



## THE ROLE OF LOGIC IN THE GENESIS OF A FEMINIST STUDY GROUP. PHILOSOPHY AND LOGIC AS TOOLS TO FIGHT AGAINST OPPRESSION

MÁRCIA GABRIELLE RODRIGUES LAUX  
RAFAELA ANTUNES NUNES  
Universidade Federal do Rio Grande do Sul

### Resumen

En 2016, la *Escola Estadual de Ensino Médio Padre Reus* fue el escenario de muchas manifestaciones feministas, escuela que hace parte del *Programa Institucional de Bolsa de Iniciação à Docência* (PIBID) de nuestra universidad (UFRGS). Estas manifestaciones evidenciaron la necesidad de ampliar los conocimientos acerca de temas feministas discutidos por las alumnas. En este contexto, las becarias del PIBID Filosofía UFRGS propusieron la creación del grupo de estudios “Feminismo sob uma Perspectiva Filosófica”. La propuesta consistía inicialmente en enfocar los estudios en las causas del movimiento feminista que ocurrió en los siglos XVIII y XIX para dar base a los debates filosóficos sobre las reivindicaciones de las mujeres a lo largo de la historia. El uso de la lógica informal surgió como manera de incentivar y desarrollar las habilidades argumentativas y de crear condiciones para escoger y defender los posicionamientos y argumentos de manera consciente. El objetivo era introducir conceptos básicos de lógica, como proposición, verdad, argumento, validez, fuerza lógica. Estos principios fundamentales fueron enfatizados envolviendo elementos de estudios feministas en el contenido de las actividades. Un ejemplo de esas tareas fue la lectura de “Liberal Feminism” (Oxley, 2011), en la cual el contexto histórico del surgimiento del feminismo y los argumentos desarrollados en la defensa del movimiento son expuestos. Como etapa final, sugerimos que las estudiantes hicieran un trabajo de pesquisa sobre las distintas corrientes feministas con el objetivo de generar discusiones sobre las semejanzas y diferencias entre los argumentos usados en la defensa de cada una. A partir de esta actividad fue posible explotar la pluralidad de posicionamientos del propio movimiento feminista, desde su comienzo hasta la actualidad. Las estudiantes no sólo entendieron las posibles conexiones entre el feminismo y la lógica –una vez que ellas fueron capaces de identificar argumentos válidos e inválidos, bien como razonamientos fuertes y débiles en el contexto de debates feministas–, sino que fueron capaces de incorporar estos apren-





dizajes sobre argumentos para que ejercieran críticas sobre los propios posicionamientos. Desde nuestra visión, la lógica por supuesto fue un instrumento capaz de ayudar en el aprendizaje filosófico (como los argumentos envolviendo conceptos como los de identidad, derechos y reconocimiento) y la práctica de las estudiantes. Como resultado de esta experimentación, defendemos la legitimidad de la enseñanza de lógica en cualquier contexto con temas filosóficos significantes, particularmente en el feminismo.

**Palabras clave:** PIBID, UFRGS, feminismo, lógica, argumentación.

## Abstract

In 2016, the *Escola Estadual de Ensino Médio Padre Reus* (Porto Alegre, Brazil) was a place of many feminist manifestations – this school participates in the *Programa Institucional de Iniciação à Docência* (PIBID) of our university (UFRGS). Such manifestations made evident the need to increase the knowledge on the feminist themes discussed by those students. In this context, the scholarship holders from PIBID Philosophy UFRGS proposed the creation of a study group called “Feminismo sob uma Perspectiva Filosófica”. The initial proposal was to focus on the study of the causes of the feminist movements occurred in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, in order to bring forth philosophical debates on women’s claims throughout history. It was in this context that the use of Informal Logic came into play, aiming to promote and develop argumentative abilities and to create conditions to choose and hold discussions and arguments consciously amongst the students involved in the project. Our main goal was to introduce basic concepts of Logic, such as proposition, truth, argument, validity, and logical force. These fundamental notions were emphasized in connection with elements from feminist studies. One example of the activities developed by us was the reading of “Liberal Feminism” (Oxley, 2011), in which the historical context of the emergence of Liberal Feminism and the arguments developed to defend the movement is exposed. At a final stage, we suggested research tasks on the different types of Feminism, aiming to generate discussions on the similarities and differences between the arguments used in their defense. With this activity, it was possible to explore a plurality of positions inside the feminist movement, from its beginning to present days. As a result, the students not only understood possible connections between Feminism and Logic –since they were able to identify valid and invalid arguments as well as strong and weak reasoning in the context of feminist debates–, but they were also capable of incor-





