

# **An Experimental Study on Applying Feminist Teaching to the Gender Equity Education Courses for University Students**

**Ching-Sheue FU**

Department of Early Childhood Caring and Education,  
Chung Hwa University of Medical Technology,  
Taiwan  
misssallyfu@gmail.com

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## **ABSTRACT**

*This study aimed to design a teaching method from the viewpoint of feminist pedagogy, so that students can learn to respect people of the other gender and become aware of the gender stereotypes established from “gender equity education”, and then they can be practitioners who care and take actions. This experimental study adopted the “pretest-posttest nonequivalent groups design (NEGD)” to explore the effects of applying feminist teaching. The subjects of the study were the students from two classes of a “gender equity education” general course provided by a university. According to the research results, the stereotype scores of the students in the experimental group dropped after the designed teaching intervention was applied. The students in the control group received the traditional teaching and their gender concepts were improved. The hypothesis of this study was not verified. This study suggested that to teach a gender course, a step-by-step method should be adopted and completely open discussions are not appropriate, as students’ conservative attitudes toward gender issues should be taken into consideration.*

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**KEYWORDS** - Feminist Teaching, Gender Equity Education, Experimental Study

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## **INTRODUCTION**

In 2004, the “Gender Equity Education Act” was approved by the Ministry of Education. The purpose of this Act is to facilitate real equity of genders, to eliminate gender discrimination, to defend people’s dignity, and to construct educational resources and an environment for gender equity (Laws & Regulations Database of the Republic of China, 2013). In 2010, the Ministry of Education published the “White Paper on the Gender Equity Education”, which clearly suggests that universities and colleges should broadly provide gender related courses. One of the goals is to integrate the essence of gender equity into the teaching methods and teaching materials of all the subjects taught in school education, in order to improve students’ gender sensitivity so that they can respect the rights of different genders. University students are in the genital stage proposed by Freud and the dangerous stage of intimacy and isolation proposed by Erikson. This stage is an important stage to receive gender equity education and learn to interact with people of the other gender (Huang, 2002). Wei and Feng (2012) studied the development of the gender equity education courses provided by universities and colleges during the decade from 2001

to 2010 and found that the gender equity education courses had been growing in Taiwan, showing the schools having placed more and more emphases on gender equity education. Yet, previously, I, the author of this study, saw a poster of a graduation prom in a campus, saying:

***The fees for this event held by the Department are as below: \$50 for students of the university, \$50 and \$100 for females and males from outside the university, respectively, and free for females wearing a short skirt or a short...***

This promotional text suggests a \$50 discount for females wearing a short skirt or a short, while there is no discount for males. I asked a student from the hosting unit who then answered “this text can bring more girls to the prom, and that means more boys will come, too.” This answer implies the objectification of females. The focus of the poster is on how females can get the discount instead of offering males no discount at all. Females’ behavior of wearing a short skirt or a shirt can be used to make transactions. How much more of this kind of gender discrimination of objectifying females is hidden in campuses? What I ponder is that, when we are trying so hard to promote gender equity education courses, are these courses actually related to students’ life? Students’ learning performance should not be just about midterm and final paper exams or in-class reports. It should be related to their daily life practice. If students can truly understand that “respecting people of the other gender is a must”, gender inequity hidden in campuses may gradually disappear.

The legislative spirit of the Gender Equity Education Act is “to facilitate real equity of genders, to eliminate gender discrimination, to defend people’s dignity, and to construct educational resources and an environment for gender equity”. Gender equity is the literacy modern citizens should have. However, in campuses, traces of the thought of male hegemony can still be found. Teachers’ reflection, self-awareness, transformation, and practice are important teaching competences (Ho and Chen, 2005). Teachers serve the purposes of education by becoming a “reflective practitioner” or achieving the state that “teachers are also researchers”. To be a teacher in the 21st century, one should have educational views of multi cultures and realize that the best way to promote gender equity education is feminist pedagogy (Huang, 1997), so that he can integrate feminist pedagogy into practices of gender equity education to develop school education of teaching environment of cooperation and care and to construct a teaching environment with gender equity. This way, he can become the best practitioner of gender equity education (Wu, 2000; Chang, 1998). Feminist pedagogy is about subverting the male domination value of the patriarchal society in classrooms (Weiner, 1994). It is different from general school education which requires consistency, objectivity, and knowledge and truth standards mainly based on male experiences. Instead, it stresses detecting relationships of gender inequity in forms of speech, languages, and interactions and creating a theoretical context to diagnose teachers’ teaching and how they teaching, in hopes of empowering learners so that they can become caring and responsible actors who can put what has been learned into practice (Middlecamp & Subramaniam, 1999).

