

Webs of (dis)connection - A collaborative reflection on learning in an online feminist classroom during the pandemic

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Online Learning

student experience

Critical Reflection

Feminist Pedagogies

Gender Studies

Feminist Critical Digital Pedagogy

In October 2020, a new cohort of MA Gender Studies students at the School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS), University of London, entered the gender theory classroom. Due to the lockdown restrictions and rules of social distancing enforced in the United Kingdom (UK), as in many other parts of the world, all UK higher education institutions were mandated to run their teaching programmes completely online. We reflect on our experience teaching and taking this class through the nuanced lenses of "connection" and "disconnection."

In October 2020, with the click of a button, a new cohort of MA Gender Studies students at the [School of Oriental and African Studies](#) (SOAS), University of London, entered the gender theory classroom for the first time, from our beds, desks, and couches; from cafes and libraries; from home; from work. The COVID-19 pandemic fundamentally transformed the way we move around in the world, including how we navigate our presence in the university. For those of us who embarked on a new year of academic teaching and learning in the fall of 2020, this shift was felt most profoundly in how we experienced the classroom space. Due to the lockdown restrictions and rules of social distancing enforced in the United Kingdom (UK), as in many other parts of the world, all UK higher education institutions were mandated to run their teaching programmes completely online. For the majority of UK higher education settings, online learning was a relatively nascent practice, sped up by the necessity the pandemic presented.

This paper, born from our collective and collaborative labour, is a reflective dialogue about our experiences of participating as students from diverse parts of the world in an online gender theory classroom situated within a university in the Global North. We are four students at SOAS who participated in a year-long online gender theory seminar, a key component of the taught MA Gender Studies programme. One of us, a PhD student with the Centre for Gender Studies at SOAS, facilitated the seminars as a Graduate Teaching Assistant. We reflect on the disruptions caused by the move to the virtual on the classroom itself, both in terms of the paucities and losses it generated as well as the abundance of opportunities it provided to transform the more traditional geographies of the classroom, thus creating a space for new seeds of feminist pedagogy to emerge. We play on the idea of the online classroom as being simultaneously disruptive and productive, and frame it to think through other dichotomies that became (im)possible through this virtual pedagogic encounter.

In our reflections, we talk about how connected and yet disconnected we felt to each other, to the university, to our classroom. Situating our reflections within the dichotomies of (sur)reality, (dis)connection, (im)mobility, and (in)visibility

in the online classroom, we hope to move towards a conceptualisation of online pedagogy as itself contradictory and double-edged. Experiencing and co-creating a feminist classroom virtually was both an opportunity to produce a collaborative, decentred, and democratic pedagogy rooted in feminist ideals, as much as it was a singularly lonely encounter that made us aware of the ways in which the university is deeply entrenched in producing an unequal distribution of labour and power. As students who already occupy precarious and liminal positions in the university, the online teaching experience at times exacerbated our liminality, loneliness and a feeling of *stuckedness*.

Our writing mirrors our practice of producing feminist knowledge in the classroom, employing reflective storytelling where we each write in our individual voice, whilst also reflecting on and adding to each other's stories. This is in an effort to create a *community of meaning* as articulated by Macdonald (2004, as quoted in Bailey, 2017, p. 260). We reimagine students as experts of their own classrooms, even if they are not currently understood as the main knowledge producers of feminist pedagogies. By telling our stories about the classroom, we hope to distil insights and questions about how feminist pedagogies take shape in the online mode of teaching and learning. We believe this can open up meaningful avenues to reimagining the classroom.

On presence and (in)visibility - Sakhi's story

In October 2020, I got the opportunity to be a Teaching Assistant with the Centre for Gender Studies at SOAS. Under normal circumstances, I would have been ineligible for this post, given that I was on PhD fieldwork in India. But nothing had been normal about 2020, and due to the ongoing lockdowns in both the UK and India, my field had become non-existent. SOAS, like most universities in the UK, had decided to run its taught degree programmes online. As a Graduate Teaching Assistant, my role was to lead graduate seminars for MA students in a module called *Gender Theory and the Study of Asia and Africa*.

