

# **Feminist Critical Digital Pedagogy**

An Open Book

Suzan Koseoglu & George Veletsianos



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# Introducing Feminist Critical Digital Pedagogy

George Veletsianos & Suzan Koseoglu

Pedagogy

Feminist Pedagogies

Feminist Digital Pedagogy

While writing our forthcoming book on Critical Digital Pedagogy ([Koseoglu, Veletsianos, and Rowell, 2022](#)), we faced two related challenges. First, we received more chapter proposals than would be feasible for the book publisher to accommodate. Second, we were not able to include as many chapters as we would have liked on the intersection between digital technology and feminist pedagogies and praxis.

To resolve these challenges we produced this volume, consisting of a select few chapters addressing the topic of feminist critical digital pedagogy. We see such pedagogy as a lens through which digital educational practice is examined to reveal, challenge, and impact systems of power as they relate to issues that have to do with gender. As there are many feminisms (vast differences in how feminism is viewed) and as feminist worldviews and methods change depending on one's social location and theoretical position, feminist theory building and praxis can occur in different ways ([Collins, 2019](#)). In this book, authors employ feminist critical digital pedagogy to examine teaching, learning, faculty support and research in post-secondary and higher education contexts.

We are inspired by scholars who have provided a critical, yet imaginative and hopeful reading of gender oppression and sexism in society (for example, [Ali, 2012](#); [hooks, 2000](#)), especially bell hooks who argues that feminism is for everyone, not just women. Our view is intersectional ([Crenshaw, 1989](#); [Collins, 2019](#)): feminist analysis of gender oppression, for example, is only meaningful within the context of intersecting systems of power (for example, racism, ableism, androcentrism or neoliberalism). Intersectional analysis of gender issues is important in feminist digital pedagogy because it politicizes feminist thinking; it helps educators connect the systems and structures of higher education to wider socio-political issues and critique oppressive or unjust practices, policies, or processes. We use the term feminist critical digital pedagogy in this book (as opposed to feminist digital pedagogy) to emphasize this critical dimension of feminist pedagogy and to ground our work in the tradition of critical pedagogy. Critical feminist pedagogy employs an experiential as well as a theoretical approach in its analysis of power. Experiential knowledge, in particular, is a powerful source of motivation and inspiration to educators, for critical self-reflection and feminist praxis. Chapters in the book, as well as other feminist writing in educational technology (for example, [Campbell, 2015](#); [Romero-Hall, 2021](#)) demonstrate how this works in practice.

In editing this book, we adopted two processes that impacted the writing of the book in unique ways. These two processes were pedagogical peer-review and ongoing contributions.

## Pedagogical peer-review

While each chapter went through a peer-review process, the intent of that process was to improve the manuscripts rather than act as a gatekeeping mechanism. We draw inspiration for this from Kumashiro and Pinar who urge educational researchers to engage in ethical and pedagogical peer-review (see [Kumashiro et al., 2005](#)). Kumashiro

writes that anti-oppressive researchers have argued that reviewers, authors, editors, and more broadly researchers “need to think differently about what it means to create a supportive research community” and suggests that “within the peer-review process, providing constructive criticism—and being open to being criticized—is one way to accomplish such goals” (p. 261). Pinar notes that this isn’t just a matter of preference, but is instead “a matter of professionalism, specifically, a matter of professional ethics. Employing the review process to teach requires the realization that our relations with our colleagues are as important as are our relations to our students and to ideas” (p. 267).

## Ongoing contributions

This book is published with an open access license, but it is also open in the sense that it is a living, developing, and evolving document. The typical book publishing process encompasses an end date by which the book is published. At that time the book becomes a complete and finished artifact around which authors and readers interact. While future editions serve to update the book, de facto end dates are embedded in the book publishing process to bring books to the hands of readers but also pause or end the process of what goes into a book. This practice is a remnant of the analog era that has transferred into the ways that digital books are understood and conceptualized. This collection already includes important and insightful scholarship. Yet, we know that it can be better, for instance by including perspectives from more diverse authors.

But we also know that the chapters we have collected shouldn’t wait for other chapters before they’re published. These reflections led us to ask: what if this book has an ongoing publication date? Could this book grow over time, not through updated editions, but through updates to the book itself? What does an ongoing book look like?

In thinking about these questions, we realized that a book could be similar to a scholarly journal which includes multiple issues within volume or similar to how some scholarly journals now produce [thematic series](#) or collections. We also recognized that some book publishers push content updates to authors when updates are available, and perhaps this is something similar. We eventually came to the realization that a book can be a live document in which future chapters can be added, made possible via the affordances of independent publishing platforms—such as [EdTech Books](#) which we used for this book. In this sense, the book is open not only in terms of its open access license, but it is also open in terms of its ability to accommodate more contributions than what it started with. It is open in terms of enabling colleagues to contribute their work in ways that are inclusive and equitable, in that it is accommodating and flexible to their individual circumstances that may preclude them from meeting fixed deadlines.

Importantly, it seems that we are in good company: in the week prior to publishing our book we saw that [Harrison, DeVries, Morgan, and Paskevicius \(2021\)](#) are also exploring the concept of ongoing contributions in a book they are editing on critical instructional design.

Call it experimental. Call it disrupting the book publishing process. Call it exploratory. Call it an act of inclusion. At its simplest, call it an ongoing call for proposals/chapters. Here is how we envision this process will work: If you are reading this editorial, the book is published and available. If you would like to submit a chapter to be included in this collection, we commit to shepherding it through a peer-reviewed process and potentially including it as part of this collection. Please feel free to submit a proposal using [this form](#).

If you’re a colleague interested in participating in the review process or supporting a broader effort to continue growing the book, please don’t hesitate to reach out to us. Our hope is that the book will continue to grow with new contributions and editorial visions, to eventually become a one-stop resource on feminist critical digital pedagogy.



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# The University Cannot Love You

## Gendered Labour, Burnout and the Covid-19 Pivot to Digital

Brenna Clarke Gray

Educational Technology

Higher Education

Ethic of Care

COVID-19 Pandemic

Feminist Pedagogies

Moral Stress

Feminist Ethics

Academic Labour

Emotional Labor

Academic Burnout

Gendered Participation

Pivot to Digital

Gender Studies

Feminist Critical Digital Pedagogy

*A recent study of publishing on Covid-19 itself shows a precipitous decline in women's participation in journal submissions, as does a review of submissions in political science (Dolan & Lawless, 2020; Pinho-Gomes et al., 2020); academic women are increasingly speaking out about their inability to do their jobs completely, not only due to unpaid labour at home but due to unrecognized pastoral care work within the university (Burzynska & Contreras, 2020; Gabster et. al., 2020). For many of us who work in educational technologies and faculty or student support, resisting or refusing care has an immediate and harmful impact on our colleagues and students. And so, as the work of care in the pivot to digital—both at home and at work—falls disproportionately on women, we find ourselves facing burnout. If we can't trust the university's capacity for care, what happens next? Rooted in feminist ethics of care thinking and an embodied approach to pedagogy and scholarship, this chapter reviews the most recent research into gendered participation in the academic labour force, care work, and the pressures on women academics at work and at home to argue urgently for a radical rethinking of how care is enacted within the university.*

In March of 2020—or earlier, depending on your place on the globe—most of post-secondary education moved to fully remote instruction in order to accommodate public health demands for social distancing and government mandates to stay at home. A year on from this moment, many of our institutions are still fully or partially online. Much has been discussed about workload and burnout as we adjust to this so-called new normal, and research increasingly suggests that the workplace impacts for academics have not been evenly experienced. Care work is suddenly in the news all the time: families are managing childcare and virtual schooling and elder care and work-from-home dynamics, and the classroom is increasingly a site of accommodation, shared trauma, and grief. Many of us are enacting and framing care even more explicitly than we might previously have done—as our children and parents appear in Zoom calls and our syllabi lay out our practices of care—but care work within both the home and the academy has always been more likely to fall on women's desks, and even more disproportionately on the desks of racialized, queer, and disabled scholars. Those on the margins of the academy are more likely to do what the editors of *Gender & Society* have dubbed “the housework of the university”: mentorship, pastoral care, undergraduate teaching, and other “frontline engagement with

student” work that is less prestigious and less rewarded within the structure of the academy (O’Keefe & Courtois, 2020). In the moment of Covid-19, all of this work demands an expanded capacity for care.

And yet, we work in universities: slow, lumbering institutions that do not, by their nature, have care at their centre. So as the labour of care in the pivot to digital—both at home and at work—falls disproportionately on women, we see increasing chatter about academic burnout. If we can’t trust the university’s capacity for care, what happens next? Rooted in feminist ethics of care thinking and an embodied approach to pedagogy and scholarship, this chapter examines gendered participation in the academic labour force, care work, and the pressures on women academics at work and at home to argue urgently for a radical rethinking of how care is enacted within the university. How would the professional lives of women and marginalized scholars look if our institutions valued and rewarded care?

## Defining and Recognizing Care

In thinking about care, I ground my definitions in ethic of care philosophy. Emerging from feminist thinking, the ethic of care is “a psychological logic of relationships” that attends to our relationships to each other, acknowledges the power dynamics that can disrupt those relationships, and centres our interdependence upon each other at the core of its thinking (Gilligan, 1993, p. 73). In other words, we demonstrate care by recognizing and prioritizing our relationships to each other within and beyond the institution, and we recognize our responsibilities to each other and the power we hold. In the context of pandemic teaching, for example, a care-centered pedagogy acknowledges the complicated moment we are living through and involves extending grace to students, recognizing that they might be caregiving or dealing with grief and loss, and resists adding additional burdens like requiring cameras to be on in the homespace or using surveillance tools like e-proctoring and analytics to track and punish behaviour. Care, of course, happens all over the institution—or, at least, there is space for care everywhere: in instructional time and mentorship/supervision relationships, in student services, in formal and informal pastoral care, and in faculty support, for example.

The work of care has larger ramifications for those who engage in it: it exacts a toll. Those who work in jobs with a high component of emotional labour—first defined by Arlie Russell Hochschild as “the management of feeling [...] sold for a wage” (2012, p. 7)—are particularly susceptible to burnout (Jeung, et. al., 2018). The stress of emotional labour is made worse when metrics of workplace success render it invisible (Hochschild, 2021, p. xi), because people don’t stop feeling called to and responsible for caring for others just because their workplace doesn’t value it. When we devalue care, we devalue the carer, and carers are often already marginalized in other ways. In academia, precarious employees are more likely to struggle with additional stress from emotional labour than tenured faculty, but interestingly status is only so insulating: women experience more stress than do men as a result of exhibiting higher levels of emotional labour, regardless of their employment status (Tunguz, 2016).

The pivot to fully online teaching required care. I am writing this while still mired deep in the pandemic, but if you are reading it from some moment in the future, think back to those early days through March of 2020 as the world shut down. The moment was unsettling for everyone, and most advice for novice online teachers was to foreground tenderness and calm. This advice carried through the summer and into the fall. But to help faculty extend grace to students, they needed to have someone extend grace to them. They needed safe spaces to learn and grow so that they could provide the same to their students.

Given this topic is deeply personal to me and my work, it’s important that I take a moment to situate myself in this conversation. I am coordinator of educational technologies—a tenure-track role—at a regional university, and I was the faculty lead of the very small team that moved our campus courses to fully-online delivery in March of 2020. On our campus, we have a faculty complement of 500, and about half of those users had never engaged with our learning management system prior to the transition. My role is pedagogically-focused, but I also do a lot of hands-on technical support and provide a lot of reassurance and comfort. It is, very explicitly, care labour. In the early stages of the pandemic, this was at its most extreme: I spent much of my long working days helping faculty feel safe using the tools and helping them to see the task ahead of them as achievable. This work was deeply rewarding, but also deeply exhausting. One day, after a very kind colleague told me she always felt so much better after talking to me, the source of



my impending burnout snapped into focus: I was absorbing the anxieties of an entire institution. Where was I meant to put my own? While educational technologies are often overlooked as a site of care <sup>[1]</sup> within the institution, care is critical to any functional faculty support program.

I am also a mother to one boy who turned four during the pandemic. I don't think I have ever articulated that in a work of scholarship before, but my experiences of motherhood are central to my experiences of working through this period. When the daycare shut down, I had already elected to start keeping my son home for about a week—the university closed first, and it seemed strange to be home staying safe while he went to school—and for five months he was home full-time while I worked more than full-time moving my university online. (He has since gone back three days a week, and we muddle through accordingly.) I am married to my son's father, and while I would have described our caregiving as equitable in the time before the pandemic, when the daycare closed, my son moved into my workspace for almost all of the first few months. His joyful contributions to my working day made every day better and more loving, and he reminded me to draw on my stores of patience for him and for my faculty; those same contributions also made it impossible for me to do focused work or to think about anything significant until after he had gone to bed, and my working day often extended late into the night. And so while I was burning out on care at work, I was also burning out on care at home. My story, of course, is not unique.

And I am also a white woman. My race insulates me from many axes of marginalization within academia. As I write this essay, I am mindful of the tradition of “me first” equity politics that centres the experiences of white women as the most pressing, while also acknowledging that much of the research I draw on in this essay does not disaggregate data on racial lines, nor do I have explicit data on the experiences of other equity-seeking groups through the pandemic. Wherever possible, I have drawn on research and thinking that centres experiences other than my own.

## **Gendered Labour in Covid-19**

Both within and without the academy, women have been disproportionately burdened by the expectations created by the pandemic working conditions. The impact is clear across the economy and across the world, where most of the job losses have been among women, and specifically among women of colour, meaning that the economic turndown is both a feminized and a racialized one. We are not, in fact, all in this together. It is also increasingly clear that where family pressures require someone to leave the workplace to enact care at home, it is disproportionately the case that women make that choice. For those women who have remained employed, lack of childcare resources have changed how and when they work. In general, it is women who carry the labour of caregiving. In April, the UN warned about the specific costs to women of the emerging pandemic; in particular, it anticipated the increased unpaid labour in the home as a result of school closures falling disproportionately upon women, as well as concerns about women leaving the paid workforce entirely in order to cope with this labour (UN, 2020). This has an impact on women of all socio-economic and backgrounds, and certainly more dire impacts on more marginalized women and their families.

But the early explorations into this moment in the academy should also give us pause, too. While academic women enjoy privileges of social and economic status due to their positions and work, they are still disproportionately impacted by Covid-19. Indeed, it should not be forgotten that women also make up the majority of precarious academic workers, who are typically the first casualties of budget cuts, especially those due to declining enrollments, which limit access to work for sessional and contingent faculty. A recent study of publishing on Covid-19 itself shows a precipitous decline in women's participation in journal submissions, as does a review of submissions in political science (Pinho-Gomes et al., 2020; Dolan & Lawless, 2020); academic women are increasingly speaking out about their inability to do their jobs completely, not only due to unpaid labour at home but due to unrecognized pastoral care work within the university (Burzynska & Contreras, 2020; Gabster et al., 2020). Women in all sectors of society are working harder and achieving less.

## Resisting Neoliberal Manifestations of “Care”

In a recent meeting of our book club at my institution, we found ourselves joking about what it was we needed to really be able to do our jobs effectively. We were a room of care workers, broadly conceived: faculty support and instructional faculty, folks who are at the centre of a stressful transition to fully online teaching. We weighed the likelihood of the thing we really needed—adequate staffing for faculty support, smaller classes for instructional faculty—versus what we got: yet another offer to take a yoga class or mindfulness workshop via Teams. One of the more kind and generous among us noted quickly that our frustrations shouldn't be targeting the good folks in our wellness office trying to do the work of caring for us. And that's true, of course.

And yet. The university supports the development of those sessions for a reason. Wellness webinars and other representations of institutional care are typically framed as being an individual responsibility: stress is something for the individual to manage, not something structural for the institution to resolve. This is, in fact, a co-opting and neutralizing of the political dimension of care: we are invited to “breathe, meditate” to resolve the situation, and not to “organize for change” (Michaeli, 2017, p. 53). Michaeli references Audre Lorde's assertion here that self-care is an “act of political warfare”—and indeed, the history and Black and Indigenous invocations of care are acts of resistance and continuance—but not when it is subverted in the service of academics working harder and producing more. This, indeed, is the work of Black feminist and womanist thinkers that considers care as radical self-preservation and survival in a world that doesn't value one's presence. Without appropriating this perspective, non-Black scholars can embrace its resonances and reject neoliberal representations of care that strive to individualize the experiences of trauma and make survival our private problems to solve. I have come to see these wellness webinars as positioning my exhaustion, my stress, my overwork as something I can solve on my own, with deep breathing or lunchtime yoga; they invite me to see my struggle as a personal failing. I am not failing. I am being failed.

In addition to considering who cares, it is critical—and deeply frustrating—to consider what care upholds within the university structure. Many universities were quick to celebrate their “caring” faculty in the promotional materials they released throughout the pandemic, but the question we should ask is how that care is materially supported. Do those caring faculty have smaller class sizes or more support resources? Do the support teams across the university that enable that care to be enacted get staffed appropriately to uphold that service without burning out? The labour of individuals showing care for each other often papers over structural failures. It is individuals working long hours who make up for understaffed and underfunded units; it is individuals taking time to help navigate bureaucracy or file forms that help the faceless university processes seem human and humane. Hannah McGregor asks all academics to consider critiques of care by Black and Indigenous scholars and think about when and where care should be refused or resisted: namely, where it props up the institution (McGregor, 2020). Care is complex: we use the word “care” to refer to things, like foster care or health care, that may be well-intentioned but that can and do enact great violence, especially among those already structurally and systemically marginalized. McGregor draws on Christina Sharpe's [In the Wake](#) and its insistence on care as a lateral force, unmediated by the state or other power structures, and given its complexity care becomes “a problem for thought” (2016, p. 5).

McGregor also draws on Billy-Ray Belcourt and his critique of “uncritical deployments of care” (Belcourt, 2018) in a settler colonial context that sees a superficial care primarily as a mechanism for profit and for papering over harm. Care is not an unambiguous good; it is not even necessarily neutral. We must ask what our care is being deployed in the service of.

But for many of us who work in educational technologies and faculty or student support, resisting or refusing care has an immediate and harmful impact on our colleagues and students. Imagining a structure and space for thinking and teaching outside the confines of the university is critical, valuable, urgent work. At the same time, for those whose work is circumscribed by the walls of the institution, the sense of being trapped is real. I described it [elsewhere](#) as feeling caught in a Samuel Beckett story: I can't go on (I know my care is being exploited by my institution); I'll go on (but what else can I do?). In my own role as a tenure-track faculty member, I know I have the freedom to refuse work that many do not, while recognizing that my refusal may have consequences for my career later. But in a moment of crisis, the work

doesn't go away, and with frozen budgets, I'm acutely aware that any work I refuse lands on non-faculty staff with less institutional power than even I hold. And the people impacted – sessional faculty, students—are also disproportionately vulnerable. So what do we do?