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

### **1. The Meaning and Content of Feminist Pedagogy**

Since the second wave of women's movement at end of the 60s in the west, more and deeper attention has been paid to the gender issue in the field of education. Feminist pedagogy sees education as a link in the overall effort of terminating females' status of being secondary. For a long time, women have been excluded from power structures in education systems. Traditional pedagogy hasn't properly included female experiences and viewpoints. Feminist pedagogy was developed with the viewpoints of feminism integrated into pedagogy to enrich the content of pedagogy (Pan, 1999). What is the meaning of feminist pedagogy? Chang (1998) suggested that the theoretical key point of feminist pedagogy is to go beyond the scale of traditional knowledge, re-introduce female voices, further work with other disadvantaged groups, transform the traditional school model of competitions and authority dominated by males, and construct a cooperative and caring school model and classroom atmosphere of gender equity.

The focus of feminist pedagogy is on teaching practices of female experiences. It stresses detecting relationships of gender inequity in forms of speech, languages, and interactions and creating a theoretical context to diagnose teachers' teaching and how they teaching (Middlecamp & Subramaniam, 1999). Thus, putting feminist teaching into practice is about increasing human dignity and the possibility of human development, devoting to resolve social justice related issues in the context of education, and paying attention to the relationship between pedagogy and epistemology. Feminist teachers' manifestation and reflection of their own teaching consciousness lie in empowering students, carrying out social justice, integrating experiences and knowledge into students' learning, and including multi cultures (You, 2001). Feminist pedagogy also implements the critique of the traditional male thinking model and the teacher-student power structure into fair treatments of teachers and students in campuses. The consciousness-raising strategy of women's movement is transformed into a teaching method which can be applied in classes. Personal experiences are also brought into classrooms as the contact point of reflecting the power relationships in social cultures (Hsieh, 1997).

In sum, feminist pedagogy is to question the male domination value of the patriarchal society in classrooms, in order to subvert the idea that all knowledge is based on male subjects and to include female experiences into the structure and content of rich knowledge, while stressing caring for people of the disadvantaged gender and disadvantaged groups by integrating female characteristics into classrooms in order to facilitate equal chances of education. Therefore, in a classroom of feminist pedagogy, students are encouraged to speak to create dialogues, and by authority transference between teacher and students and fair treatments, knowledge is generated and constructed. In a classroom of feminist pedagogy, individuals are also concerned and respected. Through the concept of learning groups, students' social responsibility and ability to take actions are developed, for the purpose of adaptive development in the classroom society of gender equity and harmony.

Thus, I believe a teaching method based on the feminist pedagogy viewpoint must be about concerning and respecting individuals, fair dialogues between teacher and

students, and encouraging students to speak and construct knowledge by their consciousness raising and associations with personal experiences.

## **2. The Principles and Methods of Feminist Teaching**

Teaching under the principles of feminist pedagogy can be called feminist teaching. The form of feminist teaching is principles instead of a fixed or standard teaching model (Chiu, 1992; Hsieh, 1997). There are 3 principles of feminist pedagogy, including: “co-teaching” with students being the subjects to destroy the class relation in the classroom; “cooperative communication” which stresses sharing individual opinions and experiences; and “concrete action plans” in which students are the constructors of new knowledge or theories.

Based on the principles described above and the integrated views of several scholars (Lo, 2001; Hsu, 2014; Tsai, 2014), appropriate methods for feminist teaching were summarized, including the creative thinking teaching method, critical structure teaching method, small group discussion teaching method, and cooperative learning teaching method.

