



The Controversy of the Twin Pandemics: Feminist Pedagogies and the Urgency of Revolutionary Praxis

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Abstract

This intervention reflects on the twin pandemics of COVID-19 and anti-Black racism in conversation with feminist pedagogies and controversy. To do so, I weave together ideas from the papers in this themed section on Controversy and Anti-Oppression Pedagogies as well as scholarship on feminist pedagogies and practices to argue for revolutionary feminist disruption. I highlight a pedagogy of discomfort and discomfort as a framework for Black feminist and anti-oppression pedagogical engagements and spaces. I argue that doing so yields liberatory possibilities for our classrooms.

Keywords

Anti-oppression, controversy, feminist pedagogies, reflexivity, Black feminism

Introduction

It is important for educators to know how deeply unjust systems affect people and their communities in unique ways, but it is also imperative to understand the intersections of injustice. Pedagogies must call out and teach students how racism, sexism, homophobia, transphobia, Islamophobia, and inequality are structural, not people behaving poorly.
-Bettina Love (2019: 55)

The twin pandemics of COVID-19 and the attention finally paid to systemic anti-Black racism, elevated by the state-sanctioned and extrajudicial murders of Breonna Taylor and George Floyd by law enforcement in the United States, coincided in the year 2020. In their wake, our collective attention was



abruptly drawn to controversy, with a rapid transformation of our daily lives and in our collective consciousness. Consequently, the impacts on our pedagogical practices have been unavoidable, as our students look to us to open spaces for making sense of the time and of respite. Our collective approaches to teaching and learning, as well as the form of the classroom, has required us to accommodate uncertainty and the twin pandemics have infiltrated these new forms of pedagogical spaces we find ourselves in. For some of us, the current moment is the first time we have come to reflect on the blurred lines between the university and society while others have been attentive to disruptive feminist pedagogies for some time (Ahmed 2012; Bain and Laliberte this issue; FLOCK this issue).

Demonstrated by the opening quote from Bettina Love, a pedagogical shift is required that scrutinizes the dynamics of power, knowledge, and spaces as we have known them. After an academic year radically altered by a global health crisis, what have we made of controversy when pedagogical practices are based on models and institutions that perpetuate white supremacy and anti-Black racism? Kobayashi and Peake (2008: 166) note, “Geography is a discipline founded, then, on difference and hierarchy”, and this difference and hierarchy eventually make their way into the classroom (Oberhauser 2008). Given that controversy laid bare structural inequalities, exploitation, oppression, and vulnerabilities embedded in place (Alexander and Mohanty 1997), feminist pedagogical approaches can inform our teaching and learning processes, particularly as they become buttressed against controversy.

In my concluding reflection to this themed section on Controversy and Anti-Oppression Pedagogies, I reflect on feminist pedagogies and controversy through my personal experiences as well as through reading the essays in this collection. My reflection is galvanized by Aideen Quilty’s (2017) engagement on queer disruption by thinking with Megan Boler’s pedagogy of discomfort (2004). Quilty (2017:112) summarizes four aspects of Boler’s framework: “first, an invitation to see differently; second, the importance of critical self-reflection in provoking change; third, the importance of emotion; and fourth, a call to action”. Additionally, I am influenced by Black feminist pedagogies in my reflection, which work “to in part expose and contest epistemologies that rationalize, obscure, and perpetuate the oppression-laden experiences of racially marginalized peoples” (James-Gallaway and Turner 2021: 25).

Seeing Differently

Taking up the work of feminism requires that scholars either become uncomfortable, by questioning received truths, disciplinary boundaries, or their own situated position within structures of knowledge production, or that they acknowledge their own already-existing discomfort, the ways they cannot yet bring their full selves into disciplinary spaces without translation or “becoming a problem” (Gökarıksel, Hawkins, Neubert, and Smith 2021:2).