porating the acquired knowledge on arguments facing criticism on their own feminist positions. As we experienced, Logic is indeed an instrument capable of assisting philosophical learning (arguments involving concepts as identity, rights and recognition) as well as the student practices on everyday life. As result of this experience, we defend the legitimacy of Informal Logic teaching in any context of learning significant philosophical themes, particularly on Feminism.

**Keywords:** PIBID, UFRGS, Feminism, Logic, Argumentation.

## 1. Introduction

a)

Through PIBID<sup>1</sup> UFRGS,<sup>2</sup> we had the opportunity to participate in the development and presentation of Philosophy courses at the public high school Padre Reus,<sup>3</sup> in Porto Alegre, RS, Brazil, under supervision and orientation of PIBID's current coordinator, Prof. Leonardo Porto, and the Philosophy teacher of the school, Prof. Fabio Goulart. Entering this teaching environment enabled us to learn and develop several skills, such as the elaboration of lesson plans, the ability to choose the best didactic practices for each theme proposed, as well as the analysis of which practices show good results and which ones need reformulation. We also practiced mutual help by assisting our pairs, diversifying and improving teaching materials and, eventually, solving students' doubts about the content presented.

The creation of the project "Feminismo sob uma Perspectiva Filosófica"<sup>4</sup> called for the development of a workshop in that school. As 2016 was a year of many feminist manifestations organized by female students, we considered the context an opportunity to expand the knowledge about Feminism amongst the students, providing their practices with an important conceptual support. Since the subject demanded the collection of many historical information as well as regular debates, we suggested the creation of a study group, rather than just an isolated workshop. The creation of the group took place during an occupy movement in

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<sup>1</sup> PIBID is an institutional scholarship program focused on teaching, with the objective of giving opportunities to undergraduate students to have initial experiences in teaching at high school.

<sup>2</sup> Federal University of Rio Grande do Sul.

<sup>3</sup> A public state school situated in the south zone of Porto Alegre.

<sup>4</sup> In English: Feminism under a Philosophical Perspective.





this school<sup>5</sup> so becoming part of activities of the students weekly schedule during the occupation.

The main goals of the study group consisted in promoting a philosophical perspective grounded on the movement's own demands. The female students from Padre Reus defended causes they had in common: they wanted to put an end to prejudices, moral and sexual abuses they suffered in school, and male oppression – mainly caused by men who were superior to them. Hardly someone would disagree that attitudes of oppression and prejudice are reprehensible; nevertheless, it was important for the students to understand and defend the reasons why the experienced situations were negative. The struggle against oppression and discrimination goes through several stages and requires, as a starting point, that the ones who suffer the negative actions identify them as such – in this sense, the knowledge about Feminism and Logic could provide to their practices an important conceptual support. On the one hand, it was clear that the students had already recognized the negative actions performed by others, confronting the situation. On the other hand, we realized that there was a lack of solid arguments against those actions. Had they existed in that context, they could have been used as weapons against those daily attitudes of oppression and prejudice – attitudes that were not curbed, would eventually be considered natural, like other similar sexist attitudes have been for many centuries and could continue going unnoticed in the school environment and family circle.