## Rethinking and Restructuring Care

What if the university valued care work in the first place?

Throughout this chapter, I have often thought (but striven not to say) that care is burdensome: care does not have to be burdensome, but it becomes so within systems that refuse to make space for it. It feels, for me, like a rejection of myself and my choices to imagine caring for my son is exclusively burdensome, but our institutional structures tell this story about our experiences for us. Looking to the language of embodiment in scholarship and pedagogy is useful here, and also telling: like the literature of radical care's roots in Black scholarship, the literature of embodiment is deeply resonant with decolonial scholarship. Roxana Ng argues for the value of recognizing embodiment in post-secondary pedagogy, because “most intellectual encounters entail a confrontation of bodies, which are differently inscribed” (Ng, 2018). We are not, of course, the brains in jars that the university imagines or wishes us to be. Ng discusses how gender, race, ability, sexuality, and class inscribe themselves upon the body, and these factors also intersect with questions of who is seen to be a caregiver and who is called upon to do care work. Care, too, inscribes itself upon the body—or circumscribes the body—both in terms of how childbirth and elder care and other caregiving roles outside the university often involve physical or embodied acts, and also in how they frequently require caregivers to absent themselves in ways that are conspicuous. When I am simultaneously called to answer a question in a videoconferenced department meeting and wipe a pre-schooler's bum—my pandemic home office space also being my child's preferred play area and the home of the potty during toilet training—my embodied self on screen is (comically, irrevocably, humiliatingly, depending on one's perspective) inscribed as a caregiver. This has an impact on my career: we know that having children is detrimental to women's academic careers, and we know that the pandemic has exacerbated the existing differences (Minello et. al., 2020).

The body of work on embodied scholarship and pedagogy underscores that it doesn't have to be this way. The academic myth of the life of the mind, separate from the troubles of the body, was always designed to keep certain bodies out: a white, able, male body is neutral, default, and acceptable because it draws no undue attention to itself; other bodies are not. The disabled body, the pregnant or lactating or post-partum body, the Black, brown, or Indigenous body, the queer body: these shapes are not welcome, nor are the experiences and perspectives these bodies hold. These bodies and the university are at odds, and the tradition for these bodies is always to assimilate as best we can. But frequently, we see the common cost of those struggles to assimilate are stress, exhaustion, illness, and burnout (Bisaillon et. al., 2020). As Alison Mountz [\[2\]](#) notes, “Masculinist spaces, practices, and topics articulated by participants assign value to some bodies and work over others” (2016, p. 216). At the same time, the work of caring within the university is critical; students survive and thrive because of recognized and unrecognized pastoral care work, primarily undertaken by those same bodies the “life of the mind” narrative is meant to exclude. The emotional labour of the university ensures student success, but it goes unrecognized and is a source of added stress and workload for academic staff (Laws & Fiedler, 2012). Given that some studies suggest the amount of unsupported emotional labour of academic staff now rivals or exceeds that of frontline health care staff (Berry & Cassidy, 2013), appropriate changes in the university might include recognizing this care work as institutional service or credited teaching time, valuing institutional service more highly, and providing professional development areas related to pastoral care, advising, and support work.

## Conclusions

I am very tired. I don't know when that will change. It has been a long, complex, and difficult year, with real personal costs. At the same time, when I look back over the year, I am not sure what I should have done differently. I would not

withhold the care I showed. And my complicity in my own overwork and exploitation is difficult to make meaning from. There are no easy answers here, but to value care—within and without the walls of the university—as the force that sustains is perhaps the first step. As Bessette and McGowan argue in their recent reflection on affective labour and faculty development,

...affective labor exists at work, it is integral to our work, we do our best work because of it, and we need to address it and incorporate it into our conversations about workload and expectations. (2020, p. 146)

There is an imperfectly analogous concept I borrow from my reading of current research on the impact of the pandemic on health care providers: moral stress (the phrase doesn't begin there <sup>[3]</sup>, but it is most useful to me in this context). This is a phrase for the taxing experience of having to support a policy or practice that contravenes your values. For many of us, working in a new fully online teaching and learning world against the backdrop of yet more administrative austerity has meant exactly that. Perhaps the pandemic has meant using or supporting tools—e-proctoring, plagiarism tracking, learning analytics—that we know to be harmful or easily weaponized. But we are also, many of us, marginalized within our universities while using our emotional labour to sustain the institution. This is work that taxes our sense of identity. Research on moral stress suggests that moral repair is possible, but it begins with institutions accepting responsibility and acknowledging harm (Shale, 2016). Whether that is possible begins, surely, with demanding that this work is recognized.

The university cannot love you. But it would be nice if it could see you.

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## Footnotes

[1] It is also my assertion that care is a critical component of edtech procurement. When procurement is underwritten by an institutional ethic of care philosophy—which centres on relationality, responsibility, and acknowledging power dynamics—the natural outcome is technology procurement that recognizes our fiduciary responsibility to student data and expenses. Care is a critical component of selecting appropriate educational technologies for our students, and it is all too often at the margins of the discussions that go into procurement.

[2] Mountz’s essay “Women on the Edge: Workplace Stress at Universities in North America” is a critical examination of the role that the devaluation of women’s bodies and embodied experiences has on stress and burnout. Mountz writes about the academic woman’s experience of miscarriage and infertility, and she challenges the silence around these topics in academia (considering the widespread experience of both among academic women) by talking about her own experiences. In solidarity with Mountz’s disclosure, I’m moved to note here that one toll the pandemic stress took on my body and my family was that I experienced a miscarriage in October 2020. We must make space for the stories of all bodies, when they are well and when they are suffering, within academia.

[3] Indeed, moral stress emerges from work on moral injury, which comes from scholarship on trauma and reaction in soldiers. EdTechs are not soldiers and we are not health care workers; we do not make life-and-death decisions. But we do carry the burden of care within institutions that are not structured for it, and I find moral stress useful as an anchor for thinking about the costs of care.





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# Reflection, Agency and Advocacy as Feminist Pedagogy: Rethinking Online Environmental Education

Patty Born

Neoliberalism

Higher Education

Environmental Education

Feminist Pedagogies

Online Education

Ecofeminism

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Feminist Critical Digital Pedagogy

*This chapter describes the evolution of one online class, *Foundations of Environmental Education*, which has typically been offered to graduate students at a liberal arts university in St Paul, Minnesota. The class, developed some 15 years ago by another faculty member, was originally structured in a traditional way, based on a teacher-student hierarchy, with teacher-identified outcomes, priorities, learning tasks, and assessments based on specific outputs defined and evaluated by the teacher. My position as an ecofeminist educator is that environmental education courses should be grounded in care, particularly since so many people are motivated to learn about and act on behalf of the environment as a result of their own positive feelings toward nature and animals. My belief was that the course needed a full deconstruction, reorganization and reconstruction grounded in an ethic of care. I wanted to disrupt the existing approach and move toward a more student-centered, care-oriented experience that valued students' lived experience, their own passions and questions, and explored issues that they identified as important. I also wanted to facilitate their own process of self-evaluation, and free them from any pressure that a traditional grading structure had previously created. I discuss my process of reflecting on student agency, and my impressions of the traditional, hierarchical structure of the original class and its impact on the student experience. Further, I describe how I applied feminist pedagogical approaches to my course, and share excerpts from student reflections and responses to these changes. In conclusion, I describe the impact the shifts had on my teaching and thinking, and how I have used the process to help me apply these principles to additional courses I teach.*

This chapter describes the evolution of one online class, *Foundations of Environmental Education*, which I have been teaching for several years. I first describe the major outcomes and artifacts associated with this class as it was originally structured, and explain how they upheld traditional, hierarchical, neoliberal approaches and paradigms. Next, I explain how my positionality as an ecofeminist scholar-activist informed my process of redesigning the course, grounded in care, constructivism, and community. I applied feminist pedagogical approaches to redesign the course, and share excerpts from student reflections and responses to these changes. As a final take-away, I offer readers tangible suggestions should they wish to apply any of the strategies to their own courses.

# The Context

The class that I focus on in this chapter is *Foundations of Environmental Education*—a graduate-level course designed for students with a variety of backgrounds and experience. Offered at a liberal arts university in St Paul, Minnesota (US), it is a required part of a Master's degree in Natural Sciences and Environmental Education, which has been a program at Hamline University for 25 years. The program is fully online, with field-based elective courses and independent study opportunities for students no matter their physical location. Hamline's School of Education has been offering online graduate courses since 2011. While it may seem ironic to offer environmental education courses online, this approach presents a number of important benefits: attracting, as it does, a much greater diversity of students, including those from rural areas, those from outside the state of Minnesota, those serving in the military, those with physical disabilities or limitations, and who couldn't otherwise access the campus. In many ways, online courses are accessible in ways that physical, face-to-face courses simply are not (Aneja, 2017).

The course *Foundations of Environmental Education* is one of the so-called core courses for the degree, which means that every degree-seeking student is required to complete it as part of their program. In the time that I have been program director and lead faculty in the program, I have taught the class eleven times. Other courses that I teach in the Master's program have focused on animals in environmental education, environmental education for early learners, sustainability education, environmental justice, and an overview course on learners and learning. Every year, I supervise at least 50 Masters students across our education graduate degree programs as they complete the culminating work of their program: either a written thesis or capstone project. For the most part, students in the program are working adults with a deep commitment to teaching and learning about the environment. Many work in traditional classroom settings. Others work in nonformal settings such as nature centers, parks, or zoos, and some work for environmental or civic non-profit agencies.

A commonality among these diverse backgrounds and professions is that the students are passionate about saving the planet, advocating for nature, and creating a hopeful future. Most share stories of childhoods spent exploring natural places with loved ones, memories of animals or wild places that have been important to them. In their initial applications to the graduate program, almost to a person, prospective students unabashedly talk about love: how it drives their passion for their work, how deeply they care for the planet and are concerned with environmental issues, how important it is that their own children and future generations can experience and feel that same deep love for Earth and its inhabitants. They have a vested, very personal interest in environmental education, and in many cases, a desire to learn more so that they can bring their passion and commitment to the environment to their own professional settings.

## Environmental Education in Context

According to the United States Environmental Protection Agency, environmental education is defined as

*a process that allows individuals to explore environmental issues, engage in problem solving, and take action to improve the environment. As a result, individuals develop a deeper understanding of environmental issues and have the skills to make informed and responsible decisions. (epa.gov, 2018)*

Others, including myself, take a more holistic view of environmental education, calling for it to include "critical thinking about issues of quality of life and human-nature interrelationships" (Stevenson, Wals, Heimlich, & Field, 2017, p. 52). It happens in classrooms, parks, nature centers, zoos: the list goes on. Wherever people are making connections to and learning about the environment, environmental education is happening.

For too long, wary of being too political or controversial, environmental education practitioners, particularly those in the United States, have espoused the mantra of teaching students how to think, not what to think [about environmental issues]. This approach carefully sidesteps any discourse or critical reflection on the role of advocacy in environmental education, which has arguably been a barrier to equipping students with the tools and agency to create change (Jickling, 2003). At times (although this is improving in some cases and spaces), environmental education's focus has felt somewhat neoliberal in the way that it tends to instrumentalize learners, promoting individual actions rather than

looking more holistically at the intersections of environmental, social, and economic issues (Jickling, 2003; Lloro-Bidart, 2017; Meek & Lloro-Bidart, 2017) and the emotional components associated therein. The program in which I teach seeks to support students in a deeper interrogation of problematic anthropocentric behaviors, along with reflection on environmental advocacy, and offers an examination of multiple perspectives on environmental education pedagogies. It responds to students' love for the subject matter and honors their commitment to doing meaningful work on behalf of the planet.

## My Positionality

I have worked as a faculty member in higher education for 15 years. I arrived here through a circuitous route: my early career included positions as diverse as park naturalist, wildlife research aide, natural resources specialist, museum educator, education director, and classroom teacher. That I have spent my adult years working as an educator in one form or another belies my own history as a struggling student.

Fortunately, I vividly recall what it felt like to really be seen: my fifth grade teacher seemed to recognize that I was happiest outdoors. She found whatever excuse she could to send me outdoors to take care of our school's resident "pets"—the chickens and ducks who lived in a courtyard between wings of the school building. An animal and nature-lover from a young age, I felt most comfortable and free outdoors among the animals. Out there, no one was expecting me to sit up, keep still, complete the worksheets, or print neatly. I simply needed to scatter cracked corn on the ground and I was doing enough. I was free to lie in the grass, talk to the animals, and enjoy the sun on my face.

But by the time I reached middle school, the expectations and requirements of schooling began to take their toll: I struggled to live up to the expectations of my white, upper-middle class suburban district. Teachers labeled me "sloppy" and openly mocked my messy handwriting. I didn't have the right clothes, the right hairstyle, the right friends. I became shy and introverted, and internalized the disapproval of others. Although I maintained decent grades, school felt like a daily struggle to me: having to ask permission to go to the restroom, having to consume everything on my plate before being allowed to leave the lunch room. Not being able to choose where I sat, or even *how* I sat (I was uncomfortable at the tiny plastic desk to which I was assigned and would have been much happier sprawled on the floor), having to take timed tests. Being taught a whitewashed, male-dominated version of history, social studies, and science, and being publicly derided or punished by the teachers when I questioned their version of truth. My painful (but sadly, not unusual) experiences in public school in the US taught me the education system was created to maintain legions of obedient children who did what they were told, when they were told, how they were told.

I was lucky enough to have supportive adults in my life who helped me figure out how to navigate high school and eventually, college. I ultimately received a doctorate in education where I deepened my commitment to educational equity and critical pedagogies. I have been fortunate to make my professional home at a University with a commitment to social justice: for me that means actively working to dismantle systems of oppression, particularly within teacher education and traditional educational power dynamics (McCusker, 2017) and environmental education settings.

My early experiences as a student fundamentally informed and impacted my teaching. I disagreed with the oppressive approaches and indoctrination I had experienced throughout my years as a public school student and wanted to somehow undo them. It seemed to me that the purpose of education seemed to be centered around compliance and production, which felt harmful and wrong. But that memory of the ducks and chickens and my fifth-grade teacher continued to remind me that there was actually something beyond compliance and production. It was love. It was agency, freedom, a chance to learn from and with animals, to breathe fresh air and have time to reflect. It was a recognition of individual personhood; to that teacher, I was more than just a student who wouldn't sit still. Those hours spent outside with the chickens and ducks had a profound experience on me as a learner, one which has taken me years to unpack and which has affected my entire educational approach. Having shared my personal experience, I hope to have conveyed my own grounding as a teacher-educator and the elements of my own past which have inspired me as an educator and scholar-activist.

# The Course

Originally developed some 15 years ago by another faculty member, *Foundations of Environmental Education* was structured in a very traditional way: based on a teacher-student hierarchy, it was characterized by teacher-defined outcomes, priorities, learning tasks, outputs, and assessments. It was developed and taught by a colleague prior to my “inheriting” it when I became director and lead faculty for the Master’s degree program. The early version of this class contained a mix of history, research, and writing. It was intended for those who were working or interested in working in the environmental education field. The course has been taught online since its creation, and at its beginning, the class coincided with early versions of online teaching platforms, whose structure and functionality were limited. These early versions were taught using the Blackboard Learning Management System, and were set up in a read-respond-reflect format.

Requirements for the course included the three “R’s” of online learning: reading, research, and wRiting. The assignments, their ostensible purposes, and the assessment tools used are detailed in Table 1. In the original version of the course, students were assessed largely on their ability to make regular, substantive, coherent discussion posts, to meet minimum requirements for word count and other details, and to produce artifacts such as essays and powerpoint presentations. These assignments were rather superficial, and their assessments were designed to show that students were reading the material and engaging with the online discussions. While filled with important content and the potential for rich supplementary material, the course felt somewhat lacking to me, focused as it was on one [white, western, masculine] perspective of environmental education, and requiring students’ efficient production of artifacts: descriptive environmental timelines, discussion posts, and lengthy writing assignments. There was a significant amount of reading included with the course, but very little material reflective of perspectives of anyone other than the western, white, masculine identifying-scholars who dominate the environmental education literature.

The assessment rubrics I inherited focused strictly on the quantifiable elements of each assignment such as word count, number of research sources, and APA adherence. I was frustrated at having to constantly monitor students’ discussion posts and written assignments, counting words and responses, and felt there must be a better way to engage them. Prioritizing quantity over things like quality or authenticity felt, to me, like a form of policing and had a rigidity that did not feel conducive to the sort of deep reflection or engagement that the subject matter demands.

In my mind, this approach seemed disrespectful to the students. Most of the students were working professional adults who had pretty clear ideas about what they wanted and needed out of a graduate degree. The structure of the course afforded them little to no agency, limited choice as to the resources available and assignments required, and it privileged the written word and adherence to the administrative minutiae of rubrics as evidence of success. As is clear in Table 1, the course requirements and grading criteria were stringent and narrowly focused.

**Table 1**

*Assignments and assessments in the original course prior to curriculum redesign.*

Original course assignment/requirement	Ostensible purpose	Assessment tool used by instructor
Instructor-selected readings related to each week’s theme.	To provide information about that theme and/or examples.	None.
Discussion posts and responses (weekly or more often).	To engage students with one another.	Checklist:

Original course assignment/requirement	Ostensible purpose	Assessment tool used by instructor
		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 1-2 “original ideas”</li> <li>• 2-4 responses to others’ posts</li> <li>• Each post should be less than 200 words</li> </ul>
Environmental Timeline: Written or submitted as a slideshow presentation.	To contextualize the role of environmental education within the past 100 years of US history.	At least 15 events included for a grade of B.  At least 20 events included for a grade of A.
Environmental Elder Research: 5000 word essay describing one person’s contribution to the field of environmental education.	To offer an in-depth study of one person’s perspective on or contributions to the field.	Writing rubric, APA adherence.
Students select a person from the list provided by the instructor.		

The structure of the original class upheld an oppressive educational hegemony where the instructor held the power to decide what information was important, how students should engage with the content, and evaluate the quality of their engagement based on criteria determined by the instructor. The end result was that the students were reliant on the instructor to make a final determination as to their knowledge, capability, and command of the material. Table 2 provides some examples of how the course as it was originally designed reinforced hegemonic educational practices.