As much of the discussion in the UK higher education space that time was undergirded by the question "How do we take our classrooms online?," the challenge of reproducing the experience of a face-to-face (F2F) classroom in a virtual setting occupied much of my orientation to teaching. My own encounter with online pedagogy was interesting and perhaps unique in this regard, because I had no prior experience of F2F teaching to compare with. Due to this, I was able to develop my pedagogical practice in the online classroom without the burden of replicating and translating anything from a traditional, F2F classroom. Instead, the online classroom provided an opportunity to trouble and reimagine the boundaries of a traditional classroom in ways that were aligned to the tenets of feminist pedagogy. For me, this became an ongoing question of how to make the online classroom more cooperative, collaborative, and care-full.

This question is an especially pertinent one for feminist pedagogy, with its strong pedagogical emphasis on student engagement, collaboration, and intersubjectivity in the classroom, which are important tenets of producing feminist knowledge. Conceptualising a natural allyship between feminist pedagogy and online teaching pushes back against some of the backlash against online teaching in general, and online feminist teaching in particular. Arguments and strategies that insist on simply replicating the F2F classroom experience in the virtual space are bound to fail, this literature argues. Bailey (2017) asserts that "there is no way to replicate some of the desirable aspects intrinsic to our face-to-face experience, nor should we obsessively attempt to do so. The most miserable online instructors are, I think, those who cannot let go of trying to "reproduce the magic" they feel in their brick-and mortar encounters. Inevitably, they come to see online classes as a diluted version of "the real thing," and perhaps this even becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy" (p. 264). Instead, this literature suggests moving beyond the need for replication of the F2F experience, and reimagining the online classroom as a different, but equally transformative, pedagogical experience.

While advocating for the recognition of the online classroom as a natural ally to feminist pedagogy, this literature also addresses the question of how feminist practices and values can be translated effectively to online teaching. (Chick & Hassel, 2009). Chick and Hassel (2009) argue that "it is critical to explore the ways that technology can not only accommodate feminist teaching strategies but may be in other ways more compatible with some of the student-centred, collaborative, democratized, and action-oriented approaches that are characteristic of feminist teaching" (p.

212). Aneja (2017) supports this view by stating that “feminist pedagogy’s efforts to ally with ODL (online distance learning) are reflective of strong, shared values at the core of this alliance – most prominently, a common democratising mandate” (p. 851). In my story, I reflect on the possibilities as well as challenges engendered by the digital turn to co-create a democratic and participatory classroom aligned with the tenets of feminist pedagogy, using my own experiences of facilitating a Gender Theory seminar.

In the university, the physical classroom is designed to highlight—quite literally—a hierarchical distance between the teacher and students. By centering the teacher in the front of the room, the space demarcates a binary of power/knowledge between the teacher and student. This binary clearly establishes the teacher as the provider of knowledge and student as the receiver, producing a form of knowledge transfer that Paulo Freire (1983) has aptly termed the *banking model* of education. According to Freire (1983), the banking model views knowledge as “a gift bestowed by those who consider themselves knowledgeable upon those whom they consider to know nothing” (p. 53). In this model, Freire argues that students are seen as empty vessels or “banks” who need to be filled with the right investments by the teacher, which can then provide good returns for the future (ibid).

Feminist pedagogy attempts to break this unidirectional flow of knowledge by disrupting the spatial organisation of the traditional classroom—by using circular seating, for example. In the online classroom however, this geography is completely transformed, rendering traditional hierarchies and distances meaningless. In our seminar, as the students and I tried to figure out how to navigate new digital geographies such as Zoom, it fostered a shared sense of vulnerability among us in the face of unpredictable and often insurmountable technology. It was oddly gratifying to see that even the most eloquent amongst our professors—who would often give guest lectures—would at times be rendered silent by technology, unable to unmute themselves on Zoom.