The study group was also positive in pointing to the fact that the students agreed that Feminism was a political, philosophical and social movement, which advocated equal rights between women and men. Nevertheless, divergences arose when, in the subsequent stage of the studies, the students had to decide what actions needed to be taken so that the goals of the movement were achieved. After all, should one who calls herself a feminist have specific characteristics in her speech and actions? For example: should all feminists defend abortion? Moreover, regarding physical appearance, does every feminist have to let her body hair grow? Do we need to raise a flag and go to the streets to be a feminist? Can men participate in these debates and protests? The philosophical point of view we were proposing was

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<sup>5</sup> The occupation movement in schools is an action developed by students who physically occupy the school space. Through the occupation, the students demand actions from the State to ensure the proper functioning of education. Schools all over Brazil, particularly in 2016, used this mechanism as a means to combat the precariousness of the Brazilian educational system.





precisely an invitation to the doubt, to reflection, to formulate questions related to those ones. In so far as Informal Logic can be considered the study of argumentation, it could provide help for women to better understand their own ideas, beliefs, feelings and emotions.

Contrary to what some feminists say –the ones who criticize Logic and see it as a tool for the oppression of women–,<sup>6</sup> we believe that Logic is precisely a tool that, if adequately used, can be very effective for the oppressed individual to recognize his or her situation and subsequently succeed in claiming rights, that is, making themselves heard.

In this way, our defense of Logic as a tool to fight against oppression applies not only to women's struggles, but also to any other movement groups that find themselves in a similar scenario.

Logic, as a discipline that studies the rules for human reasoning –having as one of its characteristics the treatment of the forms of general thinking (deduction, induction, hypothesis, inference, etc.) and intellectual operations –, was used to identify and deconstruct the arguments that legitimized the oppression and discrimination of women throughout history.

The feminist movement that took place in France and England in the eighteenth century –from thereafter reaching several countries, both inside and outside the European continent– had its foundations meticulously constructed in logical reasoning, as shown in the work *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman: with Strictures on Political and Moral Subjects*, 1792, by Mary Wollstonecraft, which is considered one of the founding documents on Feminism.

Informal logical reasoning and argumentation are part of philosophical reflection and debate on any issue, which is why we defend the development of logical reasoning and argumentative abilities for the empowerment of groups that are seeking recognition and political and social equality.

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<sup>6</sup> The criticism of some feminists is mainly related to the way in which the subject is taught at universities (didactical materials or the posture of teachers) and the way Logic has been used by the intellectuals throughout history. Andrea Nye's book, *Words of Power: A Feminist Reading of the History of Logic*, is one example of this kind of criticism. If these feminist studies are saying that Logic has been and can still be used as a tool for oppression, their thesis is clearly acceptable and we fully agree with it. But from this we cannot infer that oppression is an intrinsic characteristic of the discipline. Projects like the one we developed with the students at Padre Reus is an indication that such a statement can be false. However, this is something that clearly demands future and detailed studies.





## 2.1. The First Step: Initial Exercise and Historical Contextualization

b)

The first meeting of the group study “Feminismo sob uma Perspectiva Filosófica” was based on the fundamental question: “What does it mean to be a woman?” From working on different answers to this question, we came to know the students a lot better and also to develop a debate on the concepts of woman and Feminism. We asked them to write the answers anonymously, and then the group read those answers together. After this exercise, we suggested the reading of the Introduction of *The Second Sex*, by Simone de Beauvoir. We selected this text for two reasons: the fact that Beauvoir started her work by pointing precisely to the challenge of defining the term “woman”; and also for the need to put the students in touch not only with philosophical texts but with texts that had the women’s struggle for recognition as a main theme.

Following on the discussion generated by Beauvoir’s text, some of our subsequent meetings were dedicated to the historical contextualization of the women’s struggle for recognition and basic rights, which for many centuries were granted only to men. Our exposition focused on historical aspects of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, periods in which feminist themes were greatly visible. We tried to take into account not only European but also Brazilian contexts. The purpose of this exposition was to show how women claimed for their rights in the course of history and what arguments they used for that purpose. The discussions generated from this study also included concepts of identity and other concepts we can find on ethical discussions. With regard to the historical context, we studied Olympe de Gouges,<sup>7</sup> Mary Wollstonecraft,<sup>8</sup> Millicent Fawcett,<sup>9</sup> Emmeline Pankhurst,<sup>10</sup> Nísia Floresta,<sup>11</sup> Josefina Álvares de Azevedo,<sup>12</sup> Leolinda

<sup>7</sup> Olympe de Gouges was the pseudonym of Marie Gouze, who was a French political activist in the eighteenth century, feminist, abolitionist and playwright.