**Table 2**

*Traditional educational hegemonies reinforced in the original class prior to curriculum redesign.*

Tasks	Hegemonic educational practices reinforced
Weekly themes pre-selected and static.	The instructor has determined what students should focus on and when. Course structure, pacing and flow are established before the course even begins, eliminating flexibility or response to student questions/priorities.
Initial discussion threads are created by instructor.	Prompts and responses are centered on instructor’s perspective on “what matters” each week.
Requirements for student work are rigid and based on word count and quantity of submissions.	Students are graded on word count and frequency of submissions. Students are incentivized to create lengthy, frequent, often verbose responses. Students are discouraged from introducing new ideas or challenging others’ perspectives, since the number of responses to others is prioritized over content.
Readings selected ahead of time and all are required.	Readings and additional materials offer only that perspective which is prioritized by the instructor; scholars and authors are limited to instructor’s knowledge

Tasks	Hegemonic educational practices reinforced
	base/comfort level. Students are required to consume all reading materials in order to receive credit.
Envrionmental Timeline Project grade is based on number of events included.	Students are given two grades to choose from and grade is based on number of timeline events rather than other, more meaningful criteria. Timeline represents one perspective.
Environmental Elder Research Project. Students choose an individual from a list provided by the instructor or must “seek approval” to choose an alternative.	Term “environmental elder” hints of cultural appropriation. List provided by instructor is comprised of mostly white American males who impacted environmental history, many of whom also had problematic, colonialist mindsets and behaviors. Many voices and perspectives are erased. Requiring students to seek approval discourages students for whom “challenging authority” is difficult or culturally discouraged.
Final paper has rigid requirements related to word count and APA adherence.	Favors only the written word as a means of effective, meaningful communication; disadvantages students for whom writing is difficult or those for whom English is a second language.

## An Ecofeminist Perspective

I first taught the class about six years ago, but after teaching it just a few times, it started to feel jarring. Something wasn't quite sitting well with me. I grew convinced that the course needed a full deconstruction, reorganization, and reconstruction. Instead of a focus on historical events and white male influencers, I felt the class should instead contextualize environmental education, present a variety of perspectives, and recognize the interconnectedness of environmental education. I felt that the learning community should be responsive to the varied and diverse lived experience of the students. I wanted the class to reflect some of the values that are central to environmental education: love for the planet, a desire to dismantle power structures and practices that are harmful to Earth and its inhabitants. Tenets of ecopedagogy (Gaard, 2008, Khan, 2008) drove me to recreate the online class to be one that valued collaboration, community building, and recognition of the multitudes of ways of knowing, feeling, and engaging. As it turns out, these values also intersect with many paradigms of feminist pedagogies (McCusker, 2017) and with Richards' cyberfeminist pedagogy (2011). I wanted to create an online class where students would be free to take time to reflect deeply on material and create thoughtful, considered responses. As others have noted, shy or introverted students find a freedom to contribute to virtual discussions or be vulnerable. These students may feel stifled, threatened, or discouraged in the face-to-face setting (Aneja, 2017; Russell, 2019) where they are subjected to other students' body language, gestures, rolled eyes, and implicit or explicit verbal or visual critiques of identity and ideas.

I sought to disrupt the existing approach and move toward a more student-centered, care-oriented, shared community that valued students' lived experience, their own passions and questions, and explored issues that they identified as important. I wanted to create a space for them to express their own feelings about the environment and to let those feelings, questions, and curiosities guide their work in the class. I also wanted students to interrogate the binaries typically associated with environmental education: people/nature; good choices/bad choices, science/emotion, hope/despair (Fletcher, 2017). Finally, as a way of honoring their individual journeys and cognizant of the deeply personal nature of the class, I also wanted to facilitate their own process of self-evaluation, and free them from the need to perform in the ways that the traditional grading structure had previously demanded.

I have long tried to maintain an approach to teaching that challenges students to question, among other things, the role and impact of power structures that have dominated their educational experiences. I seek to support students in reflecting on their own positionality, the systems of privilege in which they were raised (or not), their own relations with

nature, and their notions of community. As a scholar-activist, I'm concerned with the intersections of individuals' relations with self/other, nature, and social systems. Feminist pedagogy gives emphasis to empowering student voices, collaboration, community building and lived experience (Kishimoto & Mwangi, 2009). To me, an ecofeminist pedagogy calls for interrogating the human/animal/nature connection to help students expand their thinking beyond traditional—and highly valued in western cultures—anthropocentric paradigms. Ecofeminist values intersect with feminist pedagogical approaches to create communities of learners, democratic classrooms, and engage with social [and environmental] justice. My position as an ecofeminist educator is that environmental education courses should be grounded in care, particularly since so many people are motivated to learn about and act on behalf of the environment as a result of their own positive feelings toward nature and animals. I aim to work within the intersections of social, ecological, and interspecies justice (Humes, 2008) and I seek to teach for a "just, democratic, and sustainable planetary civilization" (Kahn, 2008, p.9). I seek to do this at the "micro" level in my teaching, as well as the macro-level in my work as a scholar-activist.

Above all, I didn't want the class to reproduce that neoliberal, individualist mindset so prevalent in environmental education approaches. This mindset tends to isolate practitioners and those they teach: focusing on individuals and events without context, often burdening the individual with guilt, anxiety and overwhelm, without seeing the intersections that are so prevalent in environmental work (Lloro-Bidart & Semenko, 2017). I felt it was important to move away from environmental education's tendency to focus on the responsibility of the individual alone to solve environmental problems. It seemed appropriate, then, to reconfigure the class to be more just, democratic, and sustainable, a central tenet of many feminist pedagogies (Llewellyn and Llewellyn, 2015). Finally, realizing the class would continue to take place online, I sought to engage in a sort of eco-"cyberfeminist pedagogy" as Richard (2011, p. 7) describes, creating an online class grounded in an "ethics of care, community-based curriculum, collaboration, and embodied praxis."

Most of all, I wanted the class to be a place where students could engage with the content as an act of "political love" (Tolbert & Bazzul, 2019), acknowledging that "the possibility of remaining neutral has never existed" (p. 305) letting their love for the subject matter drive the ways in which they interacted with material and with one another, and ultimately with themselves as learners. Tolbert and Bazzul's notion of teaching as an act of political love has helped me to clarify my thinking and positionality as an educator, allowing me a freedom and courage to assert my own stance as an eco-feminist educator.

I reflected deeply on these values as I redesigned the class. Knowing that my goals were to ground the course in an ethic of care, create community, elevate student voice and agency, attend to power dynamics, and engage in the course as an act of love, I knew a complete overhaul was in order. I looked at everything from the readings to the assignments, to the deadlines and assessment tools and sought to re-generate the course, aligned more directly with ecofeminist pedagogical approaches.

I placed reminders in the syllabus and in each daily announcement about how we, as a learning community, could care for one another, and invited students to share their own ideas. In addition, I sent out weekly email notes to students, checking in on their well-being, their level of energy for the week, and their perceived level of commitment to the class at that particular time. I threw out the expensive and outdated textbooks, replacing them with resources students could access and download free of charge such as those from the [North American Association for Environmental Education](#) and [Learning for Justice](#) (formerly Teaching Tolerance). I also added additional resources by Black scholars and scholars of color, as well as scholars identifying as LGBTQIA (refers to individuals who identify as lesbian, gay, transgender, queer, intersex and asexual). I identified several overarching themes as "possible pathways" in the course, but left each module (a duration of about two weeks) to take shape based on student questions, discoveries, or ideas. I included content related to the development of environmental education, but sought to include diverse perspectives and urged students to do so as well. I grounded the content in the idea of intersectionality (Crenshaw 1989), an idea presented quite early in the course. My aim here was that students would apply lenses of gender, race, class, ability, and socio-economic status to their readings, assignments, and experiences in the class. My aim was to employ feminist research methodologies (Abusaa et al, 2020) as I approached the activities in the course re-design. I also established a



“Go and Do” activity, an expectation that students would venture outdoors each week (or more often, if possible) to reconnect with Earth and remember their own deeply personal reasons for engaging in this work.

Table 3 describe changes I made to main course elements, indicate which ecofeminist pedagogical approaches they reflect, and provide specific examples to illustrate.

**Table 3**

*Examples of ecofeminist pedagogical strategies used in the class.*

Course activity	Action	Ecofeminist pedagogical approach	Examples from course
Readings and supplemental resources	<p>Updated to reflect scholars who identify as BIPOC (refers to individuals who identify as black, indigenous, or people of color) and/or LGBTQIA and present important, previously silenced perspectives on environmental education.</p> <p>Optional guiding questions or “nudges” offered to help students frame their responses.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• No voice is privileged over another</li> <li>• Disrupt hierarchy</li> <li>• Student ideas and contributions are valued and may drive discussions or other activities</li> <li>• Clear and transparent objectives, assessment measure, and expectations</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Readings and resources come from a variety of sources; more than half are written by BIPOC and LGBTQIA scholars.</li> <li>• Students are invited to share resources they want to contribute or feel has value to the course.</li> <li>• All materials are free to students (our library pays).</li> <li>• All instructor-selected readings and course material is shared ahead of time to ensure students have access and to allow students to prioritize time and reflection, rather than busywork.</li> <li>• Any rubric that was used was shared with students ahead of time.</li> </ul>
Course themes	Redesigned away from “dates and faces” toward more meaningful engagement with the subject matter. Loose themes identified at the start but openness to change as student needs emerge.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Interrogating binaries in environmental education</li> <li>• Hope</li> <li>• Advocacy/social change</li> <li>• Engaging in pro-environment behaviors</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Themes that reflect ecofeminist and ecopedagogical values including environmental equity and access; the role of advocacy.</li> <li>• Student and class needs drive the themes which emerge as the course progresses.</li> </ul>
Discussions	Students invited to create their own discussion fora and topics. No requirements as to word count, number of responses, etc.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Dismantling hierarchies</li> <li>• Intersectionality</li> <li>• Student agency</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Students led and guided discussions—I didn’t intrude or guide unless asked.</li> </ul>



Course activity	Action	Ecofeminist pedagogical approach	Examples from course
Environmental Issue Project	Students identify an issue that is important to them, conduct research, seek out multiple perspectives.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Research that calls for reflection on issues as well as focusing on marginalized communities</li> <li>• Recognizing and honoring emotion as central to environmental education</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Students had freedom to choose the topic, urged to seek resources from BIPOC scholars.</li> <li>• Students were asked to research multiple perspectives on the issue.</li> <li>• Students had freedom to present or write, illustrate, make a video, create multimedia, etc.</li> </ul>
Go and Do assignments	Students were encouraged to go outdoors on a regular basis and ground themselves in their own “why.”	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Sustainability</li> <li>• Regeneration</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Students were invited to go outdoors every day or as often as possible to tune in to nature and remind themselves why.</li> <li>• Time outdoors is healing.</li> <li>• Workload determined and managed by students.</li> </ul>
Portfolio assignment	Student collection of impactful work and reflection on their experience	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Student voice and agency</li> <li>• Disrupting power dynamics</li> <li>• Hope</li> <li>• Learning as an act of political love</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Students are asked for feedback about course structure and content</li> </ul>
Final meeting	Students initiate and lead a one-to-one meeting with instructor, either in person or virtually.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Student voice and agency</li> <li>• Community building</li> <li>• Connection</li> <li>• Interrupting hierarchy</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Students choose what to share and why.</li> <li>• Students and I connect personally for a period of time.</li> <li>• Student reflects on their whole experience in the class.</li> <li>• Student shares what was important, what had an impact, etc.</li> <li>• Student determines final grade for the course.</li> </ul>

Perhaps the most radical and meaningful change I implemented was to *eliminate grading altogether*. Instead, I shifted to a portfolio-based approach. I wanted students to look to themselves for assessment of their learning and to reflect on their own growth and development. I also wanted to know what they most valued about the course, what resources meant the most to them and why. I described this approach as follows in the syllabus:

Throughout the course, you will compile a collection of resources that you deem to be of high value and which will likely serve as resources during this class and as you progress in your program here at Hamline University. The purpose of your portfolio is to share with me the elements of the class that you felt had the most significant impact on you as a learner. Hence, you have total freedom about what to include. Your portfolio should include a variety of elements; and may include the following:

- summary of your thoughts on the environmental education programs you visited during this course (you should have visited at least 4 programs over the course of the semester);
- your environmental education philosophy;
- examples of environmental education lessons you developed that you are particularly proud of;
- articles or readings that were especially powerful for you;
- examples of your best work during the course: for example, discussions that you participated in where you felt particularly engaged, video presentations you submitted that you felt demonstrated a high quality contribution, notes that you took during your research project, or something else.

Students compiled their portfolios over the course of the semester, and I reserved the final two weeks of the semester for one-on-one meetings. I invited students to respond to the questions shown below. Many chose to write letters to me, and then to present their portfolio collections as they read their letters. Many submitted letters to me and approached the portfolio sharing process as a very informal conversation. Some created multimedia presentations that responded to these prompts. I was open to receiving this communication however students chose to share it with me.

Toward the end of the semester, we will have a face-to-face or virtual meeting, where you will share your portfolio with me, and the following questions will guide our agenda. This approach may feel challenging, confusing, or liberating to you (maybe all of the above!). I encourage you to give it a try and continue to stay in communication with me throughout the semester so that I can best support you.

- What about this course challenged you the most?
- What did you most enjoy about the course?
- How engaged were you in the various course expectations; such as the readings, discussions, research?
- How productive and constructive were your discussion contributions?
- What helped you to develop or grow as a practitioner of environmental education?
- How did you contribute to your colleagues' growth and learning during this course?
- How did you select your portfolio materials? What did you choose \*not\* to include and why?
- For some students, self-assessment is challenging. For others, it's empowering. How did you experience it? What was it like to be in charge of your own assessment and performance in the class? How comfortable were you with that level of control?
- What is the final grade that YOU think best reflects your performance in the course this semester? Why? For help with this, review assignment requirements and rubrics, guidelines for posting "good" discussion topics, my feedback, feedback from your peers, etc.

Admittedly, meeting with each participant over coffee or virtually is time-consuming. With an average of 23 students every semester, I'm committing myself to well over 23 hours of meetings in what is usually a very busy time of the year. It is tiring. Many of my students are only free on evenings or weekends. I open up my calendar and try to accommodate meeting preferences, but this means missing dinners with my family and a lot of weekends. On the other hand, I am energized by each conversation. I am always so happy to have created this opportunity to meet with students so that

they can share their experiences with me. I feel it allows me to get to know each student at a much more intimate level than I would otherwise. I also get good feedback on my instructional style, course content and pacing, and suggestions for improvement. I'm struck by the generosity that the students bring to these conversations: they are consistently willing to share their successes, challenges, learning, impacts, as well as how the course affected their own teaching practice and stance toward environmental education.

## Conclusion

Following is some of the feedback that I have received which has underscored the importance of these approaches.

*This past semester has been a real challenge for me, from teaching in the classroom for the first time (during a pandemic) and beginning my grad school journey, it has all been an adjustment. But I feel that I have handled all the challenges and come out the other side a better educator and better able to manage my time.*

*To be honest, I feel I put forth as much effort as I could. I read all of the readings and completed my assignments, but with all of the chaos of this year I didn't do anything beyond what I felt was the minimal expectation. I still feel I was engaged and learned a lot, however I think I could have done a little better if I had more mental stamina to put towards this work. However, being a teacher this [pandemic] year has proven to really push me to the ends of my work limits.*

Based on this feedback, it is clear to me that students assess their own performance and expectations of themselves. Even when they find that challenging, they are willing to do so with frankness and honesty. They candidly reflect on their own participation, energy level and investment in certain course activities. Since they are the ones doing the reflecting there is no hierarchical judgement or valuation of their participation or contributions—any of that comes from them, not me. They reflect on their learning and growth, and in so doing, have become more clear about their own expectations of themselves as learners and participants.

It is important to me to also share some feedback about the “go and do” activity, which encouraged students to venture outdoors as often as possible to reconnect with nature in whatever way made sense for them: drawing or writing, hiking or running, camping, canoeing, or simply sitting and being. Students consistently share that this experience, perhaps more so than any other, is important to them and reconnects them to their love for the environment. This speaks to the need described earlier to create environmental education spaces as places of political love, and to freely and unabashedly encourage students to seek out opportunities to feel safe, loved, and supported by nature.

*The readings and discussions that have been presented in class [have] influenced my relationship with nature... when I find myself being outside, I allow myself to almost surrender to the emotions and feelings that arise while I bathe in nature's medicine. I don't take the natural environment that surrounds me for granted because the readings and discussions have reinforced this idea within me that we are not only connected to nature, but we are nature.*

*I feel like with the way things are right now it is so easy to get lost in a daze, and much harder to find the motivation and desire to do things and to keep pushing. I feel like the [Go and Do] assignment for me is something worth doing. When people come to me for advice about being stressed, angry or lost, I always tell them to imagine that they are a tree, that they are grounded, and to close their eyes, and imagine they can hear the leaves in the wind. I have always found that this makes me feel calm.*

Taking an ecofeminist stance toward the redesign of this course, and maintaining an ecofeminist pedagogical approach has been deeply rewarding. I have seen students be challenged by reading material, new ideas and paradigms, and by the self-evaluation process. In my situation, the ecofeminist approaches were supportive of student growth, reflection, and application to their own practice as educators. Perhaps most importantly, though, the ethic of care and the willingness to approach the subject matter as an act of political love was the most transformative of all.

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# Virtually De-Centered and Radically Hopeful: Faculty Learning Communities

Judit Török & Maura Conley

Faculty Development

Higher Education

Educational Development

Community Building

Feminist Pedagogies

Learning Communities

Faculty Collaboration

Power Relations

Feminist Critical Digital Pedagogy

*In Fall 2020, Pratt Institute's (US) Center for Teaching and Learning facilitated and participated in a Deep Dive Community on Feminist Pedagogies (FemPed Deep Dive Community). This fully online faculty development series used online platforms for collaborative research, conversations, community building and engagement. The program brought together a diverse faculty group from nine departments to examine readings on feminist pedagogy, apply critical lenses to classroom and administrative work, and set the task of enacting a Reflective Action Plan. The goal of the Plan was to both look back at the labor completed and its implications, and become part of a larger institutional tradition based in real action as individuals in our classroom practice and as a group in this Community, the first of its kind. Our chapter provides an experiential reflection on this virtual FemPed Deep Dive Community as our case study along with an exploration of practices that we have implemented in our community. We showcase how we put the pedagogical suggestions of "Don't Hate Me Because I'm Virtual" by Chick and Hassel (2009) into practice with colleagues as we gathered online. We reflect on the larger implications and what they mean for online teaching practices as well other feminist-pedagogy-inspired virtual faculty learning communities or groups.*

Our chapter aims to frame our virtual FemPed Deep Dive Community through the concept of hope as a radical agent. We share both our successes and shortcomings through an experiential reflection on this virtual community, and through deep respect for the process and less emphasis on progress. We put the pedagogical suggestions of "Don't Hate Me Because I'm Virtual" by Chick and Hassel (2009) into practice with colleagues as we gathered over a period of four weeks. A de-centered collective community, where each participant is asked to be self-guided as well as responsible to the entire group, is quite out of the ordinary within the traditional system of higher education; it was also truly a difficult leap for some because of pandemic-related fatigue and social-upheaval traumas, among myriad other reasons.