While these shared feelings of frustration—and often hopelessness—with technology can help break the ice and ease some of the early tensions between the teacher and students, I do not believe that the online classroom can completely flatten hierarchies. Rather, it creates new hierarchies through newer mechanisms of surveillance and control in the online environment. As the tutor, I was in control of who could “enter” my classroom and who could be allowed to speak. I could assign breakout groups and decide how long they would run. While most of these controls were logistical rather than disciplinary—to make sure the sessions started and ended on time!—they did at times curtail the agency of students in the online classroom.

Within this new geography, I tried to make it as accessible as possible for the students to navigate and participate. I structured the sessions in a way that would centre students’ voices while also providing a direction to their discussions. Students could choose how they engaged in class, whether to switch on their camera and speak up, or write their thoughts in the chat. Like in a typical F2F classroom, there were students who were more active than others. However, unlike F2F, there was no pressure on students to make themselves seen or heard in the class in order to participate. This helped facilitate student presence in a way that would not have been possible in a traditional classroom—some students would keep their cameras and mics turned off throughout the class but would be writing fervently in the chat. They would, at times, also provide justifications for being unavailable on video—some were at work or in public places, others were “just not feeling like showing up on camera today.” Students who did not participate at all would still email later that they really “enjoyed the discussion.”

Navigating these experiences as a tutor challenged my own assumptions about what “good” student participation looked like. Often, a teacher’s worth is based on how much student engagement they can generate in their classroom, the parameters for which are usually based on the number of students in attendance and the number of those who speak up. This construes the classroom as itself a performative space, mandating certain kinds of performances from both students and teachers. This performativity is primarily an embodied one (Butler, 1988), disciplining how we bring our bodies into the classroom. This can be challenging as well as risky for those of us who may not fit into the standards of bodies that can rightfully occupy space in academia. Those of us who are not White, cis/het, able-bodied, neurotypical; those of us who may not speak English in the “correct” way or in known accents, are already more at risk of being harassed, misunderstood, or prejudged in the classroom. In the online classroom however, students have more control in terms of what or how much they choose to reveal about their bodies and selves, which can lead to a safer

learning experience. Further, this question of why someone may be taking time to switch on their camera can become a starting point for discussion around which bodies are seen as acceptable and which are not, and the ways in which the class can be more inclusive towards bodies that are different.

Finally, reflecting on student participation and initiative in the classroom does bring up questions of responsibility and labour: How can we be careful in ensuring that student-centred classrooms do not lead to the burden of additional labour upon the students? These questions, along with those of negotiating presence, navigating the disjunctures between physical and virtual materialities, and producing situated knowledge within and through the online classroom, are discussed by my co-authors, who were also students of the Gender Theory seminar. They highlight the opportunities and disruptions produced by embodying this virtual space, while at the same time being careful and critically aware of the labour that goes into the production of these spaces.

Material becomes ethereal - Ruth's story

Mulrooney and Kelly (2020) extol the benefits of the "physical space of the campus" (p. 2) and its role in developing the social bonds between students and staff, as well as acknowledging that the loss of this space can affect our sense of belonging. These feelings of connectedness and belonging thus came under threat when universities were forced to close as the COVID-19 pandemic swept across the nation. When I applied to SOAS to pursue my Master's degree in Gender Studies and Law, I had not expected to be a student of the online gender studies classroom. However, this move from in-person to online teaching gives us the unique opportunity to evaluate the materiality of pedagogical techniques of universities when usual methods were made untenable in the online environment. This chapter will explore how effective online teaching was at levelling the playing field between students for the various reasons we have discussed and whether or not some of this can be translated back into in-person teaching or if an entirely new method should be employed instead (Watermeyer et al, 2021).

I have often described my experience of being part of an online gender studies cohort as learning in a bubble. Within this gender studies bubble, we were all safe and free to speak our truths and lived experiences without fear of judgement from the cohort. Hearing these personal stories from my peers taught me just as much about what I was learning than the lectures, often helping contextualise the theories we were covering. These stories became discussions, with students and professors alike contributing their own knowledge and experiences. Even across time zones, it felt as though we were connected by our commitment to what we were learning and the respect we held for each other. Lectures often began with the question of "*Where is everyone joining from?*" the numerous and varied responses to this question only highlighting the physical distance that separated us. Although we were all present in the online classroom, our own classrooms were situated all over the world. We were united in our separation. This simultaneously equalised and separated us, as hierarchies beyond our control affected students' ability to connect to the online classroom.

