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Marking gender studies: the (Radical) value of creative-critical assessment

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ABSTRACT

Feminist pedagogies have established the need to query power structures in terms of curriculum content and teaching praxis. However, the topic of student assessment poses difficulties: it is a means through which students' performance is evaluated and quantified according to set institutionalised criteria that values particular forms of hegemonic knowledge. The following article presents a self-reflexive exploration of assessment within a Gender Studies module taught in the Autumn semesters of the 2017/18 and 2018/19 academic years at a UK university. The module was a core component of the institution's MA in Gender Studies. This was an exciting opportunity to experiment with assessment styles corresponding to feminist pedagogies to help develop students' and instructors' disciplinary scope and explore the radical potential for creative-critical approaches to assessment. This article outlines some the challenges of employing alternative modes of learning and teaching from a feminist perspective and suggests some strategies to address these.

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1. Introduction

Gender Studies is an interdisciplinary field that aims to dismantle 'traditional' ways of teaching and transferring knowledge, questioning the hierarchies on which many standardised higher education practices are based (Hassel & Narisa, 2012, p. 144). Having emerged out of feminist movements of the 1960s and 1970s, initially in the form of Women's Studies, the field aimed to recentre the contributions of women within the context of patriarchal societies that marginalised them in terms of employment, education and domesticity (Maynard, 2004, p. 29). Informed by feminist pedagogies and querying the traditional power dynamics of a classroom in which the instructor is positioned as absolute authority and giver of knowledge (Pilcher & Whelehan, 2004, p. 177), Gender Studies highlights the importance of the lived experiences of marginalised peoples and poses the question of what it means to live a life that is gendered (regardless of masculinity or femininity).

In 2017, I taught a Gender Studies module at a UK higher education institution when it launched its Gender Studies Master's degree, and again in 2018. As a feminist film and

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This is an Open Access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution License (http://creativecommons.org/ licenses/by/4.0/), which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited. media scholar, the module offered the opportunity for me to target my expertise in gender and culture towards a curriculum characterised as specifically feminist. This had not necessarily been the case with previous modules I had taught, some of which had taken the general – though not apolitical – form of film and media histories or approaches to analysing media. As I discuss in this article, teaching gender-related subjects brings about unique challenges in terms of how teaching practice reflects an instructor's politics. Throughout my term in this post, I reflected on my own pedagogy and how my teaching of Gender Studies would be a reflection of my feminist approach to research.

This article specifically focuses on the challenges Gender Studies instructors might face when marking and grading students' assignments and the power dynamics that may be reproduced in standardised assessment practices in higher education. The module I delivered was distinctive from other theory-based modules offered by the university in the option it provided for students to undertake a creative-critical submission for the final assessment. I will explain in detail what was meant by 'creative-critical' later but for the time being, I use the term 'creative-critical assessment' to refer broadly to non-essay forms of coursework, specifically those with a creative, arts-based format, represented by an artistic output or object. The assessment submission could focus on any topic of students' choice related to subjects covered during the module, could take any form (posters, photographs, films, sculptures, or any other 'object') and was to be accompanied by a reflective essay of indeterminate length. My experiences with this module directly highlighted the intersection of feminist theory and practice, by which I meditated on the symbolic role of creatively assessing students as expressive of feminist pedagogy.

The prospect of including a creative-critical project in this module posed some difficulties for me as a feminist instructor. First, when students asked what a creative-critical project should look like (and how many words long the accompanying essay should be) my answer of 'it could be anything' was unsatisfying for students and I was, in the first instance, unable to provide a sample submission for them to look at. In the initial year in which I taught the module, out of eight enrolled students on the module, only one opted to submit a creative-critical response, potentially due to the lack of supporting information I could provide. More students submitted creative-critical pieces in the second year (four out of twelve), though most still opted to write essays. Further, due to the focus on written content within the institution's marking criteria for coursework, it was difficult to mark the creative-critical submissions due to the alternative formats of the projects.