<sup>8</sup> Mary Wollstonecraft was an eighteenth century English writer, feminist and philosopher.

<sup>9</sup> Millicent Fawcett was a nineteenth and twentieth century English feminist, intellectual and political activist.

<sup>10</sup> Emmeline Pankhurst was an eighteenth and nineteenth century English feminist and one of the founders of the British suffrage movement.

<sup>11</sup> Nísia Floresta was the pseudonym of Dionísia Gonçalves Pinto, who was an eighteenth century Brazilian educator, writer, poet and advocate of women’s rights.

<sup>12</sup> Josefina Álvares de Azevedo was a nineteenth and twentieth century Brazilian journalist, writer and one precursor of Feminism.





Daltro,<sup>13</sup> Celina Guimarães Viana,<sup>14</sup> Gilka Machado<sup>15</sup> e Bertha Lutz.<sup>16</sup> It is worth to note that special attention was given to the reading of excerpts from *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman: with Strictures on Political and Moral Subjects* by Mary Wollstonecraft, and from *Declaration on the Rights of Women and Citizens* by Olympe de Gouges. These were expository meetings, which included visual presentations with illustrative historical videos and images, as well as open debates with the students.

## 2.2 The Second Step: Feminism, Philosophy and Logic

The aim of the second moment of the study group was the exposition of some concepts and tools from the so-called Informal Logic. In order to make students able to understand in an organic way the possible connections between Feminism, Logic and Philosophy, we began this phase of meetings with a brainstorm. We asked the students: “What do Philosophy and Logic have to do with Feminism?” Not having any reply from the students, we explained that one of the main goals of Philosophy is to isolate the concepts involved in a question and analyze them. For that purpose, the initial question led us to three other ones: “What is Philosophy?”, “What is Logic?” and “What is Feminism?” These questions helped the students to recognize the connection between the terms and their relation to the feminist struggle. To each of the conceptual questions, they were saying all the words that came to their minds, for example, for the question “What is Feminism?”, they referred to words like “fight”, “respect”, “visibility”, “gender equality”, etc. The result of the brainstorm based on the new questions resulted in the joined construction of the meanings of each of the concepts, and later, in the answer to the main question: “What Philosophy and Logic have to do with Feminism?”<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Leolinda Daltro was a nineteenth and twentieth century Brazilian teacher, suffragist and indigenist. In 1910, Leolinda, together with the writer Gilka Machado and other women, founded the Brazilian party called “Partido Republicano Feminino”.

<sup>14</sup> Celina Guimarães Viana was a nineteenth and twentieth century Brazilian teacher and the first Brazilian woman elector.

<sup>15</sup> Gilka Machado was a nineteenth and twentieth century Brazilian writer, suffragist, and precursor of erotic poetry written by women in Brazil. In 1910, Gilka Machado, Leolinda Daltro and other women founded the Brazilian party called “Partido Republicano Feminino”.

<sup>16</sup> Bertha Lutz was a nineteenth and twentieth century Brazilian biologist, educator and feminist.

<sup>17</sup> We presented our position on the application of the question and the methodology involved in this exercise on section I, namely “Introduction”.





In order to identify, in the discourse of others and in our own beliefs, valid and invalid arguments, strong and weak reasoning within the context of feminist debates, we presented the basic concepts of Logic –proposition, truth value, argument, premises and conclusions, validity, as well as concepts like inferences, deductive and inductive reasoning, analogy, and sufficient and necessary conditions. All didactic material was constructed using examples and exercises linked to feminist themes, comprising all the knowledge acquired at the previous meetings regarding not only historical, but also new contexts which were introduced. The concept of proposition as an expression that can either be true or false was discussed using examples such as: a) Mary Wollstonecraft wrote the book *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman: with Strictures on Political and Moral Subjects*; and b) In 1791, Olympe de Gouges proposed the *Declaration on the Rights of Women and Citizens*, approved by the National Assembly. Another exercise, aiming at identifying premises and conclusion in an argument and at evaluating validity, contained these propositions: “All men are intellectually superior to women. Márcia is a woman and Rafael is a man. Rafael is intellectually superior to Márcia”.