As previously discussed, feminist pedagogy relies on discussion and connection amongst students (Bailey, 2017). It is fair to say that we all struggled with this concept because of the realities of mediums such as Zoom that we all suddenly had to become experts in. Student voices were often lost due to us speaking over each other and connection was difficult due to the loneliness that is a common by-product of online learning. This loneliness was compounded by the COVID-19 pandemic; we were unable to balance the connection that was lost due to online learning with the support of friends and family because we were cut off from them or stuck with them, which only marred this unique opportunity to spend so much time with those important to us. As much as we wanted to believe that we were part of a dynamic and engaging classroom, we were learning alone in our rooms with only a screen for company. We are among the rare few who can claim we got our Master's degrees from our bedrooms. This blended the situated knowledge and experiences we would have otherwise brought to the in-person classroom; whether this was by bringing our personal lives into the classroom or the classroom into our personal lives is immaterial. The lines were blurred and this meant the way we interacted with the literature and theories we were exposed to were unique.

In this way, *politicising* the personal is given an entirely new meaning when students and teachers alike are literally bringing their homes and bedrooms into the classroom space, with interruptions from family members, housemates and pets providing a unique insight into our classmates' personal lives and situated realities. This sharing of the personal inside the academic space levels the playing field of education, so to speak, and destabilises the hierarchy of teacher and student (Bailey, 2017). This subversion is even more achievable in the online classroom as the typical hierarchical structure of the classroom is subverted. Instead of the professor lecturing to a room of students from the front of a classroom, thus imposing this professor-student hierarchy through the very set up of the classroom, every member of an online classroom is a same-sized box on a screen. It is then in the hands of the students whether they want to see only the professor or maintain the simulation of a classroom.

However, the fact that the Zoom platform that we used offers a feature that allows the host of a meeting to mute all the other participants belies this effect as it places control of the classroom back in the hands of the teacher. The act of having a host to the meeting enacted a completely new type of hierarchy within the online classroom. To maintain the flow of the lesson, we fell into a routine of keeping ourselves muted until we wanted to speak, often using the raise hand feature to get the professor's attention. This was not infallible, since this feature was not always visible to our teachers as they were lecturing and so students were sometimes left waiting until the end of the lecture to ask their questions.

The online format, therefore, did affect our material presence in the learning space, as the very act of not being in the same room affected our ability to connect with each other and have meaningful discussions in accordance with feminist pedagogical teachings. However, the literal process of bringing our personal spaces into the classroom allowed us to indirectly share more personal aspects of ourselves and sometimes provided us with the opportunity for connection and discussion about more frivolous topics, simulating the opportunities we missed in hallways and coffee shops. The lines between our material and ethereal presence were thus blurred in the online classroom and we floated between these two presences, unable to commit to full materiality in either one.

Surface and depth: Examining (dis)embodiment and care in the virtual classroom - Rachel's story

Online spaces—especially where women and/or gender non-conforming people meet—can be dismissed as just superficial and devoid of meaningful or real connections. As in any space, but perhaps more pronounced online, there is a tension held in the surface. There is a capacity for depth but also often that depth can be just out of reach. If we move across the surface of an online space, fast for the sake of productivity, skimming across like water insects, we perhaps can't penetrate its depths, but when we pause—as we were able to do momentarily in these spaces during the pandemic—at times we were able to break the membrane of superficiality and find depths in our conversation which enriched our learning. My story contemplates the contradictions and challenges of creating and negotiating the surfaces and depths in online feminist learning spaces, in particular Zoom classrooms.