To help address some of these issues and develop my positioning as a feminist practitioner of creative-critical pedagogies, I tested out the module's assessment as part of my professional development undertaken during a postgraduate degree in higher education practice. This article is therefore also a response to my own engagement with the assessment, for which I crafted a zine as the creative-critical object. This article therefore forms part of a portfolio that also includes a scanned copy of my zine, titled *Not Here to Teach Feminism: A Zine About Feminist Pedagogy* (Appendix 1). I additionally carried out a reflective essay as part of the assignment as I felt it would be beneficial to have undertaken both of these components so that I would be able to fully reflect on the relationship between the creative object and its accompanying essay. It also provided insight into what sort of word count I could reasonably expect from students undertaking

the creative-critical assignment in future. For clarity's sake, I have included a copy of the assessment brief in this portfolio (Appendix 2).

I opted to make a zine about my explorations of feminist pedagogy for the purposes of self-reflection and to explore the ways in which creative practice can be combined with critical theory. The zine is an articulation of my personal journey in discovering what makes a classroom feminist, alongside some of the anxieties and challenges I faced as a young female academic on a fixed-term contract. These anxieties inevitably linked to wider political and structural issues, such as the marketisation of academia. While this is not a teaching diary as such, the zine's purpose is to provide a snapshot of what life is like as a feminist academic (in my particular context). It also acts to inform those interested in the teaching profession, providing an introduction to feminist pedagogy and what it might mean to teach gender in broader cultural terms. This added an additional layer of self-reflexivity to the project: it is a pedagogical tool providing insight into the experience of teaching Gender Studies. Additionally, I used the zine as a sample work to show students the second time I taught the module, offering further opportunities for student input, strengthening 'connections with the instructor' and harnessing a sense of community and leadership among students in accordance with the ethos of Gender Studies (Hassel & Narisa, 2012, p. 149).

2. Critical and feminist pedagogies: navigating discourses of oppression and empowerment

As noted, feminist scholars have characterised the field of Gender Studies as one that queries commonsensical ways of conveying and understanding knowledge. As I will discuss, it is imperative that Gender Studies is taught as such to reflect feminist approaches to teaching, i.e. feminist pedagogies. Before discussing the relationship between teaching Gender Studies and feminist pedagogies, some context is necessary to understand the power dynamics at stake in pedagogical approaches, teaching at higher education institutions and the delivery (and assessment) of Gender Studies programmes.

Emphasising student empowerment, feminist pedagogies have clear roots in the field of critical pedagogy, often informed as a philosophy of teaching by Paulo Freire, who influenced later Anglo-American perspectives such as those of Henry Giroux (1984), Shor (1980), McLaren (1994) and Kincheloe (2003). Having grown up in postcolonial Brazil, and spurred on by liberatory political movements of the 1960s, Freire asserted that the country's oppressive 'culture of silence' was enabled by mass illiteracy and that, therefore, communication should be privileged in education so as to eliminate ignorance through consciousness-raising and, eventually, to transform society (Freire, 1985). Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (Freire, 2005), first published in 1968, held that the liberation of the disempowered is a central tenet of education, which provides them with the tools to empower themselves (Freire, 2005, p. 56). This focus on the disempowered is noteworthy and highlights both the self-reflexivity and focus on student agency that is present in feminist pedagogies, as well as its active linking of theory and practice.

Critical pedagogy developed as a discipline with radical foundations often counter to those of hegemonic political and social regimes that ultimately structure education. A useful, if totalising, definition is provided by Eric J. Weiner:

critical pedagogy is a way of seeing, analyzing, and intervening into operations of power within various sites of learning ... it is a critical theory of education born out of the need to better understand how domination, wrapped in educational policy, pedagogy, curriculum development, and assessment oppresses, marginalizes, and/or silences students, especially those from working-class backgrounds.

