

What to Expect While Teaching a Course on Sisterhood and Feminism at Sojourner House

I.) Diversity

-Before beginning the course, it is important to recognize that the women you will teach are coming from very different backgrounds. Issues of race, class, religion, sex, sexual orientation, and gender identity come up often in class discussions. As an instructor, it is important for you to not ignore these experiences, and instead use them to begin meaningful and respectful conversations.

A.) Recognize Your Own Biases and Stereotypes

- 1.) Evaluate your language choices.
 - i.) Make sure that you are using politically correct terminology that is respectful of all groups.
- 2.) Try to remain informed about the history and culture of all social groups. If you don't know something, ask someone who may.
- 3.) Recognize that someone's upbringing affects the way that they understand concepts like sisterhood and community.
 - i.) Do not assume that everyone shares the same experiences.

B.) Ways to Incorporate Diversity in the Course

- 1.) Make an announcement at the beginning of the first class that issues of diversity will arise and that no one should be made to feel uncomfortable during these conversations.
 - i.) You should also suggest that students can approach you (after class or via email) with any issues or concerns.
- 2.) Make sure that at least one of your ground rules is about respecting all people and their experiences.
- 3.) Use handouts that reflect the students' diverse backgrounds.
 - i.) Try to include diversity in all pictures and examples.

II.) Things will not always go as planned.

-You are dealing with very sensitive material that may bring up unexpected emotions or memories in your students. Once again, it is important for you to recognize these experiences as they arise. Your response often provides an important example of sisterhood for the women. Remain confident and in control, but listen and learn from the women's experiences.

A.) A student begins speaking about a personal difficulty that she experienced (drugs, abuse, etc.).

- 1.) Even if the experience is something that you are unfamiliar with, you can listen and respond.
 - i.) Sometimes it is important for someone who understands the situation to respond. Luckily, the room is filled with women who may have had similar experiences. Without assuming or expecting anything, you can always refer to the class members.
 - ii.) Either way, you should listen and acknowledge the experience of each woman as they struggle with things. Do not ignore situations as they present themselves. You may also wish to speak with the woman after class. Checking in with them before the next class is another option.

- 2.) Remember that you are ultimately in charge.
 - i.) Your response can easily gain or lose the respect of the class.
 - ii.) Spending too much time on the experience of one woman can bore the rest of the class.
 - iii.) You most likely have other things on your agenda for the day. Do not rush, but do not forget the other things you wanted to discuss.
- B.) You realize that you are running out of time and still have a lot of material to cover.
 - 1.) Do not panic or rush.
 - i.) Your students will get very little out of panicked or rushed lesson plan.
 - 2.) Remember that there's always next week.
 - i.) Before the next class, think about how you can add the topics that you did not finish to that lesson plan.
 - 3.) Move on when you need to.
 - i.) If you are really struggling to get a point across, consider asking your fellow teachers for help, or move on and come back to it (later that class, next class, etc.)
- C.) You realize that you have covered all of the material but still have a lot of time.
 - 1.) Think of conversation topics and work on getting the women more engaged.
 - 2.) Ask if there are any questions.
 - 3.) Review what you've already gone over.
 - 4.) If no one is participating, consider a writing assignment that students have to share with the group.
 - 5.) Review what you have gone over in previous classes.
- D.) Students are sleeping in class.
 - 1.) Recognize that the women have many responsibilities and yours is most likely not their first one. Many women are working full-time jobs, raising their children, completing their assigned chores at Sojourner, and taking other courses.
 - 2.) Still, it is okay to ask students to pay attention.
 - i.) consider switching tasks to keep women more active.

III.) Students may come and go.

- A.) Sojourner House is a temporary housing facility.
 - 1.) It is not uncommon for students to leave or join your class roster at any given time.
 - 2.) Make an attempt to know everyone's names.
 - i.) Even if you know that someone is leaving half-way through the course or are joining the course late. This is a sign of respect.
- B.) Students may show up late to class.
 - 1.) Make sure that they quickly take a seat and do not disturb the class too much.

IV.) Not everyone will be receptive to sisterhood and feminism (especially in the beginning).

- A.) This topic can cause much controversy and debate in your classroom.
 - 1.) Embrace these conversations as a learning experience.
 - i.) Refer to ground rules when conversations begin to get out of control.
- B.) Many students have told us that they learn a lot from the course.
 - 1.) Even when topics become difficult, it is important to stick with the class.

- 2.) Consider asking some or all of the students for suggestions/help.
 - i.) Find out what is important to them and work on incorporating it into the class.
 - ii.) Make sure that the course material is relevant to their lives.

V.) Some students may know more about feminism than you do.

- A.) Some of your students may be highly educated (college or higher).
 - 1.) It is not uncommon for these students to have a basic level of understanding of Women's Studies.
 - i.) Acknowledge the students' knowledge and encourage them to continue learning.
- B.) Almost all students come with experiences of gendered oppression (various struggles with: sex, violence, work, mothering, and reproduction)
 - 1.) These experiences may not be exactly what you learned in your Women's Studies course, but in many cases they are as or more important.
 - 2.) Try to incorporate these experiences into your lesson plan
 - i.) while trying to prove a point, use their stories as examples
- C.) Do not assume that you know more than your students.
 - 1.) In Women's Studies, "the personal is political."
 - 2.) Question your own biases and understandings of Women's Studies and women's lives.