We will discuss what it was like to both participate and facilitate the FemPed Deep Dive Community project, thus blurring the lines of traditional notions of teacher and student roles. We practiced through various activities and reflection prompts how we might de-center the "classroom," and make visible the often ignored emotional heavy-lifting that accompanies a caring-focused pedagogy, which needs constant attention and thought (McKenna, 1996). Inspired heavily by Crenshaw's (1991) critical lens on intersectionality, we discussed the need for developing a language which is critical of the dominant view of teaching and educational institutions. The group explored how we can know that our community was truly building on the experiences of the participants, and that we were collectively moving on to seeing

our “experiences in different lights and relating our experiences to other or new evidence” (Shrewsbury, 1997, p. 6-7). We will then reflect on the larger implications of our take-aways and what they mean for online teaching practices as well other feminist-pedagogy-inspired virtual faculty learning communities or groups.

## The Deep Dive Community

In planning Center of Teaching and Learning (CTL) programming, we try to offer a dynamic mix of faculty conversations to support teaching in online and hybrid modalities, technology platform-modeling sessions, and continuing our ongoing discussions about more theoretical aspects of art and design educational practices. We offer year-long Faculty Learning Communities that are a major contributor to the progress of the scholarship of teaching and learning efforts on our campus, but the entry points to these communities are infrequent and the yearly commitment required can seem daunting, inaccessible, or undoable to many. In an effort to combine faculty’s need for camaraderie and practices (modeled by our Faculty Learning Communities) but with only a small fraction of the commitment, we designed our month-long Deep Dive Communities. These Deep Dives are aimed to be cross disciplinary, reflective, action-oriented, and critical. Our main focus was on sharing theoretical pedagogical frameworks that colleagues could ultimately incorporate into their classroom and teaching practices. Based on some informal polling on possible topics, we decided that the first Deep Dive Community would focus on feminist pedagogies (FemPed, for short).

Remaining true to the centrality of a community, as established by best practices in our Faculty Learning Communities as well as the tenets of feminist pedagogies, our aim was to keep the structure of the Deep Dive Community very decentered. Aside from participation in synchronous sessions and a final reflective action plan, we had only a loose idea of the arc of the series; exactly how we enacted that loose plan was very much based on a group consensus.

### Selected prompts from our community-building activities:

#### Framing Questions

- What community guidelines do you want to propose for our group (if other than the CTL guidelines)?
- How should we work together, what should we value most as a FemPed Deep Dive Community?
- What are your individual questions (intentions/objective) you’d like to explore in this Deep Dive Community?
- What should be our collective set of objectives/intentions to engage with during this series?

With ten faculty participants—five part-timers and five full-timers—we embarked on a series that would explore, critique, and reflect on feminist pedagogies for our art and design school. We promised to pay part-time faculty a small stipend for their investment of time and commitment to this work. Using a mix of Zoom for synchronous meetings and Milanote for our asynchronous work, our first task was collecting resources to read together and use as common texts. We settled on Chick and Hassel’s article “Don’t Hate Me Because I’m Virtual” (2009) and asked colleagues to add their own favorites that they thought might be good for the group to read.



## Some suggestions received from our reading board

- I'm Your Sister: Black Women Organizing Across Sexualities, by Audre Lorde
- On Intersectionality, by Kimberle Crenshaw
- What is Feminist Pedagogy?, by Carolyn Shrewsbury
- Teaching to Transgress: Education as the Practice of Freedom, by bell hooks
- Care the Core: Conversational Essays on Identity, Education and Power, by Sherri Spelic
- Transforming Higher Education with Distributed Open Collaborative Courses (DOCCs): Feminist Pedagogies and Networked Learning, by Balsamo and colleagues
- New Ways of Seeing podcast, by the BBC Radio 4

At the forefront of everyone's mind in the Fall of 2020 was the recent and still shocking switch to almost-exclusive virtual teaching because of the covid-19 pandemic, thus taking the virtual aspects of FemPed into consideration would be important as Chick and Hassel state:

*If the principles of feminist pedagogy can revise classroom spaces, learning activities, and modes of communication and knowledge construction in our F2F classes, then imagine their potential for the often quiet, distant, lonely, impersonal non spaces of online classes, where learning too easily slips into the one-way transfer of information in virtual independent study or correspondence courses. The potential is great, particularly because online classes are often full of characteristics antithetical to our ideal feminist classroom. (Chick and Hassel, 2009, p. 196)*

Chick and Hassel continue to unpack the question, how to embed feminist values in learning environments, and suggest that we consider three key aspects: 1. Dynamics and Environment, 2. Definition of Knowledge and 3. Habits of Mind. Next, we demonstrate how we applied each aspect to our program design.

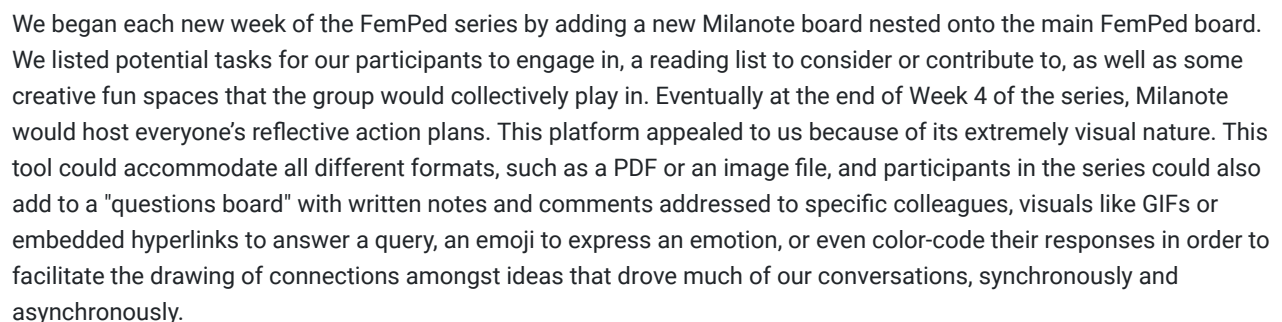
*Dynamics and environment.* Paying attention to power dynamics in a feminist virtual classroom is important for the learners to be able to use their voices authentically and care about themselves and each other as they contribute to the knowledge produced by the community. We intentionally designed our FemPed community and our asynchronous platforms to be open and inviting, with spaces for individual connections and personalities to shine through. We were also keenly aware of perceived hierarchies and power dynamics within our community from the start, and we hoped to create shared roles and responsibilities for us as facilitators, and for our faculty colleagues as participants.

*Definition of knowledge.* There is a need for a deliberate and reflective attention to forms, kinds and constructions of knowledge that occupy our classrooms. As virtual feminist teachers, we must embrace the complexities and ambiguities of our knowledge as a construct, therefore create opportunities for our learners through activities, assignments, course modules, and discussions to recognize that knowledge is beyond just individually processing data. It includes active learning, collaboration, interactions, hopeful inquiry—all of which were basic building blocks of our FemPed Deep Dive Community. We discussed various metaphors for learning and education (some suggested by the authors, others by our participants) to help us collectively clarify and create meaning. We utilized pair work and small group discussion strategies in our Zoom calls, as well as a fishbowl activity to explore topics in our community.

*Habits of mind.* As one of the most abstract yet central aspects of learning in a college classroom, this concept includes some higher order thinking and tasks, such as analyzing and synthesizing texts, evaluating arguments and demonstrating ownership of one's education. From a feminist perspective, these habits need to also be shaped by reflections on gender, race, class, and culture as intersecting power structures. Awareness of intersectionality and "confluence" (Shaw & Lee, 2007, p. 62) were key topics in our FemPed discussions, as we took apart the complexities of teaching to diverse populations, while embracing multiple perspectives in our classrooms as feminist educators.

Milanote ([milanote.com](https://milanote.com)) is a collective drafting platform aimed mostly at creatives as a means of brainstorming or organizing projects, either individually or as a group. It was suggested by a colleague and we found it very beneficial for our own idea development at CTL. We have been successfully using it with participants in our center events and series since we moved to function fully online in March 2020. It allows for a mapping of ideas using text and image, as well as the nesting of ideas within boards, which one can drag from a simple tool bar on the side of the platform in order to comment, annotate, organize, and map (see Image 1).

*Creative Milanote board with links to quotes, images, websites that participants felt like sharing across the series mostly on asynchronous time.*



## Selected prompts from our asynchronous activities

### Exit Tickets

#### Week 1

- Balancing our want for progress and an end goal, with our strong rejection of traditional ideas of production/productivity/labor—Where do we as a group want to be at the end of Week 1?
- How did your original intention change, morph, or solidify?
- What is your understanding of both your role within this community, as well as the larger role of the community itself?

#### Week 2

- What's the perfect recipe of practical—usable—decentered practice?
- Did today's synchronous Zoom activity get you/us any closer to your/our end goal? (or was it neutral, a setback, any mixture thereof...)

#### Week 4

- One interesting thing that has been eye-opening for you?
- How do you think you will work with these discoveries?
- Can feminist pedagogy be a coherent practice in academic institutions as they are today?
- What's next, what should come next?

As a teaching and learning center within an art and design school, a consideration we take seriously is to grow beyond the traditional text-heavy idea sharing, and Milanote seemed like the perfect blend of text and visual. All of this is to say, theoretically, Milanote is an ideal platform for a CTL situated within an art and design context, but when used within a faculty community we realized its shortcomings in practice.

## FemPed Milanote Weekly Board Set Ups

### Week 1: Coming Together

- Readings Board
- Guide to FemPed
- Creative Fun
- Framing Questions
- Week 1 Exit Ticket

### Week 2: Pulling Threads and Critical Lenses

- Readings Board
- Emerging Themes
- Pull Quotes
- Fish Bowl Notes
- Personal Reflections

### Week 3: Individual Work

### Week 4: Reflective Action

- Readings Board
- Reflective Actions
- Evaluation and Feedback
- Final Submissions

Reflecting back, there are some limitations to Milanote as our collective platform. Since the platform's main draw is its visual nature, it moves beyond a linear understanding of how ideas link together and represents the otherwise text-heavy bullet pointed agenda in a more organic manner. Not everyone found this approach accessible. Because there were many different entry points, some participants voiced concerns about "making sense" of what was there, how the boards were linked or organized and joining the conversations hosted on the boards each week. One participant reflected at the end of the series that he failed to interact with the Milanote board much beyond the first week because he is a linear thinker and thus was unable to make sense of its visuality.

Collaboratively choosing a platform could have added another layer to the democratic process we were looking to establish in the FemPed Deep Dive Community, but since we wanted to "hit the ground running" in the first week of the series, we opted to make that decision as facilitators ahead of time, rather than as a group. Our sense is that because there is not one perfect platform (each has its own benefits in terms of linearity, visuality, clarity, or ADA-accessibility; also, each user has their own ideas about what is most important in a platform) there probably wouldn't have been a consensus even if we had embedded choice of platform into the democratic nature of the Deep Dive Community.

The platform was not ADA compliant and in considering accessibility beyond just one small group of faculty, Milanote did not seem the logical choice. Additionally, we did not use the platform as fully as we might have for both the asynchronous and synchronous portions of the series, which could have served as an incentive for our reluctant users to engage with it, perhaps a little bit more. In hindsight, we speculate that there must be something that invites or brings people back to the Milanote board—during the sessions as well as in between—in order to really see it grow as a lively place of iteration and interaction for its users.

# Synchronous Activities

We organized weekly synchronous meetings for our participants in this series. During these Zoom sessions, we focused heavily on community building. We made sure to spend some time at the top of each session checking in with each other to build trust, as most participants hadn't worked with one another before. The second task each week in the synchronous sessions was to begin to get participants thinking about their developing reflective action plans. Some of the synchronous activities and prompts that aided this process included Virtual Consult to Clarify, Virtual Fishbowl Activity, and weekly Exit Tickets.

## Selected prompts from our synchronous activities:

### **Virtual Consult to Clarify** (adapted from Lipmanowicz and McCandless, 2014)

30 minutes, three rounds (each round 10 min.)

- Round 1 begins
- In groups of three, one person is the Participant and 2 are Consultants
- Participant shares their personal intention for an outcome as they take part in this FemPed Deep Dive Community (1 min., video on for all)
- Two Consultants - ask follow-up and clarification questions to better understand the Participant (2 min., video on for all)
- Participant turns off voice and video
- Two consultants discuss what they heard, the viability, their suggestion, perceived challenges (5 min., video on for Consultants only)
- Participant turns back on their voice and video
- All three debrief (2 min., video on for all)
- End of Round 1 - Round 2 begins
- Switch roles.

### **Virtual Fishbowl Activity** (adapted from Chick and Hassel, 2009)

45 minutes, three rounds (each round 15 min.)

- Round 1 begins
- Divide the group into Fish (2 or 3 people) and Observers (rest of the group)
- Pose a question for the Fish
- Round 1 question: What themes are you seeing?
- Round 2 question: What is emerging for you so far?
- Round 3 question: What are you not seeing and is that problematic?
- Fish leave their voice and camera on, all other Observers turn camera off and mute themselves
- Designate a note-taker (one of the Observers who is not a Fish in that round)
- Fish begin discussing the assigned question (10 min).
- When time is up all Observers turn voice and camera back on and share what they have heard as a whole group
- End of Round 1 - Round 2 begins
- Switch roles

Our participants found these synchronous events the most convenient way to take part in the series. Mostly, and it is worth reflecting on whether this is pandemic-specific, our faculty love participating in very open and honest

conversations that we are able to host as part of our general Center for Teaching and Learning series, and this FemPed was no exception. Participants were engaged with the weekly conversations in our FemPed Zoom rooms, often citing it as the highlight of the series. Via our feedback form, one participant commented, “I think it worked best in real time with the conversations that were held. The real time discussions seemed to be the most engaged/worked best with the group.”

## Reflective Action Plan

As our culminating activity, we asked participants to complete a reflective action plan. Understanding that reflection is a best practice as well as the foundation for growth and development, we asked our FemPed Deep Dive Community group to incrementally write their reflections throughout our time together. We generated a few initial questions or guiding prompts to get the group thinking, which centered around the experiences of participants within the series, how they might continue to work with what they have come to understand, and concerns they might have about what comes next.

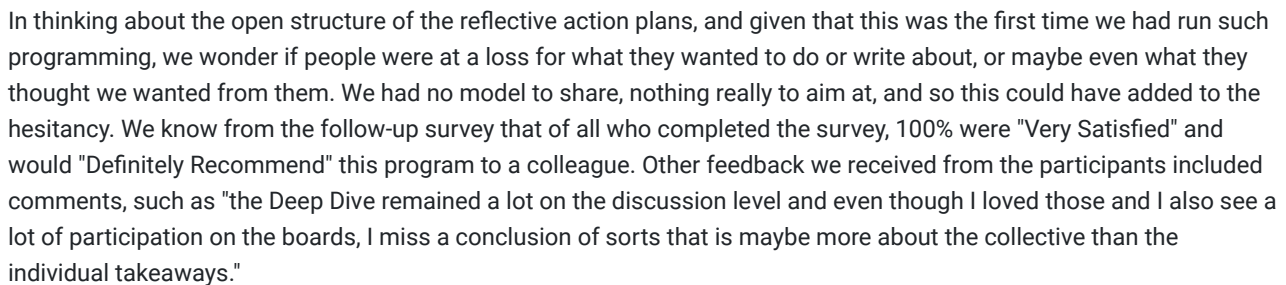
### The prompts for the reflective action plans included:

- One interesting thing that has been eye-opening for you (what you came here with, what you expected vs. what it turned out to be)
- How do you think you will work with these discoveries going forward? What will you do, specifically? Feel free to give a short description of a classroom exercise, or a practice.
- How would you explain to others what we have been talking about in this Deep Dive Community? What this FemPed Deep Dive Community is all about?
- How do we link the FemPed Deep Dive Community to other existing resources within and outside Pratt? Creating a collective resource as an ongoing process. What is one resource you would suggest for this resource to get it started?
- What is next, what should come next? What is exciting about what comes next? What concerns do you have about what is and what comes next?

The Reflection Action Board was great and engaging but within the meetings there was a noticeable lag in everyone's willingness to share. Because of the initial lack of traction with the reflective action plans and with a hope to catalyze this process, we decided to give it some air time in the last Zoom session and work on it synchronously as a group on a shared Milanote board. We introduced the prompts then gave people time to chat with each other and jot down initial thoughts. Watching it unfold in real time on the shared Milanote board (Image 2) was very exciting. Something about the board populating within the session did seem real and tangible in a way it hadn't yet before.

### Image 2

*A generative use of our synchronous Zoom time together; gaining traction with participants on our Reflective Action shared Milanote Board.*



## Reflections on FemPed for Online Teaching and Faculty Learning Communities

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group continuously looked towards our center for guidance and leadership. The participants largely felt uncomfortable with determining what course the community should take, and were hesitant to suggest structures, community activities or topics of discussion for the group. So this made us wonder: is this a failure of our enactment of the decentered dynamic lauded by a feminist pedagogy? Or perhaps it was the interference with other systemic structures, habits of mind and ways of being with each other within an academic setting that prevented the group to truly enact feminist values? Our gatherings each week were lively, inquisitive and inclusive. The topics and themes built on each other, and the flow of conversations and group orientation, was moving along together towards our set goals. Our conversations raised critical questions, and inspired the group to a commitment to enact some of these practices in their individual classes. Perhaps that is good in itself.

Traditional evaluative procedures don't work for non-traditional classroom and academic practices. Given the inherent power relationships and hierarchies that exist amongst part time and full time faculty, chairs and other administrators—and, of course, us as colleagues working in a teaching and learning center like ours—traditional educational evaluation processes don't quite apply here. In the following, we would like to provide some of our tentative proposals for what structures could have impacted the flow and results of this FemPed community, in hopes that others who might wish to replicate a similar community could consider them in their planning.

## Larger Implications of FemPed within the Institution

One thing we couldn't help but notice when we took stock of which of our participants submitted their final reflective action plans was the visible divide between part-time and full-time faculty's completion of these reflections. While hardly noticeable in any other aspect of the Deep Dive Community, the divide was blaring in participants' reflections. While all of the part-time participants completed their reflections (and thus were eligible for the stipend) only one full timer completed the reflective action plan. Paying a small stipend to part-time faculty is our way of acknowledging their time commitment in doing this work. It is an equity-inspired commitment we would like to stand by given the glaring inequities endured by part-time faculty within the US higher educational system. But as we reflect back on the institutional limitations between who can be paid for this work and who cannot, as well as our choice to make the reflective action plan a stipendable product for part-timers, we wonder if it inadvertently allowed our full-time colleagues not to complete the work because they weren't aiming for the stipend, while part-time participants felt compelled because their stipends were at stake. Did we in fact exacerbate the divide? A piece of the conversations that stuck with us as we write this case study's reflection is that there are parts of feminist pedagogy that are more applicable for our small communities, our classrooms, our most intimate of interactions, but not suitable or germane when applied to our entire institutions and educational structures.

