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The feminist first-year seminar: using critical pedagogy to design a mandatory information literacy course

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CHAPTER 9

The Feminist First-Year Seminar

Using Critical Pedagogy to Design a Mandatory Information Literacy Course

Heather Campbell

Introduction and Context

This chapter describes a feminist approach to creating a mandatory first-year seminar at Brescia University College, Canada's only remaining women's university. Brescia is a small, Catholic, primarily undergraduate university with approximately 1,500 students. It was founded in 1919 by the Ursuline Sisters, a Roman Catholic teaching order "committed to social justice, community service, and the development of women."¹ Today, it is a beautiful and welcoming campus affiliated with a large research institution of over 40,000 students.²

As early as 2009, librarians and faculty at Brescia were interested in creating an introductory research course for all incoming first-year students. At first, this was inspired by changing staff and faculty workloads:

An increasing number of Brescia students between 2006 and 2009 reported feeling overwhelmed and anxious over the demands of academic research. More students requested one-on-one, intensive research assistance from library staff during this period, while faculty reported an anecdotal increase in plagiarism.³



This was corroborated by a research study I conducted, where students' self-reported information literacy knowledge and confidence were much lower than their instructors' expectations: "The majority of survey respondents reported having regular difficulties with academic research ... a result all the more meaningful since these survey respondents also self-identified as regular library users."⁴

There was considerable support for a mandatory first-year course among Brescia faculty and staff, but many felt students needed an introduction to all of Brescia's degree-level learning outcomes, not just information literacy. Developed from the mission and values statements, these outcomes – called the Brescia Competencies – included common academic learning outcomes such as communication, critical thinking, inquiry, and analysis, along with three values embodying an Ursuline philosophy of education:

1. *Self-Awareness and Development*: Learn to know yourself and your unique contributions to the world.
2. *Social Awareness and Engagement*: Love others and help them to recognize their own individual strengths. Work with them to build a shared vision in pursuit of social justice.
3. *Valuing*: Reconcile your actions with your values or beliefs, taking responsibility for your choices.⁵

To balance our Ursuline foundations with the demands of academic research in the digital age,⁶ Brescia's first-year course needed to be different. This chapter, then, explores our use of feminist pedagogy to create a student-centered, values-based information literacy course.

The Pilot

Brescia first delivered an academic first-year seminar in 2017–18.⁷ Overall, the course goal was to introduce students to the Brescia Competencies by examining a complex question or problem from an interdisciplinary perspective. The course's assignments and learning activities focused particularly on academic research skills and included a wide range of inclusive pedagogies: small-group discussions, where students were encouraged to share lived experience; reflective journaling and self-exploration exercises; active learning and opportunities for hands-on Competency practice; guest lectures; and a scaffolded essay assignment with opportunities for personalized feedback and peer review. There were no course tests or exams.

As many studies on first-year seminars have found,⁸ following "best practices" does not guarantee success for every context or every student. For example, while students received multiple information literacy lessons and personalized feedback from both librarians and their instructors, most participants in a follow-up study did not feel better prepared to complete assignments in other courses. The course

development team felt confident we followed inclusive first-year seminar curriculum design, but some students struggled to see how course topics related from week to week. Respondents who felt dissatisfied with the course also reported feeling disconnected from course content and topics. When asked what the course should do differently, students commented on the noticeable lack of attention paid to women and gender issues, significant given Brescia's place as Canada's only women's university. My final report on the pilot therefore recommended that the course "integrate women's learning more directly.... This would require that course instructors be familiar and comfortable using and describing pedagogical methods that benefit women learners."⁹

Educating Women

The course development team experienced a threshold moment when Brescia librarian Jennifer Foley encouraged us to explore feminist pedagogy. Building on critical theory,¹⁰ feminist pedagogy's connection to our course goals and institutional values was immediately (even embarrassingly) obvious. The goal of feminist pedagogy, as influenced by key writers such as bell hooks and Maralee Mayberry,¹¹ is to "create a more hospitable place for all students, but especially women."¹² Each student's unique gifts, perspectives, and experiences are honoured through a holistic, community-driven teaching approach. Many feminist instructors incorporate skills-based instruction into their teaching, but they do so within the broader context of dismantling systems of oppression and privilege.¹³ A common element in feminist classrooms, similar to an Ursuline approach, is fostering students' commitment to social justice. As Crawley, Lewis, and Mayberry explain: "all feminist work should focus on positive social change."¹⁴