Examining the intersections of controversy and pedagogy in the current moment calls for disruption to cultures of exclusion that are enmeshed in the legacies of oppression and discrimination (Ahmed 2012, 2017; see FLOCK this issue). Institutions have reflected on this moment on our campuses (cf. Plowman 2020), in our research (cf. National Science Foundation 2021), and in our professional associations (cf. Langham and Kaplan 2020). A challenge to this moment surrounds the heightened politics of labor and the emphasis on strategies for diversity, equity, and inclusion. These strategies are sought as solutions to exclusionary institutional practices but can actually produce limitations and create boundaries in our pedagogical spaces (Bain and Laliberte this issue). Where are the world making alternatives that feminist pedagogical practices allow us to imagine and how do we enact them (Farhadi

2019)? What do we do to resist the commemorative bodies of geography's pedagogies (FLOCK this issue; DasGupta et al. this issue)?

By commemorative bodies, I mean the hypervisibility of marginalized groups in moments like this (and always) that then turns all marginalized people into the experts about how to solve the crises before us and, therefore, responsible for being at the forefront of institutional practices, including pedagogical transformations. An open letter from a group of AAG Specialty Group Chairs reflects this politics of the controversy and commemorative bodies, by pointing to “multiple layers of undue burden on marginalized scholars” (Barr, et.al. 2020). Heidi Nast (1999: 102) asserts this tension in a discussion of bell hooks' *Teaching to Transgress: Education as a Practice of Freedom* (1994), arguing for the danger of not foregrounding “the political and practical fall-out faced by many faculty who do engage with critical pedagogies and who do risk broaching difficult social and political issues”. Debanuj DasGupta poignantly states, “My authority as a professor is trumped by my students' whiteness” (see DasGupta et al. this issue). What DasGupta describes here reflects the passage that opens this section, where Gökariksel and her colleagues in FLOCK describe the need to navigate bringing one's full self into a space (i.e., classroom) because of the decision to take up feminism (see also Ahmed 2017). As teachers, we must be attentive the “the sense of alienation, dislocation, and marginalization” (Alexander and Mohanty 1997:xiv) that such pedagogical practices can yield.

Embracing Reflexivity, Affect and Emotion

As reflected in the essays of this themed section, pedagogical spaces take on various forms, such as traditional classrooms, hallways, fieldwork, social media, artistic and creative work, and the written word (Oberhauser 2008; Bain and Laliberte this issue; FLOCK this issue). Consequently, considering a breadth of feminist engagements with controversy in ways that are not limited to our embodied understandings or the hegemonic curricular traditions that we have inherited is imperative. Reflexivity, affect, and attention to emotions are integral to transforming teaching practices (Dowler 2002; Ahmed 2017; Farhadi 2019).

Incorporating feminist pedagogical approaches ask teachers to, “embrace key principles, such as: attending to power relations (including those between teacher and student); valuing personal experience and emotion as these inform knowledge and learning; and transforming in justice through reflexive praxis” (Boler and Zembylas 2016:21; see also Dowler 2002; Browne 2005; Ahmed 2018; Farhadi 2019). The role of reflexivity is essential to pedagogy because it includes an examination on the ways we show up and are aware of our bodies in classroom spaces. Reflexivity signals that we are thoughtful about the varying and shifting power dynamics our embodiments produce, the impact of those power relations on students and other members of our educational communities, and, ideally, work to mitigate power in ways that contribute to salutary pedagogical engagements.

Few of us are taught how to be effective teachers; instead, we are trained to become good researchers during our graduate preparation. Consequently, we are not always asked to be reflexive about and augment our pedagogical practices by our institutions, except by fluctuations in quantitative data in course evaluations, which are themselves sites of controversy (Nast 1999). As Catungal remarks, “we come to know ourselves as academic subjects in part through the ways that our bodies rub up against institutional arrangements that define our place and position and thus construct parameters around our value and contributions” (DasGupta et al. this issue; see also Arun-Pina this issue). Reflexive practices can become tense sites of negotiation as we think about encountering and working with/in controversy.