On that note, the issue of labor was a popular and heated theme in our synchronous Zoom conversations and a prominent emergent topic on our collective Milanote reflection board. As one participant commented on "Vulnerability":

*How can we both model these ideas/ theories without being dogmatic? How can we find a more nuanced approach to both traditional lecturing and modeling, while also allowing ourselves the space to 'mess things up' and recognizing our own intersecting identities? We should be putting ourselves in the seat of the students.*

But even more, maybe it is impossible for FemPed (the way we imagined it) to work inside of an institution. Alongside the topics of vulnerability and the part-time/full-time divide, and the inequities those create, we reflected on how the current structures of higher education factor in to our efforts to practice feminist-inspired pedagogies in our classrooms and faculty communities. Again, a voice from one community participant:

*Also how does the business model of education factor in, seeing our students as "products"? The hierarchies of education reinforce the domination. Many part-timers are considered expendable teachers with little job security and no benefits in a highly competitive market/workplace.*



This all rings very true, as most of our center events are attended by part-timers. It is there we feel the most immediate implications of these structural vulnerabilities for our small community, and all this came to the forefront of our collective discourse, in this particular series. But the fact that these critical issues plaguing higher education do come up in the FemPed and beyond, and are shared and reflected on openly and honestly in a group of cross-departmental faculty, leaves us hopeful that these spaces are useful and needed within a larger institution, where such issues can be forgotten or even co-opted and assumed into the daily operations without careful consideration and critical inquiry.

Faculty look to us for leadership in holding spaces for difficult conversations. And being aware of our status as full-time employees with our own intersectional identities, linked to very particular routes of power, we must continuously consider and practice the decentering of our spaces and assuring collective leadership and voice to all participants. So to the question of what are feminist pedagogical tools and practices we should keep refining in the future, we are committing ourselves to interactive community-building practices. Perhaps it is not just theorizing but more importantly paying attention to nuances—how communities form and function, how members experience power and voice within those communities, how to build trust and connection, and how to be mindful of triggers and our own embodied responses to differences. And in the spirit of feminist values, we hope to collaborate and learn from and learn with others who are investigating these types of structures and communities.

We found the FemPed Deep Dive Community personally inspiring and professionally very valuable. As our group wrapped up the reflective action plans and our time together came to an end, there was a palpable positive energy about the group that the conversations we had seeded the ground for future initiatives at the Institute. Just as rare as the decentered nature of faculty development series in general is the sense of hope that results from an examination of grassroots possibilities within the academe. It is our belief that the framework used for our inaugural Deep Dive Community should be taken into consideration for future open learning initiatives, leaning heavily on hope as a radical agent for change in a de-centered faculty community.

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# Agency and Reciprocity in Digital Education: Lessons from Indigenous Sewing Practices

Tanya Elias

Critical Theory

Decolonization

Educational Technology

Higher Education

Feminist Pedagogies

Digital Education

Holistic Technologies

Prescriptive Technologies

Indigenous Cultures

Feminist Critical Digital Pedagogy

*In this chapter, I share the lessons I learned while sewing handmade kamiks with my mother-in-law, an Inuvialuk elder. Drawing on the work of Ursula Franklin, I compare the holistic technologies of sewing in communities with the prescriptive technologies of mass production used to produce boots. Using this boot-kamik analogy, I explore the dynamics of mainstream prescriptive technologies that normalize neoliberalism and a culture of compliance by adopting automation, algorithms, surveillance and data tracking throughout educational systems at a massive scale. I then consider how women-led indigenous knowledge systems and technologies, in the form of needles, sinews might challenge digital educators to pursue more holistic, smaller-scale alternatives that acknowledge situated context, enable reciprocity and value direct experience.*

Several years ago, [I had a day of thinking](#). I thought about the connections between my past experiences and digital pedagogy. I thought about my emerging interest in the notion of scale within education, Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs) and Open Educational Resources (OER) and Open Educational Practices (OEP), educational technology, data, analytics, privacy and surveillance. I thought about my kids, control, conformity, reciprocity, culture and sewing. I thought about the tremendous expectations we have of our digital education, for it to be available on demand, for it to work seamlessly, for it to scale limitlessly. Then I began to think about boots and, more specifically, about two different kinds of northern footwear: store-bought boots and handmade kamiks. The former represents a common, mass-produced option. The latter is a handsewn alternative. I use this boot-kamik comparison to explore the dynamics of mainstream technological approaches and those of women-led technologies, in the form of needles, sinews and threads; and reflect on the implications of these same dynamics for digital educators.

## Image 1

*Store-bought boots and handmade kamiks. By T. Elias.*



Ursula Franklin (1985) was a distinguished scientist, educator and humanitarian who considered the ways power is woven into technology. More than 30 years ago, she said,

*Technology...exhibits its own dynamics. It is up to us, as feminists, to come to an independent understanding of these dynamics and, in the clarity of our own vision, to use this knowledge to fashion a web of life that is intrinsically human. (p. 6)*

Throughout this chapter, I use the boot-kamik analogy to explore the dynamics of the technologies of digital pedagogy. I first describe how I came to learn about both boots and kamiks. Next, I introduce the ideas of “prescriptive” and “holistic” technologies. I then seek to clarify my own vision of how digital education could be fashioned by “different kinds of work processes and knowledge-practices” (Lindström & Ståhl, 2014, p. 54). By stitching the lessons learned while sewing with my mother-in-law together with small-scale examples of holistic digital pedagogy, this chapter is my tentative contribution to the emergence of feminist digital pedagogies that are, first and foremost, intrinsically human.

## Positionality

I am a white woman who grew up in Regina, Saskatchewan, a city in the middle of the Canadian prairies. When I was growing up, I wore winter boots with thick plastic soles and felt liners. They were the same as winter boots that you find in most Canadian cities and towns. Like all of the kids I knew, I disliked my winter boots; they were uncomfortable and heavy. Despite their drawbacks, I could neither conceive nor imagine anything other than those widely available, familiar, standardized, inexpensive, easy, disposable, inevitable boots. I accepted them as “normal” without questioning or seeking alternatives.

In my early twenties, I moved to Inuvik, a small town in Canada’s Western Arctic. Inuvik’s population is predominantly indigenous and is made up of the Gwich’in First Nation, Metis and the Inuvialuit. The Inuvialuit are the Inuit of the Western Arctic whose settlement area includes the coastline along the Arctic Ocean between Alaska and Nunavut. There, I married into an Inuvialuit family. I spent the next ten years developing a close relationship with my mother-in-law, Lilian Elias. We did many things together, including sewing kamiks, and I learned a tremendous amount, of which I share a small fraction of here.

It was not until years later that I began to see important connections between kamiks, boots and contemporary digital pedagogy. While exploring two alternative digital communities I began to recognize the importance of their quiet, small-scale existence on the fringes of the corporate giants (Elias et al., 2020). I then started to see similarities between these small-scale digital communities and communities of women sewing kamiks. Both communities offer alternatives that are culturally, financially and structurally different to the mass-produced commercial options. In both cases, these

undertakings are rarely treated as viable options, instead rejected as too small, too hard to learn and too labour intensive. I began to wonder how and why these alternatives are so readily rejected.

## Prescriptive & Holistic Technologies

To make sense of the current and future possibilities of our digital technologies, we must move beyond “a technology of things” and instead adopt an approach in which we more carefully consider the complex interactions that surround those things (Elias, 2019). Franklin (1999) adopted this type of practice-based definition of technology. Using this type of definition, technologies are not products or tools, but instead the ways of doing something. They include not only the technical means of production, but also the associated cultural practices (Foucault, 1988).

Franklin (1999) further differentiated between holistic technologies and prescriptive technologies. Prescriptive technologies involve specialization by process in which “something is broken down into clearly identifiable steps. Each step is carried out by a separate worker, or group or workers, who need to be familiar only with the skills of performing that one step” (Franklin, 1999, p. 11). They are defined by their focus on efficiency, control, standardization, and maximizing gain. They usually favour machines over people and pay little attention to “externalities” that exist beyond the production process. Store-bought, factory-made boots are the output of prescriptive technologies.

By contrast, within holistic technologies artisans “control the process of their own work from beginning to finish... they draw on their own experience, each time applying it to a unique situation” (Franklin, 1999, p. 9). They are defined by their focus on reciprocity, direct experience and minimizing disaster. They value people and long-term communal benefits. Inuit Qaujimaqatugangit (IQ) expands this definition. Arnakak (2001) described IQ as:

*...a living technology... a means of rationalizing thought and action, a means of organizing tasks and resources, a means of organizing family and society into coherent wholes... It is holistic, dynamic and cumulative in its approach to knowledge, teaching and learning — that one learns best by observing, doing and experience. (para 2-4)*

Kamiks are the output of such holistic technologies.

## Compliance & Conformity

I once accepted store-bought winter boots as the only option. In the same way, educators have mostly accepted mainstream digital technologies without asking critical questions. We readily accept such options because of the dominance of prescriptive technologies that characterizes not only materials production but a wide range of administrative, economic and governance activities (Franklin, 1999). As a result, most educational technologies rely on prescriptive platforms, focused on achieving efficiency and maximizing financial gain. The design of Learning Management System shapes the teaching and learning taking place (Castañeda & Selwyn, 2018). Moreover, we are increasingly reliant on the “Big Five” technology corporations (Amazon, Microsoft, Apple, Google and Facebook) for the provision of tools that support digital education (Joseph, Guy & McNally, 2019). Recently, there has been a dramatic increase in the use of online proctoring systems (Hussein et al., 2020).

Generating my own list of the reasons why educators might adopt these tools, the words align closely with those that I might have used to describe my store-bought winter boots: widely available, standardized, familiar, inexpensive, easy, disposable, inevitable, normalized. The words, however, carry with them risks:

*While we should not forget that these prescriptive technologies are often exceedingly effective and efficient, they come with an enormous social mortgage. The mortgage means that we live in a culture of compliance, that we are ever more conditioned to accept... that there is only one way of doing “it.” (Franklin, 1999, p. 17)*

We have adopted these tools because they are easy to use, but their cost is becoming increasingly apparent. In the process of adopting them, we have normalized neoliberalism in education, through automation, algorithms, surveillance and data tracking in educational systems. Machines in the form of algorithms built into digital tools and platforms now regularly select what we see and see first; they moderate who and what is allowed via their terms of service. This “web of platforms, personalization, clickbait and filter bubbles is the only web most students know” (Gilliard, 2017, para 2). Simply put, it is difficult for both students and educators to imagine anything else.

In so doing, prescriptive digital technologies support a form of “digital feudalism” (Schneier, 2013), “digital imperialism” (Watters, 2014) and “surveillance capitalism” (Zuboff, 2017) in which the privacy and security of users is decided on their behalf by others, with neither their input nor consent. As Gajjala et al. (2017) explained:

*Algorithm and community bylaws together produce opaque hierarchies and invisible control over the process where the rules of so-called participation and the level playing field have the potential to exploit and oppress... Furthermore, [they] promote education through the guise of neutrality. (p. 146)*

As a result, rather than opening up new ways connecting and relating, the use of these mainstream digital tools standardize our actions in ways that decide for us what is and is not possible both within and beyond the context of education. At the same time, both students and teachers are now regularly exposed to the largest-ever surveillance network without their knowledge or consent (Gilliard, 2018; O'Brien & Farris, 2016).

Simpson (2014) explained the risks of uncritically adopting prescriptive digital “solutions.” She warned that if we “learn to normalize dominance and non-consent within the context of education, then non-consent becomes a normalized part of the ‘tool kit’ of those who have and wield power” (p. 15). What happens when we begin to accept such non-consent as simply an inevitable component of the educational landscape? Where might we seek alternatives?

## Acknowledging Situated Context

When it came to winter footwear for my kids, the alternatives came in the form of kamiks, handmade by their naanuk (grandmother) and me. These kamiks had several obvious benefits; they were hand-beaded or embroidered, hand-sewn and far prettier than the non-descript mass-produced store-bought boots I grew up with. Every pair is different.

### Image 2

*Many different pairs of kamiks and slippers. By T. Elias.*





They also had other benefits. Where store-bought boots were heavy, kamiks were light. Store-bought boots fell off and could get lost in a snowbank; kamiks were tied on. Another advantage was that kamiks could be worn directly from inside to outside. When I walked my kids to school in the morning, they shook off the snow and walked straight inside without leaving ugly puddles behind. It was in their kamiks that were perfectly adapted to Inuvik's cold climate with dry snow, that my kids learned to run fast in the snow. Kamiks offer a very different approach to winter footwear than the mass-produced winter boot of my childhood. They offered an alternative I could never have imagined. They were different, not only in terms of how they looked, but in terms of how they allowed my kids to move. In their kamiks, I watched my kids run freely and with a sense of possibilities that I could never have imagined as a kid.

What, then, is digital pedagogy's equivalent to running fast in the snow? Just as kamiks have many benefits, many vibrant free open-source software and critical digital pedagogy communities exist. They are often hand-built or cobbled together using a variety of different sources. While they are not always prettier, they do tend to be smaller and lighter than their mainstream counterparts; they are purpose built and adapted to specific contexts. Many digital educators have had experiences with alternative, more holistic approaches (Mackness & Bell, 2015).

Christen (2012) highlighted a series of examples in which "off the grid, Latin American and Australian indigenous peoples have used pirate satellites and radio programming to connect politically, socially, and culturally between dispersed communities" (2881). She further challenged us to imagine "alternative systems of knowledge production that rely instead on social relations maintained and forged through negotiated interdependencies, which have as their goal the mutual gain between stakeholders in social, economic, and cultural terms" (2880). Crissinger (2015) described how another project enabled a local community "to decide if objects should be open, closed to the community, or open to a specific community or during a particular time based on the historical sharing of objects by season, status, or gender" (para. 21).

In the above examples, diverse local communities are creating and sharing knowledge in contextual and meaningful ways, using "old" tools. They suggest an approach that is measured, not by an ability to create and manipulate software and platforms, but by the ability to identify and respond to complex, contextual needs, like running fast in the snow.

## Enabling Reciprocity

Although my focus here is digital pedagogy, Franklin (1999) noted that most educational institutions seek to "turn the student into a specifiable and identifiable product" (p. 22). It is within the context of these prescriptivist systems that most educational technology has been developed, gathering and responding to user feedback and often serving as a handmaiden to bad pedagogy. By contrast, holistic technologies enable reciprocity. Franklin (1999) explained:

*Reciprocity is not feedback... Feedback normally exists within a given design. It can improve the performance but it cannot alter its thrust or the design. Reciprocity, on the other hand, is situationally based. It's a response to a given situation... Reciprocal responses may indeed alter initial assumptions. They can lead to negotiations, to give and take, to adjustment, and they may result in new and unforeseen developments. (p. 43)*

Sewing kamiks was reciprocal. As we sewed, my mother-in-law told stories of her own mother-in-law who taught her to sew. While sewing one pair of kamiks, we combined her knowledge with ideas generated by a girl who was staying with us from another community. As we experimented, we gave them to my four-year-old daughter to test in the snow. When they fell down, we adjusted the design to include laces. In these ways, our sewing was reciprocal and deeply relational. Even though we did not always get it right or even agree, we laughed, we shared, we talked, we learned; we created something new. Together.

What, then, does reciprocity look like within the context of digital pedagogy? In an experimental course for digital educators, for that making, sharing and creating "led each participant to the discovery that 'our way' is a collaborative affair" (Bali et al., 2015, p. 113). In another example, in what he called "holistic open pedagogy," Worth (2017) made it

explicitly clear that the teachers did not have definitive answers to the questions being asked, but instead acted as contextualizers. He further highlighted the importance of reflecting on the following powerful questions:

*Have I enabled my class to give their informed consent to learn with the digital? Is there an equitable share of the power within and without the class, and if not, is that dynamic transparent? Do any of my teaching decisions constitute barriers to entry/engagement, such as geographical, cultural, technological, linguistic or academic? Who owns our data? (p. 101)*

Such questions of consent, power, transparency and ownership demonstrate a deep commitment to reciprocity and an approach to learning in which such ideas are not an “add-on,” but deeply integrated within its practices. Just as sewing kamiks involved listening, adjusting and learning so, too, must a holistic approach to digital pedagogy.

## Honouring Direct Experience

My initial interest in holistic approaches to digital pedagogy began with a direct experience in a small, alternative online community that I then connected to my previous direct experiences with boots and kamiks. I learned through experience that store-bought boots lasted for a certain amount of time and then broke or no longer fit. Their lifespan was short. We never fixed them; they constituted part of our disposable world. Kamiks, however, were treated differently. They too broke down over time, often getting holes in the soles or breaking at the seam, but this type of damage was expected. Before I learned to sew a new pair of kamiks, I listened and observed as my mother-in-law sewed. Then she taught me to rip apart, repair and replace.

### Image 3

*Soles that require repair. By T. Elias.*



By taking the seams apart, I learned to pay attention: to notice how a kamik was constructed and how each pair was slightly different, to appreciate the small and tight stitches, to recognize which parts were reused and which needed to be replaced. According to Kimmerer (2013), “paying attention acknowledges that we have something to learn from intelligences other than our own. Listening, standing witness, creates an openness to the world in which the boundaries between us can dissolve” (p. 300). As I listened, I learned more than how to sew. I heard the stories of my mother-in-law learning to sew from her own mother-in-law and the boundaries between us dissolved.

By repairing, I learned patience and to appreciate the work of those who had created before me. I learned that sewing kamiks was less an act of one-time product creation and more about developing an ongoing practice of use and repair. Simpson (2014) said, “If you want to learn about something, you need to take your body onto the land and do it. Get a practice... It’s not just pedagogy; it’s how to live life” (pp. 17-18). A holistic practice of use and repair ensures producers and consumers stay connected and remain attentive to one another.



Digital education can be designed and enabled in ways that similarly center on attention and practice. Manifold's (2009) described young people within digital fan communities who

*...relentlessly copy, recopy, study, reflect upon, and practice difficult aspects of creating fanart. They discuss and debate others' interpretations of favorite narratives. In-person and through internet connections, they become peer teachers of one another. (p. 19)*

In the earlier days of the internet, young women bloggers had "a desire to be a cultural producer; that is, to actively engage in the construction of one's cultural world, rather than simply consume" (Harris, 2008, p. 491). Within another open online course designed for educators, Zamora (2017) explained that "emphasizing learning-through doing in a social environment, maker culture has emphasized informal, networked, peer led, and shared learning motivated by hands-on production and fun" (p. 106). Reading these descriptions, I see more alignment with the holistic sewing of kamiks than with the production of boots or the prescriptive pedagogies that most often characterize digital and non-digital education.