The teaching methods above can be used in feminist teaching classrooms. However, the principles are still related to emphasizing teacher-student interactions and communications, eliminating in-classroom authority, creating fair dialogues between teachers and students, and reducing inculcation of stereotype knowledge. When we think from the feminist pedagogy viewpoint, we should focus on not only gender issues, but also class issues, while stressing the influences of “stand and difference” of teachers and students on “speaking” and “knowledge construction”. It is about how to, during the processes of “teaching” and “learning”, provide a set of standards and foundations to assess course teaching strategies and skills, as the guidance for classroom practices. Therefore, all participants (teachers and students) are responsible. Students are responsible for their own learning goals. They must actively communicate with and talk to others, so that they can work hard to learn from others’ life experiences while offering positive feedbacks, instead of passively receiving knowledge like before (Shrewsbury, 1987). Teachers are responsible for structuring learning materials and improving their students’ abilities. They also need to provide a safe learning environment, always care about their students’ emotions and affections while learning, help them to cooperate instead of competing with each other, recognize their different thoughts, and recognize each member’s contribution to the topic of discussions. Never forget that students are the subjects of learning and producers of knowledge. Teachers must destroy the class relation in classrooms and work with students in planning, managing, and learning when it comes to assessing activities and performances. This kind of cooperative process and structure can facilitate students to build their sense of responsibility regarding self-learning, which is helpful for their own and others’ growth and development. Through cooperating learning with students, teachers can reconsider and help students to exchange views with their peers, in order to perform critical thinking and learn to accept and tolerate different voices from others.

## **3. Gender Stereotypes**

What does “gender” mean? Biklen and Pollard suggested that it involves not only differences in physiologic sexes but also gender related concepts developed by the society and cultures. In other words, it is about explaining the two sexes based on the

social construction (Chuang, 2003). Gender stereotypes are common expectations and hypotheses of male and female personal qualities, abilities, activities, and roles (Weinraub, 1984). Li (1984) indicated that, according to the results of self-judged gender qualities of university students in Taiwan, male qualities include being independent, strong-minded, bold, firm, self-dependent, ambitious, capable, and having leadership while female ones include being warm, attentive, charming, sympathetic, kind, wishing to appear beautiful, elegant, loving children, and naïve. Gender stereotypes with “differences between males and females” still exist in both external social judgments and students’ self-judged gender qualities. Due to gender stereotypes, the society has different expectations and standards on male and female behaviors (Yen, 2004). When males or females cannot perform their “role behaviors the society expects”, people in the society would give them negative feedbacks. Any individual who goes across the gender line is considered “unnatural”, “indecent”, or “inappropriate”. In slight cases, individuals are often oppressed. In serious cases, their individual roles may be twisted (Su, 2002). Beliefs in gender stereotypes often lead to unfair treatments and the strong ideology of women being inferior to men, resulting in gender discrimination (Su, 2002, Bem; 1993). Wrong knowledge regarding gender differences is the cause of gender prejudice and discrimination, as well as the main reason of gender inequity (Nash, 1991).

In sum, “gender stereotypes” are the general impressions regarding different opinions, expectations, and values of males and females individuals have learned in the process of socialization. These general gender impressions have influences on our opinions on different genders, thus forming our certain views on gender roles without considering individual differences, limiting individual development, and even generating gender prejudice and discrimination (Chang, 1991; Huang, 1999 and 2003; Yen, 2004; Su, 2002; Bem, 1993; Nash, 1991). Currently, the main goals of gender equity education in Taiwan include deconstructing rigid gender stereotypes and constructing diversified gender views, in order to build an environment and cultures with real gender equity (Pan, 2005). Thus, this study applied feminist teaching to the “gender equity education” course. At the beginning and end of the semester, the pre-test and post-test were performed with the course students using the “gender stereotype scale”, to find out their learning performances after being taught by feminist teaching.

## **RESEARCH METHODS AND PROCESS**

### **Research Structure**

This experimental study adopted the “pretest-posttest nonequivalent groups design (NEGD)” to explore the effects of applying feminist teaching. To find out the prior gender knowledge of the students who took the “gender equity education” course, before the experiment, the students from the experimental group and the control group were asked to complete the questionnaire. Regarding the experiment, the experimental group was taught using the feminist teaching while the control group was taught in a general way of lecturing with a textbook (Table 1). The pre-test was performed before the treatment was initiated. And the post-test was performed after the treatment was finished. The differences between the pre-test and the post-test were calculated. This research design is simple and easy to apply. It is often used to evaluate school courses and business or commercial activities (Chiu, 2008). The subjects of the experiment of

this study were the students from the two classes of the “gender equity education” general course. There were 50 students in each of the classes. The data obtained from the students who completed both the pre-test and the post-test, including 25 students from the experimental group and 20 from the control group, were used for the teaching performance assessment.