Despite being a women's university, Brescia had never formally adopted a feminist identity: Women and Gender Studies is offered at the larger, affiliated institution, and there is little to no literature connecting Ursuline philosophy to a feminist approach. The parallels, though, are striking, and worthy of further exploration: the Ursulines explain that the purpose of education is to support students' awakening to their place in society and in the universe, achieved by trusting "that there is an inner guide helping [students] to grow to [their] full potential."¹⁵ Educators, therefore, must foster students' abilities to observe: "to see as others see, and therefore respect differences."¹⁶ Feminist pedagogy, meanwhile, focuses on creating engaged classrooms:

Engaged with self in a continuing reflective process; engaged actively with the material being studied; engaged with others in a struggle to get beyond our ...destructive hatreds and work together in order to know more; engaged with community and with movements for social change.¹⁷

The course design team for Brescia's first-year seminar immediately committed to using a feminist approach to curriculum design, but had some unique considerations before moving forward. Feminist pedagogy is more often described as a teaching philosophy than an institutional value, let alone a strategic initiative. There is evidence to suggest that common first-year experiences are beneficial to fostering students' feeling of belonging,¹⁸ but the strength of feminist pedagogy is in the community and personal relationships formed in each classroom. We wanted to create a course that was intersectional and welcoming of all learners—with their unique backgrounds, identities, values, and perspectives—but on an institutional scale that resulted in logistical restrictions. We could not, for example, ask every instructor or stakeholder involved to adopt feminist values. There were important human resources considerations, as well: given Brescia's size, we had only one teaching librarian supporting the course as it scaled up to become mandatory for all incoming students.

Inclusive Classrooms through Feminist Design

We addressed these concerns by carefully creating a cross-institutional curriculum team (see team membership and individual responsibilities in table 9.A.1 in the appendix). As an educational developer and associate director of Brescia's teaching and learning centre by this point, I served as an unofficial course coordinator, helping to bring together and communicate with the team. A feminist disruption of traditional power structures was reflected in our team functioning, as each member provided leadership in their area of expertise (noted in tables 9.A.1 and 9.A.2 in the appendix with "train-the-trainer" responsibility). While ultimate responsibilities for course delivery and assessment remained with the two faculty instructors, all team members were invited to contribute reading, lesson, and learning activity ideas.

We coordinated our large team through weekly meetings, held nearly year-round. Meetings used the following format:

1. Identifying and resolving immediate problems or concerns with the current week of the course.
2. Reviewing course content for the upcoming week(s).
3. Training for future lessons and activities (provided by campus experts).

The tables in the appendix list the type of training each campus expert provided: in my capacity as educational developer, for example, I delivered professional development on feminist pedagogy and the Brescia Competencies, while my librarian colleague offered information literacy training (discussed in more detail below). Weekly meetings were always attended by course instructors, seminar leaders, the educational developer (me), and usually the librarian; other members of the larger

course team would attend on an as-needed basis (see also table 9.A.2). Academic advisors, for example, would liaise with course instructors about students at risk, while student experience professionals trained the team each summer on first-year or international students' common transitional needs. Students registered in the course, though, were largely unaware of this team-based approach. To maintain classroom community, they saw the same course instructors each week in their seminar discussions, outside of the occasional guest lecture.

Weekly meetings at the end of term shifted to course assessment when I collected feedback from all parties. This assessment included interviews and group discussions with the instructors, as well as focus groups and surveys with students. Students were asked for feedback on course content and logistics, as well as broad-sweeping questions about women's learning and their experiences attending an all-women's university. Instructors, meanwhile, reflected on the course week by week, identifying any pedagogies or logistical decisions that may require future adjustment. Any acutely problematic elements with the course were addressed between the fall and winter terms. During the summer months, more extensive reflection took place so that course planning for the next year could commence. We would review the course learning outcomes, determine whether the course theme or pedagogies needed adjusting, and analyze available survey and focus group data. New rounds of professional development and training were arranged for the later parts of the summer, particularly as new course instructors and other staff members came and went.

