to agree to abstain from sex until marriage, the reality was that all of them were already sexually active and ill prepared for this experience.

After the university-level course of sex education, participants talked about experiencing increased confidence, the ability to acknowledge sexual desire and claim sexual pleasure, and a new level of knowledge that made them feel equal to, and less reliant upon, males. Additionally, participants discussed feeling less guilt about being sexual beings, and indicated they were no longer ignorant or ashamed of their bodies. These experiences appear to be in sharp contrast to those described prior to taking the class.

It is beyond the scope of this study to claim these changes were a direct result of attending the class. These developments were clearly part of a process of beginning to address areas of concern, and further research would be needed to establish direct cause and effect relationships. However, during the interviews participants were asked to consider what aspects of the class they considered had contributed to the experiences reported in this study. They highlighted the open, relaxed environment, the opportunity to air wide-ranging opinions, the insight into sexually diverse populations, and, importantly, the focus on desire and a woman's right to pleasure. The course was not based on discourses of romance, and none of the participants mentioned this topic during their interviews. Additionally, while some conservatives might be fearful of the effects of exposing young people to sexual information, it seemed that participants were actually becoming more discerning in their choices; as one participant (Nicole) put it, 'It makes me feel less like I have to settle for somebody.'
Fine (1988) has argued that young women from low-income families are most at risk from the effects of current sex education practices. However, the young women taking part in this study were white, middle class and well educated, and yet they still suffered from ignorance about human sexuality, and were placed at risk as a result of their former sex education. This suggests that the experiences of all young women are worthy of attention, as it would appear that being female is in itself a risk factor for sexual disempowerment in the current sex education environment.

While the sample size of this study can neither reflect the experiences of the class as a whole, nor allow for generalizations on the impact of using a feminist approach, this is a seldom-addressed issue and the data have merit in highlighting areas for further investigation and debate. One such issue worthy of attention is the sex education of young men. It is highly likely, after all, that current sex education curricula are just as guilty of perpetuating ignorance and confusion in males as they are in females. Teaching practices that give boys the right to talk about condom use and masturbation while girls learn about menstruation and babies are highly questionable, if not unethical.

This study focused on college-age women, while much of the existing research has attended to the school population. Clearly there are different political contexts between these two levels of education and it is unlikely that, particularly given the current political climate in the United States, such research would take place earlier than the college level. Even at the university level, sex educators may encounter resistance if they try to introduce non-traditional curricula. Around the time this study was taking place, for example, three million dollars of funding at the University of Kansas was in jeopardy pending investigations in to one of its sexuality classes (CNN.com, 2003). A senior colleague warned the author of this study that she should be cautious in her approach so as not to place her university’s funding in similar jeopardy. Irvine (2002) has shown that sex educators are less likely to try and change the status quo where they fear stigmatization, legal action or constant demoralizing battles.

As we develop our knowledge of sex education, it is necessary to consider what young people actually need to know in order to be prepared for later life. Allen (2001) has suggested there is a significant gap between students' identified need for ‘discourses of erotics’ and the reality of their formal sex education. Further, it appears these issues are not confined to the United States, as reports indicate that similar debates over abstinence-based sex education are taking place in Britain (The Guardian, 2005). The results of this study indicate that a feminist-informed sex education may be used to help young women develop as confident sexual beings, and it may also contribute to their sense of empowerment in more general areas. This would appear to be a view of sex education worthy of further investigation.

Conclusion

Concentrated efforts to maintain repressive standards in sex education may only serve to contribute to gender inequality, and can therefore be viewed as a form of
sexual discrimination. This study has demonstrated that a feminist-informed sex education course may contribute to the empowerment and independence of young women. In light of this evidence, it is timely that further investigation is made into the development and role of feminist-informed sexuality curricula.

Regardless of differing opinions on when young people should become sexually active, there clearly needs to be further consideration of the quality of sexual enrichment to which women (and men) are entitled, and the role formal sex education can play in this process. It is only by breaking the taboo that we can begin to fully examine the ways in which current sex education practices are oppressive to our students.

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References