## Valuing the Whole

Kamiks were by far the more functional choice in our Northern winter months, but not sold in stores. Instead, they were made by Inuvialuit women. My mother-in-law's sewing knowledge is not captured in the literature. She was told at residential school that such skills were irrelevant. And yet, she learned from her mother-in-law and kept sewing. She chose to believe what she knew from her own direct experience rather than what she was taught by the "experts." What did I gain, what did my kids gain, because my mother-in-law, and her mother-in-law before her, chose not to put down their sewing needles in favour of mass-produced boots?

Kimmerer (2013) said, "This is our work, to discover what we can give. Isn't the purpose of education, to learn the nature of your own gifts and to use them for good in the world?" (p. 239). Some of my mother-in-law's many gifts include her skilled use of technologies: needles, sinew and strong hands. Using these gifts, my mother-in-law taught me many things. She taught me to question my white woman-ness. She taught me that there could be other ways, ways that challenged many of the things I previously "knew" to be true. Although I could not have named it at the time, she was teaching me to think holistically and to value "small." She taught me the strength of small stitches, small stories and small ways to withstand and to restore. She taught me about persistence and resistance. I am privileged to carry these lessons with me, lessons that challenge me to think differently about everything, including digital pedagogy.

Franklin (1999) said, "Let me emphasize again that technologies need not be used the way we use them today. It is not a question of either no technology or putting up with the current ones" (p. 46). Where my mother-in-law chose not to put down her sewing needles, educators, educational technologists and instructional designers can choose not to silently accept the prescriptive approaches to education entrenched throughout our institutions. Morris (2020), for example, described his experiences in response to Covid-19:

*On the ground, in their living rooms and bedrooms and kitchens and cars, a bevy, a flock, an urgency of teachers realised there was another way. Or rather, they realised there could be another way. Not apparent. Not obvious. Not something anyone had prepared ahead of time. But something not this or that, not rigour not rubric, but something otherwise. Something the imagination could perceive. (para 13)*

Our experiences and our responses to those experiences shape us. The above teachers have been profoundly changed by Covid-19.

My experiences have also shaped me. My approaches to feminism and critical digital pedagogy have become inseparable from my experiences sitting in a circle on the ground with other women and kids, surrounded by scraps of materials and fur, beads, needles, threads and sinew, the strong smell of smoked moosehide filling the room. These memories have become my something otherwise, something completely apparent and obvious now that my imagination can perceive it. When someone proposes a new technological tool or pedagogical approach, the lessons I

learned while sewing lessons serve as my measure. I refuse to accept that “there is no choice” because I have been taught the tremendous value of a single hand-sewn stitch. I know that learning, including digital pedagogies can and should support deeply relational experiences. Experiences that value the whole: the whole student, the whole family, the whole community, the whole environment. Experiences built on laughter, sharing, dialogue. And love.

## Acknowledgements

I would like to thank my mother-in-law for everything she has taught me. I have shared the lessons I learned while sewing with her because they illustrate the deep impact of her teaching has had on everything I think and do, including digital pedagogy. I recognize that I cannot tell this story without appropriating it in some way. What I can do is acknowledge my awareness of these issues and treat her teachings with the utmost care, which I hope I have done here.

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# Feminist-Oriented, Mixed Methods Action Research

## Reflections on Methodology, Online Pedagogy, and Digital Tools

Jennifer Schneider

Open Educational Resources

Open Education

Feminist Pedagogies

Mixed Methods Research

Web-based Comment Bank

Feedback

Grading

Online Education

Action Research

Feminist Critical Digital Pedagogy

Open Educational Practices

*In this chapter, I explore the potential for mixed methods action research critically evaluated from a feminist orientation to expand feminist knowledge building in online higher education programs, curriculum and instruction, in particular online grading and feedback processes. My approach is simultaneously reflective and forward focused. I also explore how digital tools might be used as part of this broader research approach to both promote and support feminist pedagogy and thinking. A recent mixed methods action research study that explored the impact of a web-based comment bank intervention on online pedagogy serves as a site of critical inquiry.*

In a recent mixed methods action research study (Schneider, 2020), I explored the impact of a collaborative, web-based comment bank on online pedagogy. In this chapter, I critically evaluate that research study through a feminist lens. This study originated out of my own experiences both teaching in online learning environments and simultaneously serving as a peer coach and mentor in the same spaces. In this role, I worked with online instructors who consistently shared their frustrations with unexpectedly high (and increasing) time demands associated with increasing class sizes and an associated limited ability to provide individualized and student-specific feedback on written assignments. I, too, would often experience similar challenges and frustrations in my own teaching and learning. At the same time, I was often asked to review student complaints and disputes associated with perceptions of a lack of timely, specific, and/or personalized feedback on assessments and written submissions. Instructors and students both experienced and shared persistent challenges that impacted self-efficacy and confidence in online teaching. While the literature includes a variety of strategies to adopt a feminist digital pedagogy in course design and teaching, there are fewer examples that offer insights on how to do so in connection with grading and feedback processes. I undertook this action research study and associated digital tool development work with the hopes of impacting positive change in this area.

In this chapter, I reflect on the action research process and explore the potential for mixed methods action research to expand feminist knowledge building in the context of online higher education programs, curriculum, instruction, and, in particular, grading and feedback processes. I use feminist pedagogical and methodological frameworks to critically examine the research. My approach is simultaneously reflective and forward focused. As a part of this action research

and reflective inquiry, I also examine how digital tools might be developed and incorporated as part of this broader action research approach to further promote and support feminist pedagogy and thinking and, relatedly, how I and others might “achieve feminist ends using digital tools” in this context (Golden, 2018, para. 2). Using feminism as a lens to critically examine my practice necessitates ongoing critical reflection and inquiry of the study itself, as well. This chapter, and the reflections contained herein, are part of this process of critical analysis and ongoing exploration.

I begin my discussion with background information on the web-based comment bank I co-designed with input and feedback from university instructors, followed by an overview of the research questions and methods developed and applied in an illustrative mixed methods action research study context. I conclude with a reflection on the value of mixed methods action research (Endnotes 1 and 2) from a feminist lens as well as its complexity, including related issues of bias, reflexivity, assumptions, and voice.

## The Feedback Project: A Web-Based Comment Bank

In general, a comment bank is a library of customizable and personalizable feedback comments (or statements) and resources that are organized by category and address a range of student work. The [comment bank used in this study](#) (Image 1) was designed with intentionality and express acknowledgment of the struggles that have long accompanied the grading and feedback processes. Challenges such as instructor fatigue, stress, and ambiguity (Hattie & Clarke, 2019; Tierney, 2013) as well as bias and equity (Schinske & Tanner, 2014; van Ewijk, 2011) have long been noted. In this study, these challenges were intentionally confronted—as encouraged by feminist pedagogy—and collaboration was used to explore potential solutions to the above-noted challenges.

**Image 1**

*Home-page of the open-access web-based comment bank created for this study (<https://www.thefeedbackbank.com/>).*



The site design welcomes contributions from readers. Contributions can be shared and submitted [here](#) as well as via links embedded on the comment bank. New comments and comment categories are regularly added to the site. Existing comments can be copied, pasted, and customized to suit individual assignments and student needs (for an example, see Sample Comments to Promote Dialogue below). Users can adapt, share, and submit requests for new comment types and categories.

### Sample Comments to Promote Dialogue

- I enjoyed reading your work! After you've had time to review my reflections, please reach out with questions or simply to continue our dialogue on your work.
- Thank you for your hard work! I've shared some initial thoughts on your paper. Keep in mind that I am only one reader and these are only recommendations. I hope you find my feedback helpful. Please reach out via email to explore these points and my suggestions further!
- Let's chat! My suggestions are just that - a suggestion! I hold weekly office hours and would be happy to dig deeper. Hope to hear from you!

Feminist digital pedagogy informed and influenced this action research inquiry as well as the related development of the study's intervention, a web-based comment bank. Golden (2018) describes a feminist digital pedagogy as one that "engages goals, topics, and projects that demonstrate equality – fairly addressing students and texts, including formerly overlooked voices – using digital tools" (p. 42). Leckenby and Hesse-Biber (2007) write of feminist researchers as "an integral force" (p. 251) with powerful implications that include—and even extend beyond—concerns of sexism, oppression, patriarchal structures, and associated subjugation such as those described by hooks (2015). hooks (1989) explains that,

*Feminist education— the feminist classroom—is and should be a place where there is a sense of struggle, where there is visible acknowledgment of the union of theory and practice, where we work together as teachers and students to overcome the estrangement and alienation that have become so much the norm in the contemporary university. (p. 51)*

In reality, the forces attributed to and acknowledged within feminist researchers shape all research topics and methods, including, as discussed in this chapter, the referenced action research on issues associated with higher education, online learning, and grading feedback. Moreover, feminist inquiry might further efforts to help all individuals both identify their unique voice (amidst a world with innumerable voices seeking to be heard) and belief in the inherent value of that voice (Gay, 2014).

## Research Questions and Methods

My research questions were designed to generate feedback and data on issues of instructor online teaching efficacy, collective teaching efficacy, and perceptions and attitudes surrounding the online grading and feedback processes. The impact of interventions on efficacy are typically measured using quantitative approaches such as pre- and post- surveys (Deller, 2019). Surveys are often chosen due to factors such as cost, time, simplicity, and ease of use (Ebel, 1980). In this study, however, and in a manner that embraces feminist pedagogy as "a pedagogy that is at-once reflective and realistic in its relationship to empowerment" (Bond, 2019, para. 1), I deliberately chose a mixed-methods action research design as it recognizes that "[a]ttending to the naturalistic conditions and multiple layers of classroom life demands a subjective, holistic, and flexible approach" (Klehr, 2012, p. 123).

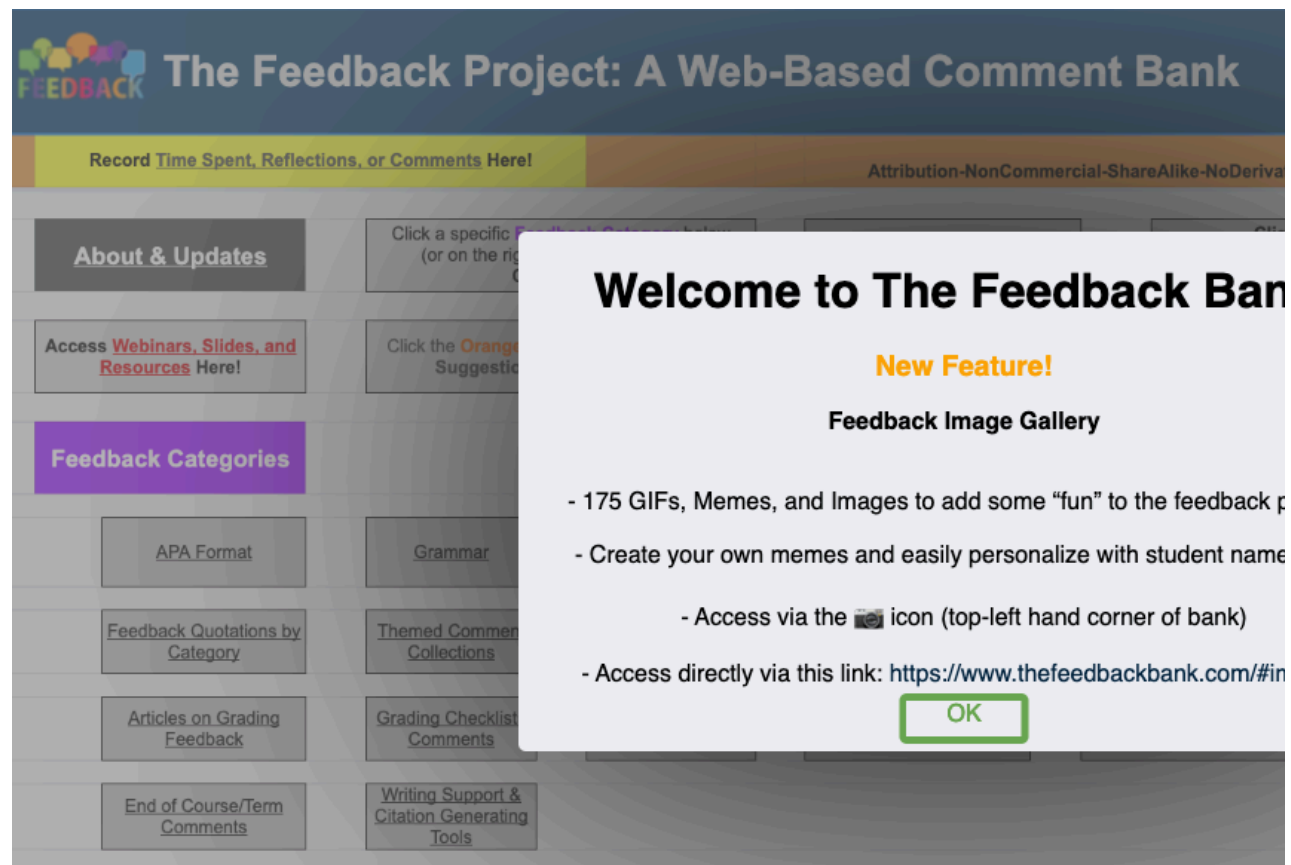
Mixed methods action research affords researchers both flexibility and reflection-based analysis. These attributes are both especially valuable for researchers interested in the potential for intentionally designed digital tools to break down existing structures and associated—often deeply embedded—processes in digital spaces and reflective of tenets "core to the feminist learning experience: breakdown of hierarchy, participatory learning, and social construction of knowledge" (Milanés & Denoyelles, 2014, para. 8).

Research participants included 18 instructors at a private, U.S.-based university that serves a global student population. I collected quantitative data via pre- and post-intervention surveys. Qualitative data was collected via open-ended survey questions as well as through informal interviews, conversations with participants, and document analysis.

All participants were actively engaged in the comment creation (and associated knowledge construction) process, including through the submission of new comments for inclusion in the comment bank as well as through the customization and personalization of comments copied from the bank. The feedback process (and development of both the comment bank and associated features and tools) was ongoing, iterative and looped, in that participants would access the bank, review, personalize, and apply comments, and then share new comments on an ongoing basis. Updates were highlighted via rotating carousel messaging (Image 2).

## Image 2

*Updates highlighted via rotating carousel messaging.*



Many features designed and added during the course of the action research study were direct responses to participant requests. For example, a section with "Kudos" comments (see below for examples) was created in response to a participant request. The [Feedback Finder Chrome Extension](#) (see Image 3 for an example) was also created as a result of a participant's desire for a more streamlined copy and paste functionality. The comment bank's [image gallery and meme generator](#) (Image 4), the [case brief feedback generator](#) (Image 5), and global search functionality (Image 6) were also inspired by, and created in response to, feedback shared by participants throughout the course of the action



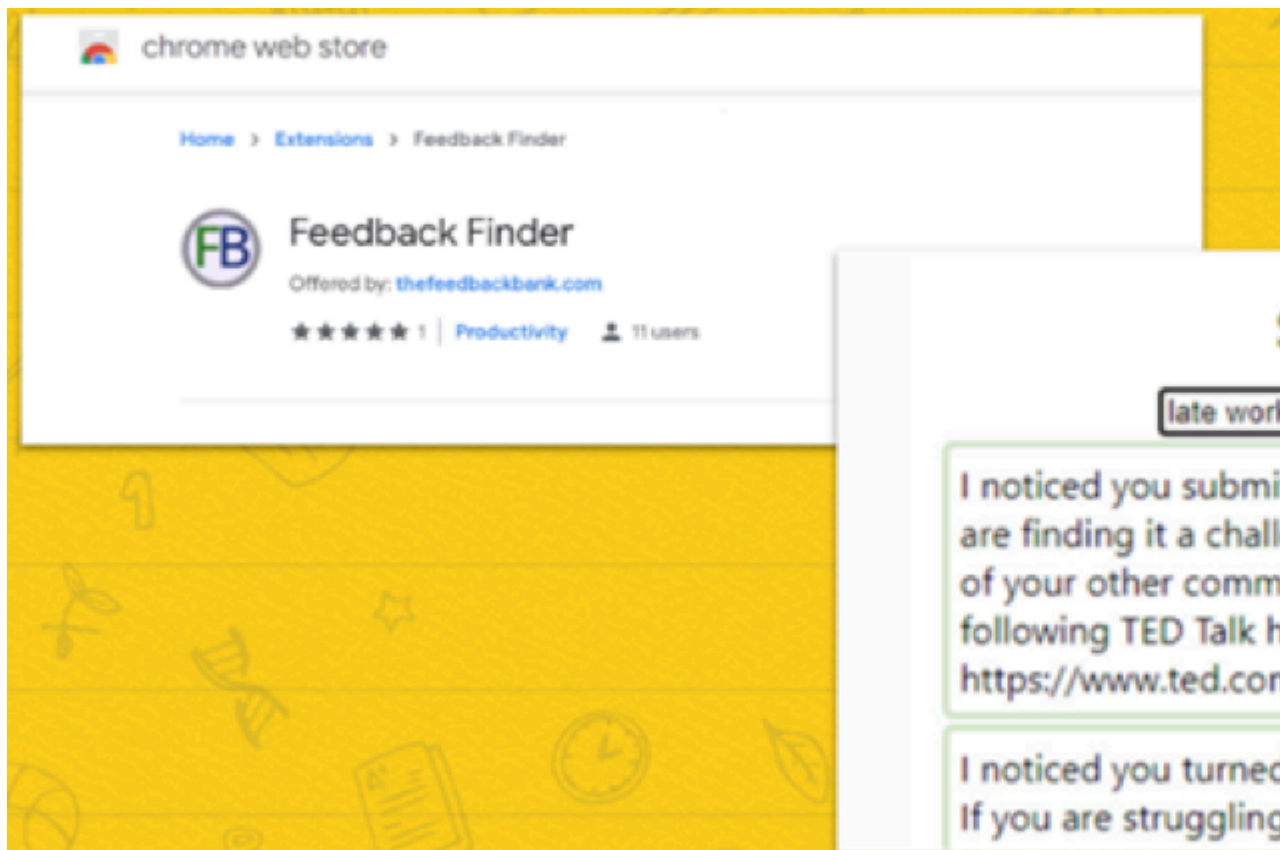
research study. Ongoing communications provided opportunities for peer sharing as well as the social construction of knowledge. Development was iterative and dynamic. Anonymous surveys embedded throughout the feedback bank also promoted the free and honest sharing of feedback and improvement requests in an ongoing and simultaneously reflective and forward-focused manner.

