



CHAPTER 12*

Zines as Primary Sources

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Introduction

I developed this exercise while taking an online course on Feminist Pedagogy for Library Instruction, taught by Maria Accardi and based on her book of the same name.¹ I was already teaching with zines, and this type of class seemed like a good way to experiment with incorporating elements of feminist pedagogy. Feminist pedagogy is a type of critical pedagogy that values collaborative learning, consciousness-raising about various forms of oppression, and diverse personal experiences as valid ways of knowing.² As Elizabeth Peterson acknowledges, “True critical pedagogy requires more time than a single 50-minute session allows”; however, consciously including critical and feminist principles can transform the classroom experience in a positive way.³

At the Sallie Bingham Center for Women’s History and Culture, we have a collection of over 5,000 zines, primarily written by women and girls (but inclusive of transgender, genderqueer, and even cisgender male authors). Creators of zines are often people whose views are not represented in mainstream and academic publications normally encountered in the library classroom. Choosing zines written by queer or transgender people, people of color, young people, people living with disabilities, and people from various class backgrounds exposes students to a wide variety of marginalized voices.

The think-pair-share exercises allow every student to spend time in class to read individually, then talk and share their ideas, at least with another student if not with the whole class. This format accommodates a few different learning styles and varying comfort levels with public speaking. Feminist pedagogy emphasizes communication and participatory and collaborative learning, which

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is demonstrated in this activity.⁴ The student-led definition of the elements of zines supports collective knowledge creation rather than relying on lecture.

This activity is designed as a fifty-to-seventy-five-minute one-shot program for an audience of college students. This was developed in a special collections setting but would be appropriate to use in any library with zine collections and can be adapted to different age levels with appropriate selection of zines for the session. This activity does not require technology or computers, so it can be done in any kind of classroom.

Learning Outcomes

- Identify and evaluate the structure and creative elements of a zine
- Describe how zines are similar to or different from more mainstream publications like magazines or personal writings like letters and diaries
- Describe how zine writing can be used to share personal stories and information

Materials

- Zines—enough for each student to have their own to read*
- Handouts—see appendix 12A for template
- Notecards for feedback

Preparation

The main preparation is selecting zines for the class. You may be using zines as a genre so you could use anything from your collection, or you may wish to choose a narrower subject area or authorship. Feminist pedagogy values sharing diverse personal experiences.⁵ In a one-shot library instruction program, it is not always possible to draw out students' own personal experiences, but using zines is one way to demonstrate this value.

Though the topics of zines can seem infinitely diverse, the feminist zine culture of the 1990s to the present is predominantly white and middle class. In

* If your institution does not have a zine collection, there are many sources of free online zines available for download. Searching for terms like *free zine PDF* is one way to find them. The Small Science Collective offers free PDF mini-zines about science-related topics that are appropriate for all ages (<http://www.smallsciencecollective.org>). The Queer Zine Archive Project (QZAP) has an online database of queer zines (<http://www.qzap.org>). If you have even a small budget, you can purchase zines on a wide range of topics from a number of sources including Etsy.com or distributors like those listed on the Stolen Sharpie Revolution website (<http://www.stolensharpierrevolution.org/zine-distros>).

building our collection and in choosing zines for class presentations, I actively select zines by people of color so that their voices are included. Regardless of the topic of the class, be conscious of whose voices are represented in the zines you select. For example, when I worked with a class on “rockumentaries” (i.e., music documentaries), I could have easily relied on male-dominated zines like *Maximum RocknRoll* and *Search and Destroy*. Instead I made sure to include materials from the Boston-based organization Rock against Sexism, feminist music review zines, *Jigsaw* and *Bikini Kill* zines, and *Shotgun Seamstress*, which is “by & for black punks, feminists, queers, artists & musicians.”⁶

Session Instructions

1. Begin with an outline of the class session and an introduction to your library to give an overview of the collections and any special procedures for research.
2. Students will select a zine and review it individually, paying special attention to how it is constructed and the graphic elements used in its production. They will make notes about the different elements they notice. Students will then talk with a partner to compare observations about what they found in common between their zines. Each pair will share their common elements to come up with a group description of what makes up a zine. If you have a whiteboard or flip chart, invite a student to write these up. Summarize verbally to synthesize ideas and add context or note anything left out. In this discussion, students will often compare zines to magazines, diaries, or other formats.
3. Students will choose new zines to read, this time to get to know the author of the zine. After reading, the students will then turn “introduce” their partner to the author of the zine as if they were a new acquaintance. If time allows, students may report back anything fun or interesting they discovered or new questions they have. This activity focuses on how zine writers share stories and information with the reader in a personal way. Accardi writes about “listening to and creating space for marginalized voices, marginalized ways of being and knowing” as a way of challenging traditional notions of scholarship.⁷ Presenting zines as personal writings in a scholarly library setting, and suggesting their use as valid primary sources for research, is one way to demonstrate this valuing of diverse personal experiences.⁸
4. Distribute blank note cards for students to write anonymous feedback as an assessment exercise. Ask students to write two things they learned, one or more questions they still have, and how the session made them feel. If students want direct answers to their questions, they may write an e-mail

address on the card. Allowing this opportunity for anonymous questions is one way to alleviate anxiety students might have about using the library or research in general.⁹

5. Close with a review of the session and procedures for returning to the library to use zines. Remind students of how to contact you.
6. After class, review the note cards. The notes about what the students learned and the questions they still have will give you and the instructor feedback about whether the learning objectives were achieved. Write an e-mail to the instructor to share your responses to questions with the students. Following up to share positive outcomes and address things you would like to change for future sessions helps build an ongoing relationship with the instructor.