In our classes, we often found ourselves engaging with the assigned feminist texts and from those diving into our personal 'deep' experiences. Often these deep experiences were gendered experiences of the everyday—something that in other places in our lives may have been dismissed as a superficial concern. Like much feminist scholarship this worked to peel away what is seen as superficial, look beneath the surface and reveal the depths. Someone may offer their story with a little hesitation, to be met by encouragement—the graphic flicker of red love hearts or clapping hands in the corner of our square, words of encouragement and phone numbers shared: the beginnings of support networks.

At other times, moments of depth were cut off at inopportune points. There is a moment that still tugs at me: we had moved into small breakout rooms, we were talking about a text which quickly led to one student sharing their painful experience. With their camera off, and shaky wifi, in tears, they shared their story. We were engrossed in listening, showing solidarity and comfort. Prematurely, the Zoom room closed, and they disappeared out of the call. If we had been in person, we may have offered to spend time together after the lecture. With tea perhaps, or something sweet. We would slow down, get to know each other mutually and holistically. In that conversation, on the surface of what they were saying there was so much tension and we didn't really get to break through. After the class I, with little success,

tried to find them in the Whatsapp group for our Masters cohort that we as students had informally set up, and on the email directory, to offer support. But it felt strange and uninvited to pursue supporting them outside of the class. In encounters like this, I learnt to ask about someone's surroundings in order to locate them in their own social network, and to offer that our support continued outside of the class. In encounters like this, I was reminded that there are always limits to how much support a single space can provide. Our strength lay instead in our capacity to be present in the specific moment of the person sharing their story, and beyond it in our community building and our feminist work.

In some senses, in our online space, we forgo the 'superficial' connections you usually need in order to build trust in a relationship. If you put a new swimmer straight into the deep end, at the very least they would struggle, and exhaust themselves pretty quickly. In a similar way it is hard to cultivate meaningful relationships when we only hear the 'deep'. Do you know someone if you only know the experiences they are willing to share in a group in an institutional academic setting? Do you know someone when their experiences arise to make sense of a specific set of texts, but your conversations don't branch out emergently? There is a gap. What was absent from our conversations was just as important as what was present.

When people ask me about what it has been like to study during the pandemic, I often say "I don't really remember much of it"—sometimes information has felt like it is floating around without being anchored to specific locations. I'm comparing this to memories of university classrooms from 10 years ago, where I first learnt particular theories—where I can recall precisely where I was sitting in a room. My memories of my 2020-21 class are somewhat less located. On the surface of it, this time around, there was no explicit physical location on which to attach the memories of lessons. If I close my eyes to remember this class, I see the squares of a Zoom meeting, and heart and clap emojis. I remember the background of another student whose walls were bright pink. I remember the time another was wearing a mustard coloured jumper. At the time, my walls were bright green and people commented on it a lot. We were beamed into each others' rooms—and those rooms became our classrooms. This superficial information - that of people's interior decoration or clothing—situated us.

In the pandemic, our bodies are up against it all, and those of us in feminist spaces perhaps feel embodied resistance and all the energy and exhaustion that comes with that. In the feminist classroom, we are often speaking about experiences of trauma or distress. We can think about welcoming this as a source of insight and knowledge, by taking a trauma-informed response to building pedagogy (Bimm & Feldman, 2020). To reflect on this in my particular experience, one tool that I have been taught (in somatic therapy) to help me stay present and to regulate my nervous system is to name the colours of the things around me. This more superficial element, the colourful backgrounds or clothes of the people in my online classes perhaps allowed me to stay. It allowed me an opportunity to not just dive in at the deep end, but to give myself rest stations to catch my breath, and to know my classmates more fully.

There were many points in online classes where the labour of negotiating space with the signals of very limited body language and cues was extremely challenging. The work of navigating this also exists in in-person classes—it is a rigid type of neurotypical perspective to imagine that the labour of affective and social interaction disappears as soon as you are in person. Co-facilitation and co-regulation are needed in all spaces. In a recent in-person tutorial, like my green walls, someone had a green phone case and headphones—and someone commented on that too. It seems we need sensory and material anchors to ground us and our learning wherever we are. This isn't a question of mandating that universities paint their walls bright colours or enforce a uniform of rainbow outfits (although I wouldn't be adverse to that). It is a question of embodied labour.