### Kudos comments created in response to a participant request

- Kudos! I'm so impressed by your improvement from last week to this week. Your writing is much stronger and your associated support is much more developed. For example, \_\_\_\_\_. I appreciate your excellent efforts! Please keep up the good work!
- Kudos! Really nice work on your APA format! You've improved significantly from the beginning of the term. Well done!
- Kudos! Really nice work with your writing. I've noticed significant improvements in the development of your arguments. For example, \_\_\_\_\_.

**Image 3**

*A "Feedback Finder" Chrome extension developed in response to a participant request.*



**Image 4**

*A personalizable image gallery and meme generator developed in response to a participant request.*



**Image 5**

*Case Brief Narrative Feedback Generator created in response to a participant request.*

**Case Brief Generator Dropdown**

Student Name

General

Case Brief Facts

Case Brief Issues

Case Brief Content

Case Brief Updates

Reading Case Law

Timeliness

**Image 6**

*Global Search Functionality created in response to a participant request.*

# Search

proofread

Carefully **proofread** all work before submitting. For example, trial and trail have two very different meanings.

Take the time to carefully **proofread** all work and consider whether you've selected the most appropriate words for your shared points.

Before finalizing your submission, always take the time to **proofread** and review for clarity. For some general tips on conciseness when writing, see:  
[https://owl.purdue.edu/owl/research\\_and\\_citation/apa6\\_style/apa\\_formatting\\_and\\_style\\_guide/proofreading\\_tips.html](https://owl.purdue.edu/owl/research_and_citation/apa6_style/apa_formatting_and_style_guide/proofreading_tips.html)

I noticed several spelling errors throughout your paper. Going forward, you might try some **proofreading** strategies. This article has some easy to apply strategies that I have found very useful. See:  
<https://www.thoughtco.com/top-proofreading-tips-1691277>

If you'd like to read more on **proofreading** strategies, see:  
<https://www.grammarcheck.net/10-essential-proofreading-tips-for-flawless-text/> and <https://writingcenter.unc.edu/tips-and-tools/editing-and-proofreading/>

Minor spelling errors are easy to miss. Don't rely on spell check alone. Ask a friend or family member to **proofread** your work.

Given the ongoing interactions between myself (as both researcher and practitioner) and participants, ongoing reflections on positionality were imperative. Positionality was considered with intentionality at all points and junctures of the action research study process. By way of example, in connection with this action research study, I might be characterized, at least in part, as an insider in collaboration with other insiders. My associated positionality remained a critical and visible (as encouraged by feminist education) component of all aspects of the action research study and my interactions and collaborations with study participants. For example, throughout the entirety of the study I held a role as a researcher and, in my capacities as an online course instructor, mentor to colleagues, and peer coach, as well as a practitioner. My online instructional work as well as my work involving virtual peer mentorship and coaching occurred in parallel with my associated action research. I used ongoing reflection and journaling as tools to ensure I maintained, to the greatest degree possible, both a critical perspective and associated awareness of my positionality throughout the entirety of my study. Both reflection and journaling provided valuable opportunities to pause and focus on the action research experience. The time afforded both consistently yielded original insights including patterns and trends in experiences and related reactions and desires, all associated with the grading and feedback processes.

I share the foregoing out of a belief that these are areas I think everyone conducting mixed methods action research should consider at all steps of the action research process. In this particular action research study, there were times I struggled with my multiple roles (researcher, online instructor, peer reviewer, and mentor, for example). Those struggles consistently yielded valuable insights as well as original features (for example, [a rubric-aligned discussion board feedback generator](#)) that were ultimately developed and added to the comment bank. However, the mixed methods action research process not only offered opportunities to gain rich insights into the impact of the intervention (the web-based based comment bank), but also offered ongoing opportunities to reflect on and learn from these struggles (including, for example, the immense benefits of peer communication and safe spaces to voice challenges with grading), most if not all of which mirror the realities of our work and practice in online teaching modalities.

In the following sections I elaborate further on issues of reflexivity, choice of methods, bias, and positionality in mixed methods action research through a feminist lens and also highlight some additional areas for consideration.

# Reflexivity

The breadth and potential power of feminist theory and feminist digital pedagogy, in particular, in this context and others, are not unlike that associated with reflexivity in other aspects of one's work and practice. Reinharz (2011) writes of reflexivity as both a theory and a process, where one's work incorporates intentional and conscious efforts to reflect on, consider, and account for the broad impact of one's thinking, actions, and perceptions on others. In my own practice (including and extending beyond research applications), reflexivity plays an important role in online course design, pedagogy, teaching, and educational research design. I am not alone. For example, Crawley (2008) writes that educators "must be reflexive about our pedagogical goals and techniques" (p. 13). Similarly, Altman and Leeman (2020) write of the importance of reflexivity and related issues of authenticity and compassion for "addressing the whole human being in ... learning experience design" (p. 5).

Altman and Leeman encourage others (educators and researchers included) to "continually evaluate [their] own mental models of what it means to learn" because

*this kind of attunement to self and those with whom we work serves to create richer relationships between faculty and their students in distance education settings, and in a profound way, connects the LXD [learning experience designer] to the very personal and emotional nature of adult learning as well in a way that impacts course design. (p. 5)*

These points and reflections also relate well, I believe, to action research study design. After all, teaching, not unlike feminism, is a complex activity. Reflexivity is an important component of both practices. For example, Beunen, van Assche, and Duineveld (2013) argue for "greater reflexivity in planning and design education" (p. 2) and write that

*Reflexivity is understood as a sustained reflection on the positionality of knowledge and presented as an opportunity to strengthen the academic dimension of planning and design curricula. The planning and design curricula, we argue, cannot tackle these issues without a deeper and more systematic self-reflection, a reflection on the disciplines, their teaching, on the role of planners and designers in society. (p. 2)*

Feminist theorists and research also adopt a reflexive approach to research, as conveyed (in part) through Jorgenson's (2011) exploration of reflexivity in feminist fieldwork and "the importance of acknowledging personal viewpoints on issues including gender, professional status, and race and their impact on social science research" (p. 115). Whereas feminism and reflexivity are both ways of thinking and processes by which one engages in a conscious effort to reflect on the impact of one's perceptions and actions on others (Reinharz, 2011), mixed-methods in my research emerges as a tool, and a powerful one at that, to act with intentionality and to actively "question language...the repository of our prejudices, our beliefs, our assumptions" in the manner Adichie (2018, p. 16) urges, in order to better understand the world (Leckenby & Hesse-Biber, 2007).

As Merriam and Tisdell (2016) make clear, "[n]o classroom teacher...will want to experiment with a new way of teaching...without some confidence in its probable success" (p. 237). The study (and related research design and study interventions) described in this chapter were no exception. As such, the described methods of data collection and subsequent analysis were all designed to increase and maintain both study trustworthiness and rigor. Ethical issues, including but not limited to "reciprocity to participants for their willingness to provide data, the handling of sensitive information, and disclosing the purposes of the research" were considered in detail and in an ongoing manner (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018, p. 181). I also remained acutely mindful of the fact that answers are inevitably heavily shaped by the questions that are asked (Taylor, 2016). While collecting and analyzing data, for example, I remained hyper aware of, and attentive to, the many different types of influences that might impact the "ordinary" voices of others during data collection. In this way, I employed ongoing reflection and consideration of not only the language used, but also my positionality, reflexivity, and bias (further explained below) at all points and stages of the action research study.

# Using Mixed Methods

Mixed methods research considered through the lens of feminist theory and pedagogy offers powerful opportunities to both acknowledge and actively support the union of theory and practice with the goal of positive change. Just as Pabón-Colón (n.d.) argues for the importance of understanding and appreciating “feminism as a verb, as an action” (Zipp, 2018, para. 3), Leckenby and Hesse-Biber (2007) and Merriam & Tisdell (2016) make powerful arguments for the value of mixed-methods research for all researchers interested in positively impacting human life, whether through applied social science, education, human-centered, and/or feminist research, lenses, and perspectives (or otherwise).

In *Feminist Approaches to Mixed-Methods Research*, Leckenby and Hesse-Biber (2007) explore how feminist researchers are using mixed methods and the relationship between mixed methods research and feminist knowledge building. They write,

*Feminist researchers have long been discussing women’s multiple ways of knowing and the multiple sites of vision on which women come to know the world at large. Reasons to break down and avoid the false dichotomy between qualitative and quantitative methods include feminist disciplinary goals that aim to avoid hierarchies and unearned privileging of quantitative methodologies. (p. 276)*

Furthermore, elaborating upon the benefits of and possibilities associated with qualitative research for feminist researchers, Leckenby and Hesse-Biber note,

*The types of questions asked that fit into a survey framework simply do not capture the issues that you want to understand. Due to some of these limitations found within quantitative methods, feminist researchers have been an integral force in exploring new qualitative methods that avoid the pitfalls of survey research. (p. 251)*

Leckenby and Hesse-Biber focus on applications for feminist knowledge building. However, I believe the forces described in their writing have value far beyond research conducted on (or by) feminist researchers (and others actively engaged in movements to end sexist exploitation and oppression and reverse long-standing patriarchies), to include anyone with an interest in “the construction of new knowledge and the production of social change” in “interdisciplinary and transdisciplinary” ways (Brayton, Ollivier, & Robbins, n.d., para. 3) as well as anyone with an interest in better understanding and impacting in positive ways people’s everyday lives and concerns (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 1) and in higher education, in particular.

When conducting mixed methods action research, it is critical to reflect on important questions associated with the quantitative components of the research and its relationship with feminist digital pedagogy. For example, Leckenby and Hesse-Biber (2007) highlight, for research with and without a feminist focus or lens, important cautions. Noted cautions include, in part, concerns for “tightly knit boxes of moral judgment” (p. 253) offered in connection with survey research on premarital sexual behavior, and which might, as an example, mirror in some ways the “good/bad dichotomy” mirrored in survey questions on instructor efficacy and implications that how one answers is reflective of whether they are a good or a bad teacher. These concerns are compounded when considered in the context of contingent workers and adjuncts who are oppressed within the system of Higher Education.

As Efron and Ravid (2013) explain, a variety of strategies yield a variety of information types. Moreover, a variety of data sources and types strengthen the ability of a researcher to compare, contrast, and analyze collected data. Additionally, associated triangulation is important as a way to further ensure research validity (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018). However, issues of survey selection and quantitative data collection are often replete with choices and alternatives (Choi & Pak, 2005). Adichie (2018) writes eloquently on the importance of choice in feminist theory, and the implications of choice more broadly (especially when a selected survey instrument can ultimately impact policy decisions that impact day to day lives) cannot be understated. Researchers of all kinds and backgrounds can benefit from being mindful of the range of potential biases, both explicit and implicit, that might be fed and fueled in connection with any particular study design. Applying and adopting a feminist orientation to mixed-methods action research

promotes intentional and ongoing reflection and related emphasis on choices least (or less) likely to embody “tightly knit boxes of moral judgment” in the ways Leckenby and Hesse-Biber (2007, p. 253) describe.

As noted, in the referenced action research study, I collected quantitative data in the form of numerical data from self-administered survey questionnaires. This data (collected from adopted self-efficacy survey instruments, all of which had been tested for both validity and reliability with the associated goal of study quality) was used to examine possible cause-and-effect relationships as a result of the study intervention. Collectively, through both quantitative and qualitative methods, I tested the effect of the planned intervention (a web-based collaborative comment bank) on online teaching self-efficacy, collective efficacy, perceptions, and attitudes of a group of participating online instructors.

The adopted data collection methods and associated data analysis demonstrated phenomenological qualities through a process of “ferreting out the essence or basic structure of” an experience, which in this case involved what can be described as the essence of the grading and feedback processes (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 227). Adopted data collection and related data analysis methods also illustrated heuristic inquiry qualities where the “researcher includes an analysis of his or her own experience as part of the data” (p. 227). Finally, adopted data collection and related data analysis methods also exhibited qualities of imaginative variation through intentional and sustained efforts to assess the study’s focus from a variety of perspectives.

## **Bias, Mistaken Assumptions, and Silenced Voices**

“When we speak we are afraid our words will not be heard or welcomed. But when we are silent, we are still afraid. So it is better to speak.” – Audre Lorde (Baker, 2020)

In *Intent and Ordinary Bias: Unintended Thought and Social Motivation Create Casual Prejudice*, Fiske (2004) notes that “[u]nethical behavior, bias in particular, depends on both motivation and cognition” (p. 118). In all actuality, everyone is capable of behaving badly and making poor judgments. As Fiske (2004) writes, despite “this comfortable account that isolates the problem in a few bad individuals, the accumulated evidence suggests that most of us are perfectly capable of behaving badly, in the relevant context” (p. 119). Judgment is everywhere, including within the survey tools we often use, promote, and distribute in the interest of conducting research to help a surveyed population. Choi and Pak (2005) note that “[b]ias is a pervasive problem in the design of questionnaires” (para. 2). Sadly (yet realistically), the types of bias are many. For example, Choi and Pak identify and describe 48 common types of bias in questionnaires.

So, while feminist researchers are most typically “epistemologically and methodologically attuned to issues of power, difference, voice, silence, and the complexities of the knowable world” (p. 253), all researchers – whether or not they identify with feminist perspectives or lens – can benefit from a deeper focus on these same issues. In preparation for the referenced action research study, I reviewed a variety of efficacy survey tools. It is important to note that there are many such tools and even for survey instruments that present with supporting attestations regarding validity and reliability, interpretations can vary. For example, questions on excellent jobs, meaningful learning, important work, and/or doing well or succeeding in school, as examples, remain subject to interpretation. This possible ambiguity is not unlike that voiced by Adichie (2015) when noting “I often make the mistake of thinking that something that is obvious to me is just as obvious to everyone else” (p. 14). Similar, as well, to Leckenby and Hesse-Biber’s reminder that “[a]s a feminist, you are interested in what is left out when the question is framed as such” (p. 251).

Persistent wonderings and questions regarding the possibility that quantitative survey instruments have the potential to leave some voices silenced finds voice and comfort in the work of Leckenby and Hesse-Biber (2007) and in mixed methods action research more generally. Related concerns for bias, mistaken assumptions, and silenced voices in quantitative survey instruments are another value of mixed-methods action research. Importantly, “mixed methods can



access subjugated knowledges and silenced voices” (p. 276) and Leckenby and Hesse-Biber’s work not only makes the case for doing so in connection with feminist research but also in connection with any research, including action research, involving possibly oppressed groups.

Given this reality, ongoing reflection was used to maintain a critical perspective and also to sustain awareness of positionality and possible bias throughout the entirety of the described research study. An intentional process of active and ongoing reflection was relied upon to reduce bias (both explicit and implicit) as much as possible. As one example, the survey instruments I adopted for the study’s quantitative data analysis were modified in ways that were inclusive of all gender identities.

Throughout the entirety of the study, I was simultaneously both a teacher and a learner, and as a teacher/learner I was also simultaneously a researcher. For example, I taught online courses similar in both instructional design and curricular content to courses taught by participating faculty. In this role, I needed to remain aware of the many types of implicit biases that could impact and influence any comparisons or evaluations of instructor feedback across similar courses. Similarly, I actively monitored my own beliefs regarding what qualifies as “quality”, “meaningful,” and/or “personalized” feedback, for example, based on my own experiences (past and present) as a learner. Analogous efforts were applied and sustained in connection with my interpretations of existing research and literature. My positionality also evolved overtime, as my familiarity with participating instructors and the assessments adopted in their individual courses increased over time.

Herr and Anderson (2015) describe a variety of positionality types and categories which to include insider, insider in collaboration with other insiders, insider(s) in collaboration with outsiders, reciprocal collaboration, outsider(s) in collaboration with insider(s), and outsider(s) studying insider(s). Additionally, and importantly, there are a variety of useful ways to consider positionality (Herr & Anderson, 2015). For example, Collins (1990) describes an *outsider within* to capture the unique experience her race and gender permit. While I identify as female, study participants included fourteen males and four females. In many of the informal conversations and virtual meetings that took place at various points throughout the study, I was the only female. In these contexts, I might also be considered an *outsider within* as described above.

At all points in a research study, a researcher must both actively reflect upon positionality as a continuum and also intentionally consider where they might fall on such a continuum (Herr & Anderson, 2015). Relatedly, a researcher must also remain aware of the possibility that positionality can change throughout the course of the research process (Herr & Anderson, 2015). Importantly, not only is positionality not static, there are related risks associated if one views positionality in a static way.

My experience presented no exception to this rule and, as my study and its associated term and schedule progressed, my relationship with study participants changed, as well. For example, professional development webinars and informal conversations that occurred at various points throughout the study led to a variety of changes in relationships and interactions with study participants. Given the extended period of time during which the study took place, my relationships with study participants whom I did not know personally before the study commenced evolved and grew as the study’s timeline continued. These changes inevitably impacted, in a myriad of ways, the nature and extent of what participants shared and related positionality, as well. Reflection and journaling provided opportunities to deepen my own understanding of these sometimes subtle changes, and simultaneously heightened my ability to remain aware of their potential impact.

Journaling was especially effective as a tool to both preserve and memorialize insights and detailed experiences conveyed through unique descriptions and language and, ultimately, led to deeper appreciation of the noted changes. The changes themselves were also revealing and suggestive of the benefits of extended time frames when conducting research of this nature. For example, as the study progressed my journals reflected a stronger voice on the part of participant input as well as much richer descriptive detail in participant conversations and reflections. Description and reflection on the part of participants also demonstrated and revealed increased momentum as the study progressed and my journals were helpful in terms of both identifying and documenting these trends and changes.

## Conclusion

In this chapter, I explored the potential for mixed methods actions research from a feminist lens to expand feminist knowledge building in the context of online higher education programs, curriculum, and instruction, in particular grading and feedback processes. In doing so, I also examined how an intentionally designed digital tool (a open-access, web-based comment bank) might be incorporated into a broader feminist-based research inquiry to both further promote and support feminist pedagogy and thinking. I reflected on the complexity of feminist oriented mixed methods action research, focusing on issues of choice of methods, bias, reflexivity, assumptions, and voice based on a study I conducted on the web-based comment bank. Study results were both highly positive and promising and yielded positive insights and feedback from participants and related data analysis. I hope these findings as well as the related critical reflection incorporated throughout this chapter lead to more work and collaboration in this area (and in open education and pedagogy more generally), continued growth and use of the open-access comment bank, as well as more interest in mixed methods action research from (and for the benefit of) a feminist lens going forward.

Going forward, the comment bank can further be developed with students too. My hope is that students, with encouragement, will “intervene in the creation of meaning and distribution of power” (Golden, 2018, p. 43). This demonstrates how feminist digital pedagogy can simultaneously have both a “public function” and support work toward decentralization of power and authority structures (p. 42).

