

Chapter 7

The Sisterhood of Schooling, Teaching, and Education

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ABSTRACT

*The term “sisterhood” evokes a wide range of interpretations and responses, both positive and negative. Popular culture defines the term in a variety of ways, largely dependent upon and unique to context, authorship, and audience. In *Race, Class, and Gender: Prospects for an All-Inclusive Sisterhood* (1994), Dill takes on the complicated concept of sisterhood from a critical perspective. In many ways, online teaching is its own complicated sisterhood grappling with challenges similar to those Dill addresses. Dill raises questions that are not unlike the persistent question of how to better attract, retain, and support educators. The chapter explores both the questions as well as associated strategies to further support educators in online environments.*

The term sisterhood evokes a wide range of interpretations and responses, both positive and negative. Popular culture defines the term in a variety of ways, largely dependent upon and unique to context, authorship, and audience. In a piece for *Harper’s Bazaar*, Cash Carraway (2019) writes that “[e]veryone’s version of the sisterhood is personal to them” (para. 6). Irrespective of the definition, the term is both personal and rarely (if ever) neutral. Sisterhoods have long been associated with a wide variety of concerns, rivalries, and persistent ambivalence (Chang, 2013). At the same time, the term is also associated (especially in popular media) with a range of positive, powerful, and hopeful associations, such as shared interests, affinity, and solidarity (Reinitz, 2019). Like most everything associated with modern feminism

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(and current day life), however, the term, its meaning, and its connotations are *complicated* (Luckhurst, 2016).

In *Race, Class, and Gender: Prospects for an All-Inclusive Sisterhood*, Dill (1994) takes on the complicated concept of sisterhood from a critical perspective and argues:

for the abandonment of the concept of sisterhood as a global construct based on unexamined assumptions about our similarities, and ... [substitutes] a more pluralistic approach that recognizes and accepts the objective differences between women. Such an approach requires that we concentrate our political energies on building coalitions around particular issues of shared interest. Through joint work on specific issues, we come to a better understanding of one another's needs and perceptions and begin to overcome some of the suspicions and mistrust that continue to haunt us. (p. 53)

Addressing the complexity and often controversy associated with the concept of sisterhood, Dill shares strategies (described as political but capable of broader applications) for working towards a “more inclusive women’s movement” (p. 42). While Dill’s writing focuses on sisterhoods in a more traditional (and feminist) sense, the suggested strategies prompt analogies and offer ideas for building more inclusive environments in a wide variety of similar contexts, including online education (a realm also subject to suspicions and mistrust) (Schultz, 2019).

In many ways, online teaching is its own complicated sisterhood grappling with challenges similar to those Dill addresses. Current data shows that despite increasing diversity in our classrooms, teachers remain predominantly White and female (Loewus, 2017). However, educators across generations, subjects, and disciplines share common experiences and student interactions. My own conversations and work mentoring peer online faculty of widely different racial, gender, class, religious, and other characteristics are dominated by reflections on similar experiences and an affinity for working with adult, online students. Educators also share feelings of alienation, struggle, and limited efficacy (Pugh & Zhao, 2003). My conversations with peers are also often dominated by reflections on the challenges associated with increasing class sizes, remote work, and hard to reach students. Limited decision-making influence and lower pay also present as commonly shared conditions and concerns in educational contexts (Ingersoll, May, & Consortium for Policy Research in Education, 2011). The shared experiences are both taxing and binding. These shared experiences also yield persistent questions that focus on improving educator retention and support.

Dill raises questions that are not unlike the persistent question of how to better attract, retain, and support educators and asks:

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