One aspect of this embodied labour is tending to our health needs. In an online space, one can tend to one's own body differently. I delayed applying for a masters for 2 years because I have Endometriosis and knew that the 'unreliability' of my fluctuating embodied needs were not accounted for in the design of the demands of the university schedule. Despite the obvious threats of the pandemic itself, the online teaching during it enabled me to attend university in a way that was more sustainable for me. As a member of the Disabled Students Society at SOAS we discussed how students across the world have been calling for years to be meaningfully included in Higher Education through the use of online technology, and with the pandemic that which has previously been named "impossible" has now been done. Imagine though if universities had listened to disabled students all along, how much more practised they would be at holding

online spaces now. In the face of the pandemic, many disabled people continued to share their knowledge about ways to make adaptations, adjustments and exciting styles of pedagogy. Disabled people's knowledge has always had the potential to support moves towards broader radical inclusivity, but has often been relegated to just an issue for the individual disabled person. However, looking to disabled peoples' insights about negotiating the tensions between surface and depth in online, offline and hybrid spaces is a rich area of knowledge.

We need to be attentive to inclusive facilitation practices that allow people to be present and included in ways that empower us to navigate the surfaces and depths which we come into contact with. All of this is a question of labour – the affective labour of emotional caretaking, facilitation and teaching. In our classrooms we can practice creating non-hierarchical spaces shaped by co-facilitation and the work of co-regulation between all group members. Staff being guaranteed space and time and remuneration to hone their facilitation techniques, to learn about trauma informed pedagogy. Students being resourced to create robust social networks. It is about recognising this as work that has to be central to pedagogy of all classrooms—and resourcing accordingly.

Where learning continues to take place online, anchors need to be built to allow students to not float off its surface. We need ways to ground the roots of social networks that we put down. If we are diving into depths, there needs to be webs of ropes to guide us back up to land on particular surfaces when needed. These ropes may look like facilitation techniques that replicate the way in which people bond in the gaps between in person classes. This may look like timetabling that accounts for lessons that have space to stretch when needed. Anchors may look like the explicit recognition that we are still bodies—we need breaks, we need ways to ground ourselves, we need ways to attach a range of sensory information to each pedagogical experience. We need webs of connection.

Presenting online feminist knowledges as both “stuck” and subversive - Shaazia's story

Switching on your laptop, logging on to Zoom and seeing a sea of boxes containing your classmates is very different from sitting in a physical space with them and experiencing learning with all of your senses. Yet this learning allowed us to diffuse location, creating a classroom not located in the Global North, but rather in every place which students logged in from.

Being a university student during a global pandemic, for me, is rooted in the context of being stuck, or of “stuckedness.” Ghassan Hage (2009, p. 96) describes stuckedness as an “existential immobility,” a sense of being cornered with no means of escape. While Hage uses “stuckedness” in the context of migration, the pandemic also created a sense of immobility. We were stuck in our home countries, or we were stuck away from our home countries in London where we had hoped to be attending in-person classes. We were stuck at home. We were stuck on Zoom screens. We worked, learned, socialised and tried to keep sane online. Above all, we were stuck in feelings of frustration, isolation and hopelessness. It was (and still is) a strange and tough time to navigate. Yet through the feeling of stuckedness, attending classes online became a lifeline, almost a sense of mobility for some of my classmates, and certainly for me. School gave us some purpose and structure, it helped us feel a little less stuck. Certainly, our learning experience was defined by the pandemic.

It is a strange feeling to feel both connected and disconnected to people you are sharing a class with. The class of 2020-2021 might never share physical space together, ever. This, after months of sharing virtual space with each other. Still, there was a deep empathy and understanding which connected us. In some ways we supported each other through loneliness, boredom and deep uncertainty. In classes and tutorials, we often acknowledged how difficult and heavy the world felt, how hard it was to focus, read the assigned reading and turn in assignments. This was despite that being enrolled in the programme was giving us something material to cling onto in a time when real life felt surreal. This experience showed that there are multiple ways in which we form connections and cultivate empathy.

