



Spring 2014

Learning Critical Legal Theory Across the Curriculum: An Innovative Course in Applied Feminism

Michele E. Gilman

University of Baltimore School of Law, mgilman@ubalt.edu

Follow this and additional works at: http://scholarworks.law.ubalt.edu/all_fac

 Part of the [Law and Gender Commons](#), [Legal Education Commons](#), and the [Legal Profession Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Learning Critical Legal Theory Across the Curriculum: An Innovative Course in Applied Feminism, 20 *The Law Teacher* 5 (Spring 2014)

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Faculty Scholarship at ScholarWorks@University of Baltimore School of Law. It has been accepted for inclusion in All Faculty Scholarship by an authorized administrator of ScholarWorks@University of Baltimore School of Law. For more information, please contact snolan@ubalt.edu.

Learning Critical Legal Theory Across the Curriculum: An Innovative Course in Applied Feminism

By Michele Gilman



In law schools, we are so accustomed to a single professor teaching each substantive class that we rarely question this method of teaching. Imagine instead a class taught by fourteen professors, each of whom teaches for one week to share their substantive expertise through the lens of critical legal theory. At the University of Baltimore School of Law, we offer such a course, entitled Special Topics in Applied Feminism. Throughout the semester, students are exposed to feminist legal perspectives on a wide range of substantive topics, including tax law, international law, immigration law, employment law, and many others.

The course is sponsored and organized by our Center on Applied Feminism, which seeks to apply feminist legal theory to real-world problems in order to promote gender equality. The Center's activities range from sponsoring an annual conference to advocating for law reform to advising students on career choices. We sought to add an academic component for students that harnessed the talent of our colleagues outside their usual substantive course silos. We have offered the course every other year since 2010. Based on this experience and the responses of students, we recommend that more law schools offer collaborative courses.

Here is how our course works. Each week, one professor leads the course and applies a feminist legal theory lens to a substantive legal topic of their choosing. The professor is responsible for selecting readings related to their topic and posting questions to the students. The students write a reflective memo based on the readings and the question prompts. The memo is due twenty-four hours prior to the class session, allowing the professor to survey responses and plan for the class discussion. Each class session is two hours, once a week.

The class is two credits and graded pass/fail. One of the Center directors volunteers to serve as the course administrator to ensure that assignments get posted by faculty, that students are submitting their memos, and that professors assess whether the memos meet the standards to pass the course. We use Westlaw's TWEN platform to manage the course. All assignments and memoranda are posted directly to the website. The class is capped at fourteen students to allow for a seminar atmosphere.

The course begins with an overview taught by Professors Margaret Johnson and Leigh Goodmark. They ask the students to define and draw the distinction between feminism generally and feminist legal theory specifically. After an overview of the major strands of feminist legal theory (including equality, dominance, and post-modern theories), students consider how those differing theories might apply to a hypothetical drawn from a current event selected by the students.

Submit articles to *The Law Teacher*

The Law Teacher encourages readers to submit brief articles explaining interesting and practical ideas to help law professors become more effective teachers. Articles should be 500 to 1,500 words long. Footnotes are neither necessary nor desired. We encourage you to include pictures and other graphics with your submission.

Send your article via e-mail, preferably in a Word file. After review, all accepted manuscripts will become property of the Institute for Law Teaching and Learning. To submit an article or for more information, please contact Emily Grant at emily.grant@washburn.edu.



In the second week, Professor Matthew Lindsay delves into legal history with the students. After reviewing numerous excerpts from historical documents, they consider how 19th Century law regulated the status of women and the theories that 19th Century women's rights advocates used to fight for greater gender equality.

After those foundational two weeks, the topics are a wide-ranging mix, depending on the availability and schedules of our volunteer professors. For instance, in Mediation, taught by Professor Robert Rubinson, students consider the potential challenges and advantages for women in mediation as opposed to litigation, and then apply their insights in the specific context of divorce in the presence of domestic violence.

Professor Dionne Koller guides students in her class on Sports Law to understand the theory behind Title IX as applied to education-based sports and to critically evaluate whether Title IX is achieving its goals or whether alternate approaches to gender equity in sport are desirable or necessary.

Professor Colin Starger teaches a class on Male Violence and the Problem of Innocence, in which students not only become familiar with the broad outlines of the research on false convictions inspired by the phenomenon of DNA exoneration, but also consider how conversations around DNA exonerations inform or distort our understanding of the problem of rape and male violence. These are just a sampling of the class sessions that have been offered.

The benefits of this collaborative course for students are many. Students gain exposure to ideas and theories that cut across the curriculum, and they are encouraged to draw connections among various legal disciplines. In so doing, they learn how our system of law fits together. They are required to think critically and engage in deeper analysis than can sometimes be obtained in regular courses, where students often focus on mastery of blackletter law. Students read cases and articles that expand their thinking and learn from professors who they might not otherwise encounter.

Student feedback has been enthusiastic. As one student stated, "having a different professor teach each class was very interesting, in a good way. It allowed for a new



perspective on each new topic, which I liked.” Another comment reads, “It was definitely my favorite class that I have taken in law school...it was incredibly eye opening to see how feminism/feminist legal theory/women’s issues in general truly intersect with nearly every area of the law, and getting to see that through the perspective of all different professors I think added to how eye opening it was.”

Some students have been transformed by their exposure to the material, “I can say that the class has helped me decide that yes I am a feminist and it has helped me finally decide at least what direction I want go in with my career (something that I was very unsure about in the past seven years of first undergrad and then law school).”

There are some downsides to this course format. For students, there is no continuity between sessions. While they are building their knowledge, there is no single professor guiding that growth. Thus, students must draw their own linkages between the class sessions. For professors, they must commit time to prepare and teach the course on top of their existing obligations. However, all professors have enjoyed the course and volunteered repeatedly to teach in it. Overall, the advantages and novel approach to the course have far outweighed the disadvantages.

In short, the collaborative teaching model is both innovative and successful. It adds to the current law school curriculum in its emphasis on cross-cutting theory, critical thinking, and rigorous analysis. Based on this experience, we suggest that other law schools think about creating collaborative courses that might work well in their own institutions. Any critical legal framework would work in this model, from law and economics to race and the law to jurisprudence to other theoretical frames. As legal educators, we all have an interest in graduating lawyers that can think critically about the world around them and work to improve the law.

Michele Gilman is a Professor of Law and Co-Director of the Center on Applied Feminism at the University of Baltimore School of Law.

Teaching to Engage

By Nancy Levit

*“Good teaching cannot be reduced to technique; good teaching comes from the identity and integrity of the teacher.” — Parker J. Palmer, *The Courage to Teach**

We have all had teachers who inspired us. The greatest teachers are eternally grateful for having one of the best jobs on the planet. Each day, they bring their “A” game into the classroom. If you will pardon the corny alliteration, I will discuss four qualities that contribute to good teaching: Attitude, Attention, Approach, and Accessibility.