The Feminist First-Year Seminar

By using a feminist approach, the final version of our first-year seminar centred on supporting students' personal growth and fostering their commitment to social justice. Information literacy was still an important component, but it took on a critical approach as students explored the realities of change making. Knowing that students are more engaged when they feel personally connected to their learning, a loose course theme was chosen to allow for flexibility and student input;¹⁹ the revised pilot's theme, for example, was "Living in a Fractured World." Course content was firm during the first three weeks while students settled into university: we introduced students to the Brescia Competencies, provided a history of Brescia and the Ursuline philosophy of education, and asked them to complete community and team-building exercises and self-exploration activities. At the same time, students suggested different social justice fractures to explore for the rest of the course, such as the climate crisis, racial discrimination, food insecurity, or gender equality. Each fracture, though, would inevitably take an interdisciplinary approach,²⁰ with students encouraged to link class discussions to previous readings, discussions, their self-reflections, and lived experience.

The next seven weeks of class explored the fractures themselves, selected by course instructors from student suggestions. Through seminar discussions, students explored how change happens in each fracture, who holds power and who does not, and the role of academic research and researchers within those structures. We were able to anticipate many of these fractures in advance, so instructors were not left scrambling to create content at the last minute; if needed, the course design team was ready to step in with ideas and lesson plans during our weekly meetings. Since the theme of the course naturally questioned authority and expertise, course content and readings went beyond academic sources to include TED Talk and YouTube videos, government policy, not-for-profit white papers, and poetry. Guest lectures and community mentors, including alumnae and Ursuline representatives, were invited to share their expertise, and we hope that senior peer students can lead discussions in future terms.

Throughout weeks 4 through 11, students worked on scaffolded team projects. After receiving training in teamwork, communication, and group accountability in weeks 1 through 3, students worked together to identify where they, as a group, could address the fracture given their new identities as university students. Groups were encouraged to incorporate academic and other forms of knowledge into their reasoning. At the end of the course, teams presented their recommended approach for the fracture to the rest of their first-year cohort, with a prize going to the top presentation as selected by their peers.

Flexibility and choice are key elements of feminist pedagogy, so Brescia's first-year seminar is a pass/fail course with no grades assigned unless requested. This caused anxiety for some students, but as the course went on most were able to relax into the freedom and creativity this approach provided. The team projects were scaffolded throughout the term, with small elements due periodically, and 'due-by' dates assigned to allow groups to work ahead should they desire. Students were provided with rubrics to understand what constituted a pass, but if they did not pass an assignment, they were also given feedback from instructors and encouraged to resubmit. To allow for individual assessment opportunities, students completed journaling exercises throughout the term. These reflections connected course readings and discussions to students' lived experiences or personal values, or they asked students to practice finding and using academic research relevant to that week's fracture.

Analysis

The Feminist Institution

As mentioned above, Brescia's first-year seminar is a unique case study in feminist pedagogy, given our scale in application. The design team certainly experienced growing pains when expanding the pilot into a mandatory course for all incoming students.

From my perspective as course coordinator, using a large course design team requires an incredible amount of trust, communication, emotional regulation, and organization; last-minute changes or pivots made pedagogical sense but could be stressful with so many moving parts. The power structures in the university didn't disappear overnight either, so while feminist pedagogy aims to address and reduce oppressive power structures, there were still tensions to be navigated. For example, the course instructors of the full-scale version also served as dean and associate dean—and were therefore the direct supervisors for most of us on the design team. Since these instructors were responsible for final decisions on course content and assessments, it took conscious effort from each team member to learn when and how to voice opinions. I also observed that using a feminist course design does not equate to feminist teaching philosophies: with all members of the team relatively new to using this approach, weekly meetings demonstrated how we each identified with feminism pedagogy differently, and therefore approached course design differently, as well.