The lessons of feminist approaches and feminist oriented critical analysis to mixed-methods action research are powerful and applicable to educational research and arguably all social science research so as to simultaneously access and explore spaces, including educator experiences, that quantitative research alone cannot. That is, while mixed methods action research is not, in and of itself, feminist in nature, this chapter’s work to explore and reflect upon ways feminist researchers might critically evaluate, incorporate and apply mixed methods is broadly relevant and valuable, including in connection with research on online teaching, online grading, online feedback processes, and related instructor efficacy (both self and collective). I hope that these discussions continue and also that the points shared in this chapter help further (and further elevate) related conversations and awareness on behalf of more individuals.

This action research also serves as a reminder of the power of critical reflection on the far-reaching benefits of feminist approaches to mixed methods action research and feminist digital pedagogy, in particular. A related reminder to look ahead points, broadly, towards more supportive and more widely embraced feminist thinking for the benefit of everyone (hooks, 2015), including and perhaps especially for digital tools and instructional interventions and within online learning spaces. Just as “[f]eminists are made, not born” (hooks, 2015, p. 7), so are, I believe, researchers and feminist digital pedagogies. Research and critical reflection on feminist digital pedagogies in practice, and in its many forms, offer guidance for the further growth and development of both.

## Endnotes

1. Note that while action research and design-based research share many similarities in their work to both identify real-world challenges and then take action to address and improve those identified challenges, there are also important differences between the two approaches. In particular, unlike action research, a primary goal of design-based research is the generation of theory to solve real-world problems. Additionally, whereas practitioners typically initiate research in action research, it is researchers who typically initiate the design-based research process (Peer Group, 2006).

2. Mixed method research: where a study’s research questions are examined using a combination of both quantitative and qualitative data.

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# Going Beyond Trees and Rhizomes: How Biomimicry Can Inform Collaborative and Multi-Disciplinary Learning in the Digital Age

Emma C. Wingfield

Design

Collaboration

Education

Teaching

Higher Education

Diversity

Learning

Feminist Pedagogies

Teachers

multi-disciplinary

*Bringing together multi-disciplinary teaching approaches emphasizes that there are more similarities than differences across disciplines and that intertwining these different pedagogies creates more fruitful learning environments. This chapter considers botany and critical feminist pedagogies as a source of collaboration to highlight—just as in nature—that growth does not occur without diversity and therefore the design of educational practices should not be mono-cultural. Allowing for space to question institutionalized learning structures by considering botanical structures, multi-disciplinary learning can carve new spaces for collaboration, both physically and digitally, and can inform how teachers create more sustainable, adaptable, and restorative learning practices for students. This chapter explores different kinds of conceptual models that can be used to inform multi-disciplinary approaches to learning in the digital age and as a result encourage cooperation, collaboration, and diversity in the higher education.*

*What if you were a teacher but had no voice to speak your knowledge? What if you had no language at all and yet there was something you needed to say? Wouldn't you dance it? Wouldn't you act it out? Wouldn't your every movement tell the story? In time you would become so eloquent that just to gaze upon you would reveal it all. And so it is with these silent green lives.*

*- Robin Wall Kimmerer, Braiding Sweetgrass.*

In botany, any species of plant that is crossbred from two genetically different varieties is a hybrid. In many cases, the collaborative genes of the parent varieties come together and produce a more sustainable and resilient plant by a process known as *hybrid vigor*. Hybridity, as a theoretical concept, is used across many higher education paradigms. Additionally, hybridity as an abstract metaphor has been used, both successfully and unsuccessfully, in archaeology and anthropology to discuss cultural changes (Stress, 1999). When it comes to processes of learning, hybridity can function as both a fluid theoretical and methodological concept. For example, similar to Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari's (1980) concept of rhizomatic thinking to make sense of knowledge, rhizomatic learning takes the botanical structure of the rhizome as a metaphor for the complex and messy ways people learn (Cormier, 2012). Rhizomatic learning relies on patterns and structures of botanical hybrids as a form of collaboration to inform how teachers create more sustainable, regenerative, and restorative learning practices for students. For the purposes of this chapter and inspired by bell hooks'

critical pedagogy, I will explore how other botanical structures can inform multi-disciplinary approaches to learning in an increasingly digital format and, as a result, encourage cooperation, collaboration, innovation, and diversity in higher education. This mutually symbiotic collaboration will be discussed using Robin Wall Kimmerer's description of the indigenous planning technique known as The Three Sisters as a conceptual framework.

## Context

My interest in multi-disciplinary learning kept me on the outside of the higher education institution for many years. I tried and failed many times to follow a traditional academic path. Although I was interested and dedicated to research and academia, I felt limited by traditional forms of learning that reinforced linear ways of thinking. This type of exclusionary approach is rampant in higher education contexts as departments often prioritize the replication of homogeneous research and struggle to embrace new technological forms of teaching as pedagogies become more digital. The higher education classroom felt claustrophobic at a time when the global community was becoming more accessible because of technological innovations increasing connections with people and things that once required years of field research and expensive grants to foster.

I learned quickly that my approach to learning was anything but conventional and I became estranged from the formal education system after my Master's degree. I felt alienated from my subject and ultimately left academia for the professional world. Once outside the academic institutional walls, I discovered the potential that multi-disciplinary learning provides. For me, the process of weaving together academic disciplines, like art history and anthropology, with practical experiences, like cultural economics and commerce, elucidated how complementary avenues pushed me to further investigate a topic.

I returned to academia in 2019. Bridging these seemingly separate paradigms made me a stronger student, researcher, and teacher. I believe incorporating this way of learning from the beginning of a student's higher education will produce a more sustainable career and a more supportive and inclusive approach to pedagogy. While I am at the beginning of my own teaching career, I simultaneously remain closely connected to my own student experience (or my own "autobiographical experience" as suggested by Brookfield, 1998) as well as the context through which I built my non-academic career. This intersection allows space for a more critical and reflexive perspective on how to shift pedagogy to meet the needs of a post-pandemic world and navigate the possibilities brewing in the digital age (McLean, 2020). The ways in which we learn are constantly changing. Technology shifts and innovations question traditional modes of academic research and delivery (Santos et al., 2016). To explore this further, I turn to biomimicry to inform multi-disciplinary collaborative approaches to higher education pedagogies by looking at botanical structures as a model for learning (Stevens et al., 2020).

## Hybridity

Teaching new ideas and approaches to others is not an automatic process. Teaching requires both creativity, ingenuity, and confidence of the subject from the teacher as well as some level of interest and attention from the learner (Freiman, 2021). It is a collaboration grounded in reciprocity - a hybrid. Multi-disciplinary learning moves away from a traditional linear learning monoculture towards the creation of multi-disciplinary spaces— both physically and digitally— where different perspectives can be interacted with and considered. As these individualized approaches to learning coalesce, they ultimately create something stronger - hybridity.

As Deleuze and Guattari explore in their book *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia* (1980), making sense of knowledge is messy and more akin to a root system of a plant that spreads out in multiple directions through self-replication (Deleuze and Guattari 2017). Deleuze and Guattari use biomimicry as a metaphor to inform learning and teaching practices that question established power structures. Teresa Castro (2019) also uses plants as metaphor to suggest alternative and counter-hegemonic ways of thinking about the world. But in *The Mediated Plant*, (2019) Castro departs from Deleuze and Guattari, arguing that plants are non-hierarchical.

The relationship between a tree and a rhizome is mutually beneficial through symbiosis. Castro's approach is more helpful when thinking about learning in higher education precisely because it creates space for multi-disciplinary, holistic, and collaborative ways of developing skills. Similarly, the root system of plants are actually highly individualized, each branch exploring its own autonomy to increase its own growth. But most importantly, individual plants and root systems can't flourish without the whole (Kimmerer 2013). It is the encounter, according to Castro (2019), between entities—roots, teachers, students, disciplines, technologies etc.—that can help us radically rethink higher education pedagogy.

Technology changed how we think about plants and forms other than humans in the biological world. This realization pushed western science towards fields already explored through Indigenous knowledges for centuries (Castro, 2019). Technology can also be harnessed to transform higher education teaching as long as we allow such innovations to help develop our teaching and shift our understanding of our own fields while encouraging students to question and critique the field. Like Robin Wall Kimmerer's quote at the beginning of the chapter, what would you do if you couldn't lecture or teach according to western linear curriculums? You would probably turn to other modes of knowledge production and dissemination to chart new ways of teaching. We need to reimagine what it means to teach in the digital age where technology and other man-made catastrophes shift our ways of learning and developing careers. We need to push the ways we conceive pedagogy and create learning spaces—in person and virtual—that are truly inclusive and holistic. Disciplines are no longer isolated from one another and teaching shouldn't progress as if they were.

Moving beyond the hierarchical and linear focus of the traditional classroom to one that integrates multiple avenues and diversions from both inside and outside the classroom has the potential to expand ways of learning. For example, hybrid learning methods have become a valuable tool for teaching at the height of the Covid-19 pandemic as schools and higher education institutions navigate new definitions of what and where the "classroom" is. While the mixture of in-person and online learning spaces can be tenuous, it has also opened up connections and opportunities for collaboration between students, professors, and institutions in different geographical locations that were independent of one another only a short while ago. Connections between scholars in the Global North and the Global South could drastically change how local histories are perceived, taught, and explored, returning long overdue agency to non-western approaches to academic research, writing, and teaching.

Ultimately, multi-disciplinary learning allows students to develop deeper critical thinking skills as they engage with different theoretical, logical, and methodological approaches. But, these essential components of learning processes are constantly changing. The influx of new research and technological means of engaging with materials has altered the landscape of higher education. For example, the need for a physical library space becomes exclusionary when access to primary source materials is accessible and de-hierarchized with an internet connection. Similar to the research process itself (Mackness & Bell, 2015), teaching must resist the hegemonic dominance of thought processes. Teaching must constantly question, re-examine, and explore new possibilities (hooks, 2000) that align with contemporary situations. If done with consideration to the body of persons involved, hybrid learning environments can reward cooperation and diversity and push such ideas even further.

## The Three Sisters

Botanist Robin Wall Kimmerer in *Braiding Sweetgrass: Indigenous Wisdom, Scientific Knowledge and the Teachings of Plants* (2013) explores the ways the natural world and Indigenous knowledge can function as tools to illustrate the concept of reciprocity in human relationships. These lessons are also applicable to ways of learning. Kimmerer (2013) states "Plants tell their stories not by what they say, but by what they do" emphasizing the importance of learning about things in different ways by teaching through different lenses (p. 86). Botanical models are socially constructed. The hybrid plant is dependent upon the interaction of parent varieties. The resulting hybrid is constructed through the different biological pathways, or lenses, of the parent. In the learning space, this can be as simple as connecting knowledges learned in class to overall life experiences (hooks, 1994). By providing context through our own career experience, we can encourage students to think about how these knowledges may already be in practice and support their own expression moving forward.

But multi-disciplinary learning suggests multiple different logical and methodical approaches. How can we move beyond a dual-hybrid approach towards a multi-hybrid approach to learning? If we are looking at other examples from the plant world and from Indigenous cultures as Kimmerer suggests, we can look to her chapter titled “The Three Sisters” (Kimmerer, 2013). Kimmerer uses the tale of the *Three Sisters* (Figure 1)—corn, beans, and squash grown in that order—to show how these three crops planted in the same garden not only protect one another but enhance each other. Each plant is made stronger through the interaction with the other. In both the online and on-campus classroom, we can view multi-disciplinary learning in the same way.

**Figure 1**

*The Three Sisters*



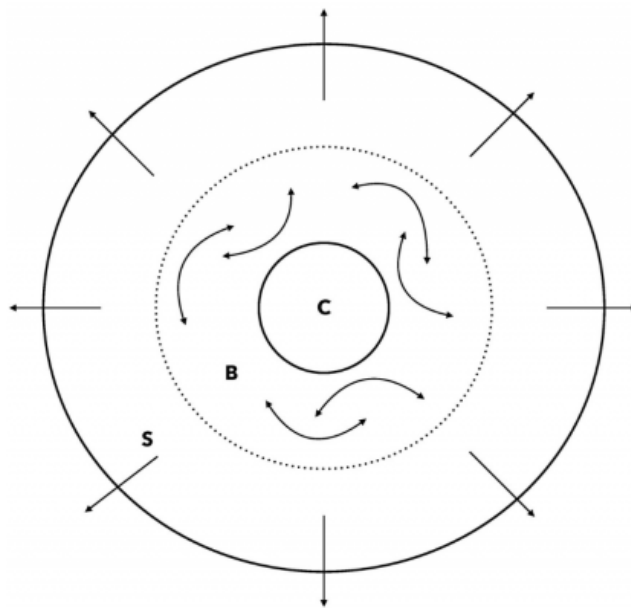
This figure demonstrates the individual crops of the Three Sisters. They are corn, beans, and squash, grown together in that order. This rendering shows how the three individual plants grow together in one crop. Drawing by author.

**Corn.** Corn (Figure 2) is the first crop because it grows tall and fast creating a strong foundation for its sisters (Kimmerer, 2013). The corn of learning is the specific discipline, department, and field that initially piques the student’s interest and brings them into the higher education classroom. Corn creates the template for everyone to follow. The students in my first year BA module this year were in the classroom to learn about History of Art, some for the purpose of wanting to build a career in the arts and others because they love the subject. Corn is a trajectory, a constant that learning revolves around and returns to in order to situate the learning experience and from which we can enhance our own excitement and understanding of the academic material (hooks, 1994).

**Figure 2**

*Three Sisters as Pedagogy*





This figure demonstrates how we can use the metaphor of the Three Sisters to inform multi-disciplinary learning in the higher education classroom.

Learning is not only about memorizing foundational material. Learning is also about how to apply diverse fields in real life and cultivate a visual idea of what research, a career, or even life could look like (Cormier, 2012). For me, this method of learning only happened once I was out of the institutional space and working in the art world. I saw the value of incorporating other disciplines and the importance of building knowledge from different avenues to animate the learning process. In many instances, however, the promise of what comes next is contradictory to how higher education is taught. There is an emphasis on constantly looking back to the foundations of a discipline as immutable, rather than cultivating the growth of something new. This encourages the view that excitement is disruptive to the seriousness deemed essential to learning in a traditional classroom (hooks, 1994).

**Beans.** Excitement, the beans of learning (Figure 2), is what makes students passionate about learning; it is vital to the learning experience. Only a handful of teachers throughout my educational career seemed to care about what got students excited about learning. In many ways, this is a result from the traditional classroom model that focuses more on learning as memorization rather than critical thinking. Critical thinking for me didn't happen sitting in a lecture hall trying to understand Michel Foucault, it was about the experiences I had outside of the classroom that put the theory and methodology to work. Excitement in learning must originate from the teacher but also be reflected back by the student. When discussing Foucault in one class, I was anything but excited and so I found a way to make the topic more approachable. During the seminars, I incorporated more visual material to help move the discussion along and pique students' interest in actually learning how to navigate this difficult topic. I incorporated contemporary digital media that referenced Foucauldian thought for the students to reference. I allowed the students to question the validity of using a controversial figure like Foucault as a methodological foundation for History of Art. This resulted in a lively discussion that moved beyond Foucault and gave the students better tools through which to critique his work. This would have not been possible without excitement.

Bean stalks are flexible yet adaptable as it snakes up and around the stalk of corn. The bean plant begins as a leaf but quickly changes its mind, transforming into a long vine (Kimmerer, 2013). The bean is how we navigate the disciplinary field. It is a metaphor for how we, as humans, use different means to process information. Adaptability is key. This could be as simple as incorporating unexpected visual material during a seminar to get otherwise reluctant students to engage with the material beyond the written page. Or it could be the transformation of the physical/digital space where learning happens. The beans of learning are meant to challenge existing knowledges, to question positionally, and transform dominant—and at times harmful—pedagogical claims (DiAngelo & Sensoy, 2009).

**Squash.** Squash (Figure 2) grows slowly. It is a late bloomer and grows close to the ground, its leaves providing shelter for the base of both corn and beans and the fertile topsoil (Kimmerer, 2013). It keeps water in and harmful weeds and pests out. Squash is a dual metaphor for multi-disciplinary learning. On the one hand, it provides a sense of groundedness by creating a safe space to encourage students to be active participants rather than passive consumers within learning frameworks (Freire, 1968). On the other, as the squash grows it moves away from the corn and the beans (Kimmerer, 2013) exploring different avenues that contribute to the strength of the whole. What can be learned by engaging with alternate fields of inquiry or incorporating web-based practical assignments to provide real-world examples of how the core discipline—the corn—operates.

This sharing of information is the squash of learning. It breaks through the perimeters that set academia apart from the rest of the world (Freire, 1968), encouraging bringing personal narratives and experiences into institutional spaces (hooks, 1994). This can be in the form of a practical experience shared, a case study, or a real-world example that helps students visualize and develop skills to analyze and “critically challenge mechanisms of ideological domination” (DiAngelo & Sensoy, 2009, p. 445). These external experiences are necessary to forge connections between students, professors, and institutions that never quite fit in traditional pedagogies. hooks describes the importance of an *Engaged Pedagogy* that not only allows us to teach and share information but also believe in the learning process as inclusive of sharing in both “intellectual and spiritual growth with our students” (hooks, 1994, p. 13). Pedagogical theories and methods as isolated ideas can be exclusionary and hierarchical. By bridging the gap between theory and practice to work in tandem, they can create a much stronger pedagogy that challenges and innovates the higher education classroom. It is the heart of multi-disciplinarity.

## Conclusion

As a student, I was desperate to understand how what I was learning in the classroom could be put in context or connect with life experiences. Like corn, squash, and beans, bringing together different types of disciplines, spaces, and fields of thought make learning stronger because of the interactions with one another. Using the *Three Sisters* and collaborative multi-hybrid metaphors rooted in critical feminist pedagogies allows us to better analyze relations of knowledge production, challenge unequal power relations, and move learning beyond hierarchical structures of knowledge toward ones that are more equitable and fluid. By bringing together multi-disciplinary teaching approaches we realize that there are more similarities than differences across disciplines. By intertwining these different pedagogies, more fruitful and adaptable learning environments are created. Looking to botany as a source of collaboration we realize that nature doesn’t exist without diversity and neither does learning. Therefore the design of educational practices and learning spaces should not be mono-cultural. We can improve student learning by incorporating and collaborating with different people, topics, departments, subjects, and technologies, benefiting from each other’s perspectives to build a stronger crop of knowledge.

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

Ruth Sellin, Shaazia Ebrahim, Rachel Piper, & Sakhi Nitin Anita

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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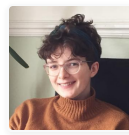




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