

2016

Ten Things I Hate About the “F” Word: Analyzing Definitions of Feminism Using Legally Blonde and 10 Things I Hate About You

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Recommended Citation

Hoffmann-Longtin, Krista, and Sarah Bonewits Feldner. "Ten Things I Hate About the “F” Word: Analyzing Definitions of Feminism Using Legally Blonde and 10 Things I Hate About You." *Teaching Media Quarterly* 4, no. 4 (2016). <http://pubs.lib.umn.edu/tmq/vol4/iss4/2>

Teaching Media Quarterly is published by the University of Minnesota Libraries Publishing.

Teaching Media Quarterly

Volume 4, Edition 4 (2016): Teaching Postfeminism and Media Culture

**Ten Things I Hate About the “F” Word:
Analyzing Definitions of Feminism using *Legally Blonde* and *10 Things I Hate About You***

Overview

“I think the whole definition of feminism is really totally off. I mean it’s a word that has so many other connotations. You know maybe it needs a new definition, it needs a new...an idea; it needs something else.” This quote from an undergraduate sophomore in a media literacy course offers a unique window into the experiences of students’ perceptions of the defining elements of feminism. At stake in this comment is the question of identity and identification. That is, to what extent is it important to identify feminisms by name (i.e., must I be call myself a feminist, if I am living a feminist life or ascribing to feminist ideals?) in order to advance gender justice goals. In this lesson, students are asked to explore this question by examining how feminist ideals are represented in media. Students are asked to familiarize themselves with concepts of identity, social constructionism, and macro-level discourses in the context of the tensions between third wave feminism and postfeminism, and then, using two films (*10 Things I Hate About You* and *Legally Blonde*), apply those theories.

The lesson encourages students to explore the challenges and contradictions in the rhetoric of both third wave feminism and postfeminism and extend that consideration to examine how the rhetoric of these (and other) films become a basis for larger social discourses. The lesson includes three ninety minute class periods. Materials required are minimal: copies of each of the film, copies of the critical viewing worksheet, and a group of students willing to participate in open discussions about these issues. By viewing and analyzing films and participating in a structured discussion, this assignment seeks to encourage students to recognize ways in which media texts like these provide a useful lens for understanding multiple feminisms as they are experienced in day-to-day interaction.

Rationale

Third-wave feminist scholarship departs from the essentialism that plagued second-wave feminists who sought to define one “feminine” identity. As a movement, third wave feminism advocates for the inclusion of multiple voices, and the embodiment of feminist ideals. While this provides space for many voices, it contributes to fragmented feminine identities (Heywood & Drake 1997). Postmodern theorists have grappled with defining fragmentation, particularly as it relates to an increasingly mediated culture.

The significance of this fragmentation is that it poses significant questions of how particular justice-oriented aims might be achieved in the absence of some of the traditional structure of a social movement. Media scholars have long recognized the extent to which media texts form the bases for larger discourses. These discourses legitimize particular social values, while simultaneously discounting others (Foucault, 1977). As such, it is increasingly salient to consider how feminisms are represented in the media and the extent to which these representations construct larger social understandings.

Budgeon (2011) and Douglas (2010) have interrogated the dissonance between third wave and postfeminist ideology, contending that, within the postfeminist structure, women believe they are empowered because they have an illusion of choice as purveyed by the media. Douglas (2010) further problematizes this notion by offering many examples where media depictions of women do not effectively mirror society. Alternatively, third wave feminists are faced with another challenge in trying to suggest a “big tent” for the behaviors that define feminist. As Budgeon (2011) explains, this “inclusivity easily mutates into an indiscriminate invitation to construct any claim to feminist membership as equally valid or radical” (289).

In *Legally Blonde* and *10 Things I Hate About You*, we see this dissonance played out, both with the characters themselves and our students’ response to them. Despite the films’ messages of empowerment, the feminist ideology of the protagonists is simultaneously legitimized and depoliticized. As such, we see two characters that are developing feminist identities without admission. While our primary goal in this lesson is to encourage our students to critically analyze perceptions of feminism in the media, we do hope our students will grapple with an important question for the current time, “If feminists and women, broadly, are being portrayed more positively in the mainstream, do we need to call it ‘feminist’?”

In this classroom discussion, we encourage students to apply the concepts of third wave and postfeminism to current media texts. By asking students to name current characters familiar to them who may embody one of these perspectives, we allow the students an opportunity to consider how their own definitions of feminism (as well as third wave and postfeminism) shape and are shaped by the texts they consume.

Learning objectives for the lesson include:

1. To identify the ways in which feminism(s) are present in film and articulate the implications of these portrayals
2. To compare and contrast third wave and postfeminism as defined in popular media
3. To analyze how media texts contribute to the social construction of identities like feminism(s).