Much of traditional feminist pedagogy translates well into the online (Bailey, 2017, pp. 252–253). Using feminist pedagogy to cultivate a feminist classroom meant creating a space where we felt safe to express ourselves, our

thoughts and ideas. It meant constantly pushing against binary thinking and the establishment. Instead of upholding the binary between public and private as the academy usually encourages, we blurred those two distinctions. Feminist knowledge production is about acknowledging that the personal is political and theorising the self (Bailey, 2017, p. 253). It is about seeing the value in everyday experience and making meaning from it. In some ways, I imagine vulnerability was easier to practise in a space that existed only virtually with people we had never (and might never) meet. We were also attending class from our homes—it was tough to abandon the personal. In the classroom, we were vulnerable. Our own experiences were prioritised and taken seriously as a way of understanding and theorising about the world. As Sakhi and Ruth spoke about in their stories, our feminist classroom had a flatter structure than what I had previously experienced. Our teachers and tutors were candid about their own struggles during the pandemic and even in the university space. We all deeply listened to each other.

Classrooms which embrace feminist pedagogy allow us to harness our diverse experiences as opportunities to learn (Bailey, 2017, p. 253). Here, life experiences are lessons, and we deconstruct knowledge by looking at how gender, race, class, nationality, religion intersect. How better to understand intersectionality than prioritising our diverse experiences? Our locations fed our contributions we made in class. Usually, before the pandemic, everyone relocated to attend a class in London. This meant that while there are global perspectives, we would all have shared a common living experience. However, during the pandemic the lines of locatedness became blurred. Instead, for the first time ever we had people directly signing in from Shanghai, Berlin, Dhaka and Dubai. There was a richness of perspective that came from having very different locations. How better to understand feminism in the Global South than to speak to someone who was attending class from Nepal, from Taiwan or from Botswana? How better to understand the effects of war and colonialism on women and queer people than to listen to someone from Palestine or from Syria? This enhanced our understanding of our classmates' experiences and enriched our learning despite having no tangible shared common experience of university. Another element which connected us was sharing vulnerability and intimacy.

In the GS classroom, we were made to do deep reflection. One of the writing exercises we had in class was to reflect on why we became feminists and another was to write about what our gender expression means to us. These were deeply personal topics and involved a lot of vulnerability. Sharing with the cohort meant that we were very aware of each other's struggles. During our last class, we had a reflection on the course and what we learned about gender. The tenderness expressed in this class, despite that many of us had never met, is something I deeply valued. We became friends online, learning each other's quirks, interests, opinions, and lived experiences. Yet, somehow, we could never deepen those relationships by speaking in the corridors or coffee shops of university. And so, while we knew how someone's room looked, we never really had the opportunity to cultivate a relationship beyond the online. While the location of the classroom was diffused, it also didn't really physically exist.

We did not only learn about radical care and solidarity, but I feel like we truly embodied that in the classroom. In *Teaching to Transgress*, bell hooks speaks about the significance of feminist rethinking of pedagogical practices to delve into various possibilities and create a learning community, which is deeply engaged in "hearing one another's voice, in recognising one another's presence" in the classroom (2014, p. 8). While the online space felt safe, or as safe as an online space could possibly feel, we could never transcend the university.

In 2021, the vice chancellor of SOAS used a racist slur and bullied some students in an online meeting. Ordinarily, this would be an opportunity to organise and to stage protest, have meetings and open dialogues. In a pandemic, this was impossible. Our teachers tried to give us online space to make sense of how we felt about it all. But we quickly realised that although we were trying to create a transgressive space, the university itself had many issues. This is without mentioning the higher education strikes that spread across universities that year and that are ongoing even today. While we attempted to decenter power in the classroom and while we were not physically located within the university, our online bubble could not protect us. The institution itself with its own hierarchies, bureaucracies and limits loomed like a spectre. And in that way, even our online space located in all corners of the world was stuck in an institution that hampered us.