In order to go deeper into these concepts, we formulated, among other exercises, two main assignments. A group exercise involving the reading of the article “Liberal Feminism”, by Julinna Oxley, from the book *Just the Arguments: 100 of the Most Important Arguments in Western Philosophy* – in which the author exposes the historical context of the emergence of the Liberal Feminism and the arguments used at that time in defense of the movement. In addition to the knowledge we had already gathered, the other exercise included the familiarization with some questions of the Exame Nacional do Ensino Médio (ENEM).<sup>18</sup> In exercising the writing skills for ENEM’s essay, students are assessed on their ability to express ideas and positions, and since we had already talked to the students about the importance of Philosophy and Logic for such tasks, we asked them to analyze an anonymous sample of ENEM’s essay. The sample was about ENEM 2002, which brought a theme involving the main issue raised in Suffragist Feminism: the right to vote.

The assignment consisted in understanding the main issues of the text oriented by the following questions: a) What is the central thesis of this essay? b) What are the reasons the author gives to justify his or her thesis? c) Are the reasons more plausible (easier to accept) than the conclusion? d) Is it possible to extract an argument from this text? Through these two main activities, it was possible for the stu-

<sup>18</sup> In English, National High School Exam – one of the main categories of application for the high education in Brazil.





dents to apprehend some of the concepts and tools from Informal Logic and to recognize how we can identify and extract arguments in a text or discourse.

### 2.3 The Third Step: The Feminist Perspectives

We dedicated the third step of our meetings to the research work produced by the students on the different types of feminist and on the arguments and defenses used by each of them. Our goal with this last exercise, besides stimulating the group research, was the demonstration of the plural character of the feminist movement. As a result, the students were putted in touch with the following feminist perspectives: Black Feminism, Radical Feminism, Socialist Feminism, Intersectional Feminism, Liberal Feminism, Transfeminism and the Queer Movement. With this contact to the feminist perspectives, the group participants were able to identify themselves or not with the defenses and practices of one or another of the perspectives approached, understanding that it is not necessary to agree with all that a perspective defends, but that it is more important to be able to justify the reasons why we defend each idea and action, and being firmly to our own well held positions.

### 3. Conclusion

Through the methods used and from the exposition of historical facts and notions of Logic applied to the different feminist perspectives, we realized that the students were able to identify the importance of well-founded argumentation and, consequently, find a successful connection between Informal Logic and Feminism, a conclusion they came to through the dynamics of the group. Considering the importance of such learning, we understand that making them aware of how argumentation can be useful, both in the feminist struggle and in their daily lives, was a crucial point to get them interested. We also see as relevant the didactical methods used for the teaching of Logic, such as the incorporation of examples and exercises always linked to the proposed theme, namely, Feminism.

We consider that the goals of the meetings were successfully achieved, realizing that the students started to build stronger and valid arguments in the group debates and in the experiences they reported from daily situations. The students showed us how they managed to convince other people or, at least, made them think about their opinions and ideas – such as their families and friends that, before our group





experience, did not understand them. In addition, it was possible to introduce them into the plurality of the different types of feminist, making them realize that no one has to agree with all types of defense, but that to agree or to disagree is necessary to present good reasons. For these reasons, we concluded that Logic can be an instrument capable of helping not only the philosophical learning and the better understanding of the students in relation to their own ideas and beliefs, feelings and emotions, but also the feminist practices of these students – who, as part of the broader feminist movement, still have a lot to fight for.

In order to replicate our teaching experience we consider relevant the evaluation of the level of psychological and also material conditions maturity of the students. The time available and the frequency of meetings were also important points in our case, as we held weekly or biweekly meetings, depending on the schedule of the school and the people involved, with a duration of two hours each. Without such an availability, it would be very difficult to reach the deep levels on the subjects that were achieved. Other issues that helped in the creation of the group were the encouragement given by the PIBID's current coordinator, Prof. Leonardo Porto, by the teachers from UFRGS,<sup>19</sup> and, mainly, by the school principal, Prof. Ildo Vilarinho, who helped us publicize and show the importance of this project to the students.

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