Lesson Description

Drawing on Campbell, Martin, and Fabos’s (2016) critical process for media literacy, the unit includes a brief pre-conversation about the lesson and approach, two class days of film viewing with a worksheet guide for each film, and a day focused on small and large group discussion of the concepts. Campbell and colleagues’ (2016) critical process includes five steps: describe, analyze, interpret, evaluate, and engage. The authors contend that this process provides students a structure useful in synthesizing theoretical knowledge about media and culture with media texts and other scholars’ critiques.

At this point in the term, our media literacy students already know the role of social construction in creating identity and developing media texts. This lesson presumes this foundation. We introduce the lesson by asking students to define the denotative and connotative meaning of feminism, as a way to underscore the idea of language and how language works. This more basic conversation about definitions provides the scaffolding necessary to problematize the binary

nature of conversations about feminist identity (i.e. “you either are or you aren’t”). Often the connotative meaning and denotative meaning exist at odds, allowing us to explore more complex questions. Consider including discussion questions such as, “Who owns the definition of feminism?” and “How is identity connected to social construction?” and “How do we construct our own identities, and how are certain perspectives be encouraged/discouraged by media texts?”

After the initial discussion, we assign students to read the introduction to Douglas’ (2010) *Enlightened Sexism*. Then, either in or out of class, students view the two films. Regardless of the viewing venue, explain to students the importance of taking notes using the worksheet during the films. It allows them to refer back to specific examples in the subsequent discussion. The films are widely available on DVD and can be streamed on YouTube, Amazon, and Google Play for an inexpensive rental fee (\$2.99). While these films lend themselves to a conversation of how feminism has changed and an application process to current media texts, the lesson could be adapted with more modern media examples such as television shows *The Unbreakable Kimmy Schmidt* and *Crazy Ex-Girlfriend* or films like *Easy A* and *The Duff*. All of these texts provide a mix of (sometimes contradictory) third wave and postfeminist perspectives worthy of consideration.

After the viewing, a class period should be devoted to discussing students’ responses to the worksheet prompts. You can spend less time focusing on the “describe” step (question 1), and more time focusing on later steps in the critical process. Remind students to utilize concepts both from the reading and the films as evidence when making their assertions.

This should lead to a conversation of how social labels and media depictions frame our thinking about a topic like feminism. Students might be prompted to consider how a rejection of the term feminism itself might be a rejection of a commonly-held, connotative meaning. Students should be encouraged to think of the implications of this, and also can be led to think about how this impulse might be understood in the context of tensions between third wave feminism and postfeminism.

For more advanced students, this discussion can extend to an understanding of the socially constructed nature of feminism, its meanings, and the ways in which these constructions influence (and are influenced by) larger social discourses. We hope students will explore the questions, “How do social understandings of feminism influence how media texts are received?” and “How do media texts influence social discourses?”

Consider ending the lesson by encouraging students (either in class or in a post-class writing assignment) to apply this analysis process to a text they regularly consume.

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Timeline

The following timeline assumes class periods are each 90-minutes in length. The lesson could be adapted for 50-minute class periods or for a “flipped classroom” model where students view the films outside of class time.

Prior to Class [10 minutes]

- If you are not already using Campbell et al.’s text, review the critical process (describe, analyze, interpret, evaluate, engage) with students (2016, 30). It may be helpful to ask them to apply this process to a shorter media text prior to this lesson to confirm their understanding.
- Provide students with two copies of the critical viewing worksheet (Appendix A) In a brief call-and-response, review with students the difference between the denotative definition and connotative definition of feminism. Ask them to record their perceptions on their worksheet, per the prompt.
- Encourage students to arrive on time for next two class periods, since the movies will take the full 90 minutes.
- Assign students to read the introduction to Douglas’ (2010) *Enlightened sexism*.
- Remind students to bring their worksheets back with them to the next class period.

Viewing Day #1: 10 Things I Hate About You [90 minutes]

- Remind students that they are to take notes during the film, attending to the critical thinking process outlined on the worksheet
- Alert the students that there may be some language they may find offensive (rating is PG-13)
- Play the film in its entirety. You may want to cue the film just past the opening credits to fit it into your class period.
- At the end of class, remind students to bring their second worksheet and arrive on time for the next class.

Viewing Day #2: Legally Blonde [90 minutes]

- Duplicate instructions from Viewing Day #1. Remind students to bring both worksheets with them for the next class period

Discussion Day [90 minutes]

You may want to have extra worksheets on hand in case the students forget them.

[25 minutes, small group discussion]

- Begin the day by asking the students to get into small groups to discuss the films.
- Randomly choose a few groups to focus on *Legally Blonde* and another set of groups to focus their conversation on *10 Things I Hate About You*
- Within the groups, ask them to assign task roles in the groups: one student to record the group’s answers, one to ensure all group members are welcome to participate, one to keep time, and one to present after the group conversation period is complete.