Lessons in humility were an inevitable result of this project. The flip side of working collaboratively, of course, is that no one person is most right, more important, or gets what they want. For example, the librarians involved (including me) were forced to re-examine our relationship with information literacy: instituting a mandatory, information-literacy-based course felt like a huge victory, but students in the pilot struggled to identify with the social-justice elements of information literacy and to see how their newfound skills applied to different assignments or other contexts. Expanding our definition of information literacy was a key first step to addressing this dissonance: if information literacy really is about teaching students to become lifelong learners,²¹ feminist writers tell us that course planning must be holistic, interdisciplinary, and collaborative.²² I needed to be humble: the information literacy components of the course were not more important than the broader goals, despite my long history in actualizing the course. Information literacy is a discipline rooted in Eurocentrism, after all, so focusing our information literacy teaching on “academic skills development” simply did not fit our feminist design.²³ In Brescia's context, taking a feminist approach meant elevating students' lived experience as authorities and knowledgeable experts to an equal place to academic research.²⁴ The focal point of information literacy instruction shifted accordingly, from the mechanics of searching to introducing—and sometimes critiquing—the place of academic research in a global society. Students were still taught about databases and keywords, but within much broader discussions of authority, expertise, and social justice.

Student Experience

As much as the curriculum team was an essential component of Brescia's feminist approach, we needed to understand the impacts of our redesign on students. I studied

two cohorts of Brescia's first-year seminar: (1) the revised pilot delivered in winter, 2019, and (2) the full rollout of the course to all incoming first-year students in the 2019–20 academic year. The study used a mixed-methods approach, including coding and analysis of student reflection and journaling assignments, student interviews and focus groups, and a student survey. Like most things in 2020, though, data collection was disrupted by the COVID-19 pandemic. We had to pivot to put the course online after only one term and then redesigned it again for the 2020–21 academic year.

Analysis and coding of student assignments from this initial data indicated that most participants (83%) in the 2019 pilot articulated an increased personal commitment to making social change. All (100%) pilot study participants demonstrated the three Ursuline learning outcomes in their assignments by the end of the course, as well. Pilot study participants articulated these outcomes in interviews with me, attributing their success directly to the feminist pedagogies used in the course:

I found the fact I got to choose what we talked about as a class ... was a big thing for me, compared to my other classes. Which made me be motivated to go to class, since even if a topic wasn't something I chose, I knew it was important to someone else in the class.

I think that's very important to feel connected. To feel you're a part of something. ... I was a little worried about being a very mature student with kids the same age as first-year students, but nobody is bothered.

I have learned a lot about myself. ... I thought talking about sensitive topics I did not have any background knowledge on would be challenging for me. I actually really enjoyed looking at these issues because it helped me understand what others are experiencing and I believe I became more empathetic.

Focus-group participants from the 2019–20 cohort described discussion sections as “safe spaces” that helped to “open up our way of thinking into other people's ways.” The meaningful topics discussed in class resonated with students, as they had during the 2019 pilot, with 2020 focus-group participants reporting that it is “important to discuss controversial topics with no ‘right’ answer in class” and to “feel a personal connection with what we're learning.”

Negative feedback on the course was largely related to scheduling and technical hiccups, as well as resistance to the pass/fail model. When we first offered the course to every incoming student in 2019–20, we used a brand-new building that experienced technical glitches during the first three weeks of class; some students' course registration was disrupted by a separate error. Given the importance of grounding students during those first three weeks, as described above, it was easy to see how some students felt disconnected from the course.

Even though a significant portion of the course focused on information literacy, and students demonstrated information literacy learning in nearly all of their course assignments, very few study participants mentioned or acknowledged the library's role in the course. Nearly all participants from both cohorts improved their ability to identify and locate a peer-reviewed, academic source and then integrate it into their reflective writing and team projects: of a total sample size of 61, only one student did not pass this element of the course. Yet only two focus-group participants (and zero survey respondents) mentioned the library at all: one named the librarian in-class workshops as helpful, while another, a returning student, found library presentations repetitive from her previous degree.