Assessment

The conversations during discussions will be your basis for evaluating whether students are understanding the design elements of zines, interpreting the personal content of zines, and comparing them to other more familiar modes of communication. You may need to prompt more in-depth discussion with specific questions like “How does this look different from a popular magazine?” Listening in on paired conversations can also give you feedback about how engaged the students are in exploring zines. You or the course instructor can ask questions in the smaller groups if a pair seems to run out of conversation when other groups are still lively. The feedback cards are also good sources for assessment and should include concrete examples that relate to the learning objectives. The questions students have at the end of class can not only show you things that need clarification or could be covered better in class, but also can demonstrate engagement and indicate students’ interest in further reading and research.

Some instructors may give students the opportunity to write an assignment based on zines, or students may even create their own zines if the instructor allows alternative formats to writing an academic paper. At the end of the semester, ask the instructor to share zines that are created by students or find out whether zines were used effectively as sources in more traditional papers.

Reflections

Feminist pedagogy includes an ethic of care and takes into account “how learners feel about their learning experiences.”¹⁰ Asking students how they felt at the end of class seemed awkward to me at first, but now I incorporate this

question regularly due to the positive reactions and specific comments I received. Previously when I have asked students if they have things to change about the session or anything else they want to share, I received less useful feedback.

These are a few examples of positive student feedback:

- “The activities were fun! I felt empowered by the zine I read and laughed a ton!”
- I felt “analytical, accomplished, fulfilled, enlightened.”
- “I liked the discussion in pairs because I got twice as much info on the diversity of zines and my partner pointed out details I hadn’t noticed that applied to my zine as well.”
- “I liked the interactive aspect of presenting ideas to everyone else.”

On the other hand, a few students are not fans of this approach: “I don’t like these kinds of discussions. I think it would have been more useful to spend time reading more and to have been told exactly what a zine is.” This comment was in the minority, but valuable to remember that many students are more comfortable in a traditional classroom setting. The comment that students wished they had more time to read zines is very frequent and I take that as a positive rather than trying to create more time for silent reading—it just means they have to come back to read more.

This activity is very flexible and can be adapted to other kinds of materials beyond zines or can be used to focus on different topics and questions using zines. The instructor may consider an assignment based on zines as primary sources and ask students to select an item about which to write a short reaction paper or a longer research paper.

I have also tried a shorter version of this activity (just the definition exercise) with younger people, including with the Girls Rock NC summer camp program, a queer- and trans-inclusive program that teaches kids ages seven to sixteen to play instruments, form bands, and write songs, among other DIY skills. The biggest challenge for this age group was finding age-appropriate materials in our zine collection, but I was able to find science-themed mini-zines from the Small Science Collective¹¹ and created my own feminist music mini-zines to use. After defining zines, the kids created their own zine pages, so this is a great lead-in for a hands-on workshop for creating zines.

Final Question

If you try this exercise, how did you feel afterwards? Are there other ways you could try stepping back and trading lecture for an exploratory exercise?

Appendix 12A: Handout Template

Class Title

Contact: Your name
 Title
 e-mail | phone

Website:

Library Hours/Location:

Research Guides or Related Links:

What Makes a Zine?

Choose a zine and spend a few minutes examining the layout and elements the author used in writing and designing the zine.

Talk to your partner and identify 3 common elements that might be characteristic of zines as a format.

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____

Who Makes a Zine?

This time read your zine for content, focusing on what you can learn about the author of the zine personally.

Turn to your partner and introduce your zine author as if s/he were an acquaintance.

QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER:

- Title of zine
- Date(s) of zine
- Author(s) or editor(s) of the zine
- What does the style of the zine tell you about the author or editor?
- What does the zine creator tell you about herself?

- What are some of the unique or distinguishing characteristics of this zine? (Note, for example, the binding, the kind(s) of paper used, printing techniques, the use of collage and/or color, etc.)
- How do the design elements add to or communicate the zine's message?
- For what audience was the zine written?
- Why do you think this zine was written? What is the purpose or message?
- What's one thing the zine tells you about life in the United States or in this particular city at the time it was written?
- What questions do you have about the zine?

Notes

1. This online course was offered through Library Juice Academy (<http://library-juiceacademy.com>).
2. Maria T. Accardi, *Feminist Pedagogy for Library Instruction* (Sacramento, CA: Library Juice Press, 2013), 35.
3. Elizabeth Peterson, "Problem-Based Learning as Teaching Strategy," in *Critical Library Instruction*, ed. Maria T. Accardi, Emily Drabinski, and Alana Kumbier (Duluth, MN: Library Juice Press, 2010), 72.
4. Accardi, *Feminist Pedagogy for Library Instruction*, 40–41.
5. Sharon Ladenson, "Paradigm Shift: Utilizing Critical Feminist Pedagogy in Library Instruction," in *Critical Library Instruction*, ed. Maria T. Accardi, Emily Drabinski, and Alana Kumbier (Duluth, MN: Library Juice Press, 2010), 109.
6. Osa Atoe, *Shotgun Seamstress*, no. 5 (New Orleans, LA, 2010): inside front cover.
7. *Ibid.*, 9–10.
8. Ladenson, "Paradigm Shift," 106.
9. Accardi, *Feminist Pedagogy for Library Instruction*, 40.
10. *Ibid.*, 44.
11. Small Science Collective: <http://www.smallsciencecollective.org>.

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- Accardi, Maria T. *Feminist Pedagogy for Library Instruction*. (Sacramento, CA: Library Juice Press, 2013).
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