Table 1: The experimental design of this study

	Pre-test	Treatment	Post-test
Experimental group	TE1	X1	TE2
Control group	TC1	X2	TC2

X1: The treatment with feminist teaching was applied to the experimental group for a total of 18 weeks and was applied in the way of class teaching.

X2: The general teaching program was applied to the control group for a total of 18 weeks and was applied in the way of class teaching.

TE1 and TE2 represent the pre-test and post-test for the experimental group, respectively.

TC1 and TC2 represent the pre-test and post-test for the control group, respectively.

The tool used for the pre-test and the one used for the post-test were both the “gender stereotype scale”.

This study applied different teaching methods to the experimental group and the control group. Feminist teaching applied to the experimental group, while traditional teaching was applied to the control group (Table 2).

Table 2: A comparison between the teaching methods applied to the experimental group and that applied to the control group

<b>Experimental group (feminist teaching)</b>	<b>Control group (traditional teaching)</b>
<p>Feminist teaching was applied. The students were encouraged to make statements, listen to others’ opinions, and combine their life experiences.</p> <p>During the teaching, what the teacher did was knowledge guidance instead of knowledge delivering. The teacher used questioning skills to help the students identify conflicts. The, the students started to communicate and debate with each other through group discussions or class discussions.</p> <p>The focus was on the students’ learning process of active participation in cooperation and discussions in the class.</p> <p>According to the course teaching schedule and the subject of the week, the students’ life experiences were integrated into the course.</p>	<p>During the teaching process, the teacher focused on delivering memorable and conceptual knowledge based on the textbook.</p> <p>The main activity in the class was the teacher’s lecturing, along with some discussions.</p> <p>The teaching was based on the subject of the week and the teaching schedule, with less consideration of the students’ personal experiences.</p> <p>During the process of teaching, the role the teacher played was “knowledge deliverer”. And the student assimilated knowledge through the teacher’s lecturing.</p>

## **2. Research Tools**

### **2.1 The gender stereotype scale**

This study applied the “gender stereotype scale” designed by Li (2006), which contains four sub-scales: “traditional expectation for female role”, “traditional expectation for male role”, “prejudice against females”, and “prejudice against homosexuals and sexual harassment”. The overall Cronbach $\alpha$  for the scale was 0.912. The  $\alpha$  values for the subscales “traditional expectation for female role”, “traditional expectation for male role”, “prejudice against females”, and “prejudice against homosexuals” were 0.687, 0.816, 0.819, and 0.874, respectively. The scoring method adopted by this study was based on the 6-point Likert scale, with the options from “strongly agree” to “strongly disagree”. All the items were reverse questions. Thus, the scores for the options were 1 to 6 points. When a participant obtained a higher score, it meant his gender stereotypes were reduced.

### **2.2 The Design of the Gender Equity Education Course Based on Feminist Teaching**

This study designed the course with the focus of the control group on concept enhancement and that of the experimental group on students’ self-exploration and integration with personal experiences so that students’ thinking could be more creative and critical. Because the focuses of the two groups were different, the time points when the teachers intervened in students’ learning process were also different. The students of the control group were taught in a uniform way. The students learned knowledge mainly through their teacher’s lecturing. The teacher intervened in the beginning of the students’ learning process. The students of the experimental group learned related knowledge through discussions, sharing, and self-revelation. The teacher intervened in the later stage of the learning process to guide. This is one of the arguments of feminist pedagogy, with the teacher being a “friendly mentor” like a mother offering his students “concern of love” and encouraging them to think and research instead of making immediate judgments (Tisdell, 1998; Pan, 1999).

Therefore, in the course designed by this study, based on the differences of the diversified subjects of the experimental group and the control group and the students’ individual differences, the students were guided to speak.

## **3. Data Processing**

**3.1 Descriptive statistics:** The prior knowledge and learning effects of the students of the experimental groups and the control groups were measured using the “gender stereotype scale” and presented in the forms of means and standard deviations.

**3.2 One-way ANOVA:** This study used the pre-test scores collected using the “gender stereotype scale” as the independent variables and the post-test scores as the dependent variables to perform ANOVA, for the purpose of comparing the effects of different treatments.

## **RESEARCH RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS**

Table 3 below summarizes the information of the valid questionnaires filled by the research subjects. There were a total of 45 university students participating in this study (m=27, f=18), including 25 in the experimental group (m=15, f=10) and 20 in the control group (m=12, f=8).