As part of reflexive practices, experiencing challenges is to be expected. The relationality of embodiment, discomfort, and controversy can inhibit our ability to fully embrace the pedagogical experiences that we facilitate. It urges us to consider how we might we move our bodies differently when

thinking about feminist pedagogical practice. It is important to me – as a fat Black queer woman – to disrupt the normative pedagogical structures that do not accommodate my own body (Eaves 2020a). As the essays in the themed section have demonstrated, the fundamental and necessary act of our bodies/some bodies navigating pedagogical spaces is controversial (Nast 1999; Gökarıksel et.al, 2021). Moreover, the body is an important figuration in feminist geography and should be taken up accordingly in relation to the classroom, on campus, and (whether we like it or not) as representatives of our universities outside of the physical campus space (Oberhauser 2008).

Norm Exploding Pedagogies

Our pedagogical examples and practices can produce a power dynamic in the form of gatekeeping. The gatekeeping continues when we fail to recognize the power of our assigned readings and course activities. Adhering to colonizing geographic practices can be how controversy emerges in the classroom (FLOCK this issue). How might we position ourselves to think more critically about the norming nature of our academic spaces, how race, gender, and sexuality becomes institutionalized into our very hallways? In the letter they share in their article and through the accompanying artwork, Arun-Pina (this issue) reminds us how deeply embedded the structures of cis-heteronormativity are in our academic environments.

Furthermore, the author(s) of the essay from FLOCK (Gökarıksel, Hawkins, Neubert, Padley, Smith, Vasudevan, and Wright), “Student-Led Activism for Racial Justice,” reminds us of unequal power structures embedded within our institutional/pedagogical spaces, through describing common outcomes of student activism for racial justice at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill (UNC-CH): “When a step is taken towards addressing racial injustice on campus (such as removing the name of a white supremacist from a building), the university leadership claims it as its own and presents it as a benevolent action the administration has taken for the institution’s “progress,” entirely erasing the hard work of student visionaries for many years.” The UNC-CH student activists were described as “agitators” and as not inclusive of the norms of pedagogy and the campus landscape.

The discursive formation of universities, such as the “genteel, quaint, and honorable” UNC-CH (FLOCK this issue), disengages controversy and erases the university's legacy of anti-Black racism, harm and violence. If this is the case, then the policies and branding of the university shape our classrooms and curriculum in normative ways and push against anti-racist and anti-oppressive pedagogies. How do we disrupt and intervene in canonized approaches to pedagogy and course materials, particularly those that promote normative notions of place or take up curriculum design in additive or tokenistic ways (i.e., a “gender” week in the syllabus), maintaining institutional oppressions? Or as Katherine McKittrick posits, “And what of our teaching practice? Do we teach refusal? Can we not teach our students to engage with various authors and narratives, critically, while also asking them to raise up the work of black women and other scholars, writers, artists, interviewees, teachers, who go unrecognized? How do we teach each other to read (disapprove, evaluate, critique, use, forget, abandon, remember) “white men” or other powerful scholars?” (McKittrick 2021: 22).

Our work as educators must be consistently conscientious of how the materials of our departments and classes create norms (FLOCK this issue). When we make room for controversy to interrupt and intervene in our curriculum, transformative possibilities are revealed. I found this to be the case with the introduction of a comprehensive resource for Black Geographies. As part of mobilizing the subfield, I collaborated with a group of early career scholars – mostly graduate students at the time – to produce the Black Geographies Reading List (BGRL) (Eaves 2016). It was created in order that scholars and communities – inside and out of academia – might have a resource for resisting commemorative understandings of Black lives and spatial politics. Putting the BGRL together was

important for countering the issue of Blackness being construed in positivist, contained ways, as has been perpetuated in geography curriculum. Introducing the BGRL revealed how necessary a tool like this was, simply by the reach of its circulation and its inclusion on syllabi inside and outside of geography classrooms.