Yet something about the whole experience barely felt real. Moving between the stuckedness of location and mobility of purpose, connectedness and disconnectedness, our own online safe space and the reality of the institution is

something I am still trying to grapple with. When I shut my laptop everything and everyone disappeared like it was never there to begin with. I was still stuck despite vague recollections of my online classes floating through a time-space continuum.

Conclusion: Reimagining the classroom

In a strange ode to producing feminist knowledge through virtual encounters, we wrote this paper over Google Docs and Zoom meetings, while being located in different corners of the world. While writing the paper, we experienced the same sense of *situated (dis)locatedness* that we have called attention to in our reflections. A common theme that runs through all our stories is a feeling of surreality—at the end of it, our virtual classroom experience barely felt real. The COVID-19 pandemic had already disrupted our understanding of what was "normal", and this distance from normalcy thus created an opportunity to reflect on the structures of power that went into creating and maintaining the idea of the "normal" and "real".

This chapter is a collective endeavour to reflect upon the discomfort of the new normal, the barely-real, and the surreal that online teaching and learning sometimes felt like during the pandemic, and to think through this discomfort towards a reimagining of both the online and offline classrooms. Through our individual reflections in this chapter, we have attempted to foster curiosity about the online classroom as a feminist space and the possibilities it engenders towards a more democratic and just pedagogy. To conclude, we would like to situate our reflections within the "stuckness" we feel as we grapple with existing and newer forms of structural power in academia.

There is an assumption that power is flattened in an online classroom. As Ruth mentions, the traditional classroom structure with a teacher standing in front of a room of sitting students is replaced by democratic boxes on a screen. Despite this, both Ruth and Sakhi reflect on how this is not always the case. Rachel also points to the labour that goes into negotiating the online space, and the negligence of this labour by a largely ableist academic environment. The current priorities of UK higher education fail to value, to the necessary depth, both facilitation skills and the work of building webs of connection. And even if we manage to create a transgressive space in our tiny corner of the internet, Shaazia's story shows that we could not really escape the material realities of our university. Hierarchy and power are very much at play beyond our classrooms—be those online or offline. In this sense, there is a remaining stuckness.

In the post-pandemic political climate of the UK, there has been an almost-complete return to in-person teaching, thus excluding those who benefited from online learning and neglecting any of the positives that come with a more blended learning experience. In our experience, allowing for a blend of both in-person and online teaching methodologies can enrich the classroom. A strong focus on one or the other without seeing the interesting and exciting ways that the two blend together ignores the possibilities within different modes of teaching. A blended approach would also involve explicitly questioning power dynamics in this resurgence of in-person teaching, exacerbated by the increase in development across multiple campuses, through a physical reimagining and restructuring of the classroom space. A classroom which allows students to sign in from wherever they are located allows for a richer knowledge base and wider social networks. It means students can bring their global lived experience into the classroom in a way that complements the learning and social experience of all who join the class.

Facilitation skills, which are valued in feminist spaces outside of academia are often underdeveloped within academia. As students, we noticed the difference between academics who had facilitation experience and those who were less experienced in structuring the space. We would encourage academics to think with the framework of *surfaces and depths* as a facilitative paradigm in any teaching space. In other words, how does the teaching style or modality open up potential for particular depth not only regarding the topic at hand, but also with connections to lived experience and social action outside of the classroom? We valued the work of those performing emotional labour in the online classroom, and see the challenges of how this can be facilitated, especially in terms of where and with whom this work is concentrated. This labour should be factored into all university plans.

We hope this discussion serves as a continuation of the pedagogy we co-created in the classroom space. Feminist pedagogy enables us to locate our experiences as the starting point of knowledge production. In the same spirit, we have attempted to critically reflect on our experiences in the classroom, and distil them into collaboratively-produced knowledge on what it means to co-create an online feminist classroom. As students, we feel that our voices are not sufficiently represented in the discourse around feminist pedagogy, and this is our attempt to speak to this discourse and contribute our perspectives to the ongoing discussion on teaching and learning in the pandemic and beyond. There is space for a significant reimagining of online education. As students, we saw windows of potentiality but also the pitfalls and have, we hope, in this paper offered ways of critically thinking about online teaching.

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