Table 3: Frequencies and percentages of the research subjects

Gender	Experimental group(n=25)	Control group(n=20)	Total
Male	15 (33%)	12 (27%)	27 (60%)
Female	10 (22%)	8 (18%)	18 (40%)

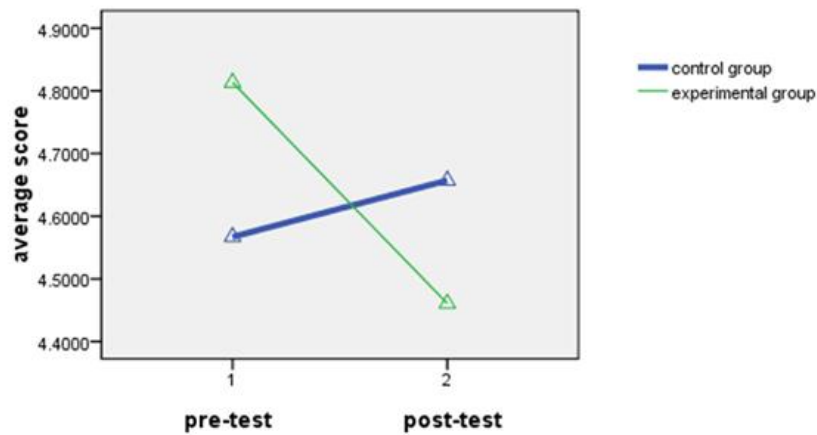
According to Table 4 below, the total pretest score of the students of the experimental group was higher than their total post-test score, while it was the opposite with the students of the control group. This means after taking the “gender equity education” course taught using feminist teaching, the gender stereotypes of the students of the experimental group were reduced. On the other hand, after being taught using general teaching, the students of the control group had higher gender awareness.

Table 4: A comparison of the pre-test and post-test scores of the gender stereotype scale and the sub-scales between the experimental group and the control group

Scale	Construct		Experimental group (n=25)		Control group (n=20)	
			Mean	SD	Mean	SD
Overall scale		Pre-test	4.81	.84	4.57	1.11
		Post-test	4.46	1.07	4.66	.81
Sub-scale	Traditional expectation for female role	Pre-test	3.93	1.42	4.01	1.31
		Post-test	3.72	1.33	3.55	1.22
	Traditional expectation for male role	Pre-test	4.59	.99	4.43	1.39
		Post-test	4.38	1.29	4.48	1.22
	Prejudice against females	Pre-test	5.03	1.04	4.33	1.23
		Post-test	4.38	1.11	4.71	.90
prejudice against homosexuals	Pre-test	5.44	.90	5.27	1.18	
	Post-test	5.10	1.28	5.53	.85	

Fig. 1 show that the gender stereotype score after the teaching was higher than before the teaching for the control group, while it was the opposite for the experimental group.





**Fig. 1:** The pre-test and post-test results of the experimental group and the control group

The hypothesis of this study was that the experimental group’s performance in gender stereotypes after being taught using feminist teaching would be better than the control group’s after being taught using traditional teaching. However, the results did not support this hypothesis. In other words, traditional teaching was more likely to improve the problem of gender stereotypes of the university students who took the “gender equity education” course.

Table 5 shows that, for all the university students, from both the experimental group and the control group, the difference between pre-test and post-test scores regarding gender stereotypes was not significant ( $F=1.948$ ). That is, the teaching results of the two groups were not actually different. However, the teaching effect of the experimental group was significantly different from that of the control group ( $F=1136.548^*$ ). Therefore, although the pre-test results weren’t different from the post-test results for both groups, the results showed that applying traditional teaching to the control group was better than applying feminist teaching to the experimental group.