Feminist and anti-oppression pedagogies are not limited to course syllabi and the contained nature of our classrooms. With calls to "decolonize the syllabus" and create anti-racist classrooms, revolutionary feminist approaches to teaching and learning can be creative in their engagement with the possibilities of controversy (Bain and Laliberte this issue). The *Ruptures I* zine (this issue) and the BGRL are two examples. Another example of this creative space comes out of the pandemic of anti-Black racism, signaled from a group of current and former members of GeogGrads, the graduate student organization for the Department of Geography at the University of Tennessee, Knoxville.

In the wake of the uprisings of Summer 2020, they gathered in a virtual pedagogical space to develop a framework that recognized the challenges to pedagogies for and demonstrated solidarity with Black people. In a letter addressed to "Black Colleagues and Friends", they write:

As Geography Graduate Teaching Assistants and Associates, we are best equipped to ameliorate present injustices and progress towards unity by educating our students and embracing the struggles experienced by our Black colleagues and students. We reaffirm our commitment to cultivating safe spaces for Black students and colleagues that encourage greater compassion and empathy with others, celebrate and appreciate differences, and enable necessary conversations with our peers and students alike about racial discrimination, prejudice, and equity. As Graduate Students and Researchers, we redouble our efforts to engage anew in anti-racist conversations in the classroom and critically assess our research -- to check our own assumptions, question how our work addresses such systemic injustices, inform ourselves and our students about current race relations and the racial injustices that permeate academia, and reaffirm our commitments to community-engaged, social justice-oriented research and advocacy.

We reaffirm our commitment to listening to your experiences and intervening in racist systems and structures as co-laborers in the construction of a beloved community. We also reaffirm our commitment to support Black leadership without placing undue burden upon those leaders, using our platform to uplift Black and Brown voices (Feng, et.al. 2020).

The practice demonstrated by this group of students reflects essential components of feminist pedagogies and practices, aligns with reflections on positionality and a need to take action in order to disrupt the limitations imposed by controversy (Gökarıksel et.al, 2021; see FLOCK this issue; Arun-Pina this issue; and DasGupta et al. this issue).

Towards Revolutionary Praxis

I was unable to attend the 2018 Critical Feminist Pedagogy Workshop in Toronto. At the time, I was co-leading an interdisciplinary group of undergraduate students from my University through a faculty-led education abroad program in Senegal. It was my first time doing so and, consequently, I learned with urgency that guiding students in a non-walled Senegal classroom space required feminist reflexivity, too. Further, immersive experiences require collaboration and vulnerability as students unravel normative ways of knowing and being in the world and think more critically about how norms have been presented. In other words, students come to "see differently".

Revolutionary feminist praxis materializes with the decision of educators to “see differently” (Oberhauser 2008). A revolutionary praxis is disruptive, liberatory, and centers care and affect (Ahmed 2017; Farhadi 2019). Discomfort and controversy inform a philosophical vision, grounded in Black feminist, anti-racist, and anti-oppression pedagogical practices, that works to shape the classroom and the curriculum into spaces of shared power, insurgent action, and collaboration and that actively and deliberately rejects normativities. Importantly, and in contrast with the normative political context of learning in higher education today, individualistic behavior modification is not the goal. Instead, strategies of this pedagogical vision effect change through accountability and collective learning (Eaves 2020b). Discomfort and controversy can not only transform our classrooms but can position us to hold “educational institutions accountable to the standards of success in social transformation” (Black Geographies Specialty Group 2020).

Prompted by the papers of the themed section and my own reflections, I close with a series of questions for our collective consideration: Where do we begin engaging in liberatory, feminist pedagogical practices across space, place, and scale? If traditional pedagogy broadly/often engages space and place in terms of containment and/or erasure and is rooted in spatial-normalizing practices, how do we begin to intervene? What strategies do we employ to take action as we transform our practices and adopt norm exploding pedagogies? And finally, how do we maintain revolutionary feminist pedagogical practices with the “return to normal,” once the COVID-19 pandemic is under control?

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