- Give the groups 25 minutes to discuss the films and their answers to the questions. Provide the groups with time cues regularly to help them stay on task and complete the questions.
- Remind the groups that their goal is not to come to consensus; rather, they should see to capture the diversity of responses and examples from the group members.

[50 minutes, large group discussion]

- Using the worksheet as a guide, lead a large group discussion with the students. Move between both films for each question, ask students to compare and contrast examples offered by each group.
- Solicit one or two examples from one or two small groups for each section of the worksheet. When students provide vague responses or generalizations about the characters, consider using probes such as, “Say more about that,” or “How did you know? What behaviors led you to that conclusion?”
- Make sure to elicit connections between the examples provided in the reading and those offered by your students. Probes here might include, “Connect your example to Douglas’s analysis,” or “Do you think that is an example of postfeminism or third wave feminism?”

[15 minutes, summary and wrap-up]

- Conclude the session with a discussion of the paradoxes and double binds contained in an “either/or” construction of feminism. Just as we are constrained by “denotation” and “connotation,” we are constrained by “feminist” or “not.” As we have taught using these texts and process, we have become keenly aware of the tensions that exist in postmodern constructions of feminism, particularly for young women.
- It is important to illuminate that this tension between third wave feminism(s) and postfeminism has been at play for nearly twenty years now. Perhaps a useful frame is Clair’s notion of the self-contained opposite. As the author argues, “Thus, discursive practices and formations are inextricably linked with the complex matter of hegemony. At times, subjugated individuals actively participate in the discursive practices that sustain and intensify their own oppression” (1998, 126).
- Then, translate this concept for your students. The paradox is in trying to both live in and fight against the structures that limit our own definition of self.
- Conclude the lesson with a summary of main points and a review of the objectives.

Optional Homework Writing Assignment

Campbell et al.’s (2016) critical thinking process lends itself nicely to an opportunity for reflection after class, particularly the sections on interpretation and evaluation (steps 3 and 4). You may consider adding an additional follow-up writing assignment, perhaps in an online discussion forum or short paper, in which you ask students to consider feminism and postfeminism in a text they have seen recently. By focusing on the later of Campbell et al.’s process (2016), students can critically analyze the ways in which current texts construct and/or attempt to offer binary perspectives of feminism (or other identities).

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Biography

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Appendix A

Critical Viewing Worksheet

Legally Blonde and *10 Things I Hate About You*

[**Note:** Each student should receive two copies of this worksheet. One for each film viewing.]

Pre-work

As many of you know, the popular, connotative definition of the word “feminist” or “feminism” is very different than the dictionary or denotative definition.

That said, write down what you think of when you hear the word “feminism:”

Now, what’s the definition of feminism, according to *American Heritage Dictionary*?

Please use this knowledge and your viewing of the films to help you answer these questions. You will discuss your responses in small groups before having a discussion with the class.

1. Describe the portrayal of the female protagonist in the film. How is she portrayed physically (what does she wear, how stylish is she, etc.)? How is she portrayed mentally (is she smart, silly, or both)? How does she relate to the male characters in the film? With whom does she develop romantic relationships? How does she relate to the other female characters in the film? How does she solve problems? Whose help does she solicit to do this?
2. Analyze the role of young female protagonists in films today. How does the main character in this film compare to other films you’ve seen lately? What aspects of her character discussed in the previous question make her similar to most young females in films? What aspects make her different? How is the plot of this film similar to some other “teen movies” that you may have seen? How is it different?

3. Interpret the ultimate effects of this film. For whom is this film intended? How did it affect you as an audience member? At the end of the film, did you like or dislike the female protagonist? Why? What techniques do the filmmakers/writers use to steer you in that direction? How do these (and other movies) tell the audience what it means to be a teenage girl in today's society? What behaviors are encouraged and discouraged, based on what you've seen?

4. Evaluate the role of this film in portraying young women to the public. How realistic are these portrayals of young women? Do you think it depicts young women in a positive or negative light? What examples lead you to this conclusion? Do you think the female protagonist would identify as third wave or postfeminist, based on Douglas' (2010) definition? Why or why not? These films are getting dated (made in 1999 and 2001). How do you think perceptions of feminism and postfeminism have changed? What examples do you have to illustrate this perspective?

5. Engage with the concepts presented in class and in the film. Would you call the protagonists in these films feminists? Why or why not? How do these films add to the conversation about what it means to be a young woman and/or a feminist? What might you do with the new knowledge you've acquired in this process? What is the role of the audience member in sharing these concepts with the wider public (beyond the classroom)? Would you talk about feminism differently with a friend, family member, or colleague after this exercise? Why or why not?