Table 5: The summary of the ANOVA results for the experiment of university students’ gender stereotypes with different treatments

Variation source	Type III SS	df	MS	F
Variation between pre-test and post-test	.383	1	.383	1.948
Variation between groups	1900.978	1	1900.78	1136.548*
Variation within group (error)	8.44	43	.196	
Co-variation between groups	1.087	1	1.087	5.537*
Variation between participants	.014	1	.014	.008
Residual	71.92	43	1.673	
Total	43.599	45		

\* $p < .05$

## **CONCLUSIONS AND SUGGESTIONS**

### **1. The feminist teaching intervention in the gender equity education course wasn't helpful in terms of teaching effect.**

In the past, in classrooms, the teacher-centered teaching method was often applied, with teachers delivering knowledge to students through lecturing. However, feminist pedagogy has always been against the teacher/student dualism since the beginning. Instead, it considers classrooms as a place for liberation where teachers and students both participate. In this space, everyone is an action subject instead of an object (Shrewsbury, 1987; Luke, 1992; Gore, 1992). Thus, in this study, the course for the experimental group stressed not neglecting any student and respecting each student's life experiences. Therefore, the discussions in the course required participation of every student and diversified experiences from different backgrounds. To ensure a high-quality product, diagrams and lettering MUST be either computer-drafted or drawn using India ink.

In this study, in the course for the experimental group, the students were guided to speak based on their diversified subjectivities and individual differences. Also, group discussions were conducted according to different subject experiences to create the classroom atmosphere with the students being the subjects. The students conducted discussions and made presentations. It was essential to avoid knowledge impartation led by the teacher. And the students collected data related to their life experiences on their own. This way the principles of feminist teaching were met. The teacher was like a midwife in the classroom, guiding the students' knowledge construction. In this classroom without limitations, the teaching designed based on the feminist pedagogy was applied, in hopes that the students could learn to respect people of the other gender, discover their gender stereotypes, and become an actor with care and practices in this "gender equity education".

However, the experiment designed based on "feminist pedagogy" did not change the university students' gender stereotypes. Contrarily, the teaching intervention deteriorated the problem of their gender stereotypes. The reasons required further research and clarification. Was it because the teacher's way of guiding students needed to be improved? Or was it because the students could not get used to the method different from traditional teaching, resulting in the counter effect? At the same time, the control group was taught using traditional teaching, and the issue of gender stereotypes of the students of this group was slightly improved. Though the difference between the pre-test and the post-test wasn't significant, the statistics showed that after taking the "gender equity education" course for a semester, the issue of gender stereotypes of the students of this group was somehow improved. Their performances were better than the students of the experimental group.

### **2. Introspection of the strategies of flipped teaching for the gender equity education course**

According to the past teaching experiences, students usually don't consider gender related courses necessary. In these classes, though there is often time for students to present their reports, the time left after lecturing is usually not enough for all students to share their opinions. Only a part of them (usually the advantageous part) can speak. It is not possible to allow for expression of diversified opinions in classrooms. In this study, the principle of the class for the experimental group was that every student

should be able to participate class activities, so that they could make observations and comparisons to discover problems and construct their own knowledge system through interacting with others (peers, teachers, and field experts). It was hoped that during the process of internalization, the students could have sufficient time to communicate with others or to think and to further construct and internalize knowledge. However, the research results showed that the learning effect of the experimental group was not as good as the control group. The reason of this phenomenon could be that the students weren't used to the open "gender equity education" course and there might still be gender stereotypes in their thoughts so that they could not be open to discussions with others. Another possible reason was that the teacher of the class could not guide the students using the feminist teaching principles. The cause of this finding required further clarification.

After the teacher's oral lecturing, the gender stereotypes of the university students of the control group were changed. The performance of the control group was better than the experimental group. In a Chinese society, it is not easy to talk about "gender" issues with others openly and sincerely (Westwood, 1997). This is probably why this study did not achieve the expected teaching effect using feminist teaching. Perhaps the students weren't used to talking about gender issues on their own and preferred to "listen to" the teacher's lecturing, supplemented by some discussions. After the students' gender awareness was constructed gradually, applying a more open teaching method would be more helpful in terms of gender education.

The "White Paper on the Gender Equity Education" stresses the fundamental philosophy of helping students' to develop gender sensitivity and to learn to respect the rights of those of the other gender, and showing concern, respect, and eliminating dualism through feminist pedagogy. An ideal way is to integrate this philosophy in to the "gender equity education" course based on these views, so that gender issues can be constructed gradually through students' harmonic communication and discussions in classrooms. However, how can university students' life experiences and the conservative attitude in the Chinese society be taken into consideration while respecting students' individual differences and seeking for diversified experiences from various participating students' backgrounds when designing the "gender equity education" course? Perhaps there is a more appropriate teaching method that can help university students to pay more attention to gender issues with more understanding.

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