Discussion and Conclusion

There is a lot of value in Brescia's first-year seminar, particularly from an information literacy perspective. Reflecting on our team-based approach has me questioning who information literacy learners are, or who librarians actually teach. On the surface, it looked as if we followed the traditional one-shot information literacy approach in this course, as my librarian colleague conducted two in-class sessions as a guest lecturer. Few students identified the role librarians played in course learning. But behind the scenes, our librarian trained course instructors on library search techniques, counselled them on bottlenecks that students commonly experience during information literacy learning,²⁵ designed lesson plans, and gave feedback on assignment design. Knowing how important it is to build a learning cohort between the students and their instructors, oftentimes librarians were *not* the ones teaching information literacy concepts; instructors and seminar leaders did, instead. Just as much information literacy teaching happened during our weekly team meetings, I would argue, as during the two in-class lessons. Sara Crawley, Jennifer Lewis, and Maralee Mayberry explain that using a feminist approach means understanding how we fit into the system and asking how our choices enable others to understand their own places and power.²⁶ Committing to a feminist, lifelong-learning approach for Brescia's information literacy program meant incorporating feminist values into all aspects of our teaching. If the teaching and learning was happening, if students were acquiring new information literacy knowledge, did it matter who delivered the lessons? We needed to *become* feminist pedagogues, personally, to successfully deliver this feminist course.

That said, it is not clear whether everyone involved with the course similarly adopted a feminist teaching philosophy: it would be valuable to formally investigate instructors' experience in teaching a collaborative, team-based course like this. Similarly, our course demonstrates that feminist curriculum design does not automatically result in intersectional teaching, despite good intentions: the course will

continue to evolve as Brescia explores decolonizing and Indigenizing its curriculum and pedagogy. The year 2020 made it clear we need to better understand the impacts of a feminist approach on marginalized populations beyond women;²⁷ racialized students opted out of my studies more often than not, which needs immediate and careful attention.

For now, it seems that study participants responded positively to the increased flexibility and choice available to them in our feminist redesign. I remain hopeful that holistic, inclusive, and intersectional teaching is possible even in scaled-up and strategic initiatives like common first-year courses. But we need more student voices to know for certain. Fortunately, we planned for students-as-partners work in our original course design and Brescia will have second-year students serving as peer mentors (and curriculum consultants) in future cohorts. Through their contributions, I hope we can better understand the impact of our feminist first-year seminar on students' confidence and ability to effect real, systemic change.

Acknowledgements

Many loving hands went into creating this course. In this space, I want to acknowledge my library colleagues' contributions—this course was a long time in the making, with a community of powerful librarian voices involved behind the scenes. Thank you especially to Jennifer Foley, Caroline Whippey, Adrienne Co-Dyre, and Colleen Sharen (our honorary librarian), for your ideas, commitment, honesty, and friendship.

Appendix

Table 9.A.1. Course Development Team

Member	Department	Responsibilities
Course instructors	Faculty (2)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Course content, pedagogy and instruction, LMS maintenance • Student feedback and assessment • Train-the-trainer area: course theme, readings, final lesson plans for each week
Seminar leaders	Faculty (2)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Seminar facilitation • Train-the-trainer area: student seminar discussions and feedback
Educational developer (chapter author)	Teaching and Learning Centre	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Course assessment, creation of course LMS • Coordination of weekly team meetings • Train-the-trainer area: feminist pedagogy, degree-level outcomes, first-year seminar “practices”
Learning and curriculum support librarian	Library	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Information literacy lesson plans and delivery • Train-the-trainer area: information literacy teaching and assessment
Manager of experiential learning	Student Affairs	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Coordination of community partners (e.g., guest lectures; mentorship opportunities)
All		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Course reading, activity, and assessment suggestions

Table 9.A.2. Additional Campus Consultants

Member	Department	Responsibilities
International student coordinator	Registrar's Office	Train-the-trainer area: cultural competence; needs of international students
Student experience coordinator	Student Affairs	Train-the-trainer area: student transition and needs of first-year students
Director of campus ministry	Campus Ministry	Train-the-trainer area: Ursuline philosophy of education; history of Brescia

Table 9.A.2. Additional Campus Consultants

Member	Department	Responsibilities
Academic advisors	Registrar's Office	Support for students identified as "at risk"
Course registrants	First-Year Students	Identification of course topics or subthemes (aspect of feminist course design)
Senior peer leaders	Second-Year Students*	*Planned for future cohorts only: Peer mentors, curriculum advisors

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