(Weiner, 2007, p. 62)

Critical pedagogy has been further made sense of as intersecting with cultural studies in its active interrogation of sites of knowledge production (including popular media), which themselves articulate a form of pedagogy (Weiner, 2003, p. 62; see also Daspit & Weaver, 2002; Giroux, 1992; Giroux & Giroux, 2004, pp. 89–125; Gray, 2003; Kellner, 2001; Kellner & Kim, 2010). Weiner, like others, nonetheless notes drawbacks of both definitions of critical pedagogy, especially the overly simplified ambitions of the former to provide a unified answer to the problem of oppression through the vaguely defined oppositional enterprise of 'empowerment' (Weiner, 2007, p. 63). This echoes Miedema and Wardekker statement that, in the past, critical pedagogy positioned itself as 'if not the ultimate, at least the best available paradigm for education, synthesizing (according to its own pretensions) all previous approaches with a clear critique of the societal conditions of education' (Miedema & Wardekker, 1999, p. 67). However, the overarching philosophies behind critical pedagogy clearly resonate with feminist pedagogies. As noted by Kathleen Weiler, critical and feminist pedagogies both

rest upon visions of social transformation; underlying both are certain common assumptions concerning oppression, consciousness, and historical change. Both pedagogies assert the existence of oppression in people's material conditions of existence and as a part of consciousness... and both thus see human beings as subjects and actors in history and hold a strong commitment to justice and a vision of a better world and of the potential for liberation.

(Weiler, 1991, p. 450).

Nonetheless, feminist critiques have supplemented the shortcomings of critical pedagogy's universalising characterisations of a homogenous disempowered, oppressed population that neglects intersecting facets of identity that affect people's experiences of oppression (Allen, 2006; Berry, 2010, p. 22; Darder, Baltodano, & Torres, 2003, p. 17; Ellsworth, 2013; Luke, 1992, p. 29; Weiler, 1991). To be clear, Freire wrote from the perspective of class-oppression from a specific context in postcolonial Brazil; his use of the term 'the oppressed' is broad but informed by his own positionality in a country that had endured a history of violence throughout its colonial past (and beyond). This emphasis on context should be foregrounded in conceptualisations of radical pedagogies. Critiques of critical pedagogy were, partly, a response by feminist educators to the (white) boy's club of critical pedagogy and its failure, despite explicitly positioning itself in line with social justice, to account for women's perspectives, thereby 'challenging the structures and practices of patriarchy in society, solely from a myopic and superficial lens' (Darder et al., 2003, p. 16).

Elizabeth Ellsworth provides noteworthy critiques of these practices through a reflection of her own experiences teaching anti-racist education programmes (Ellsworth, 2013), arguing that the emancipatory language of critical pedagogy encapsulates 'repressive myths that perpetuate relations of domination' (Ellsworth, 2013, p. 188). To Ellsworth, the homogenising discourse of oppression stifles the acknowledgement of difference that is central to feminist politics and led her to ask 'What diversity do we silence in the name of "liberatory" pedagogy?' (Ellsworth, 2013, p. 188). She thus rejects critical pedagogy's assumption that all students and teachers have the ability to engage with each other and with political topics as 'rational' subjects, a discourse that implies the existence of an opposite 'irrational Other, which has been understood historically as the province of women and other exotic Others' (Ellsworth, 2013, p. 190) and proposed a poststructuralist embrace of partiality and difference in the classroom (Ellsworth, 2013, p. 194). Accounting for students' (and teachers') different experiences of oppression (and empowerment) would result in what has since been characterised by Lather as 'a move away from legislating meaning and toward contradictory voices, counternarratives, and competing understandings' (Lather, 1998, p. 488) that is more attuned to poststructuralist feminist practice. Perspectives such Lather's have likewise drawn attention to the need to account for shifting discourses and contexts in relation to emancipatory pedagogies (Lather, 1991, p. 39).

These discussions led to a series of exchanges between feminist pedagogues and critical pedagogues, which Lather has argued resulted in critical pedagogy's reinscription as 'very much a boy thing' through its 'masculinist voice of abstraction and universalization, assuming the rhetorical position of "the one who knows" (Lather, 1998, p. 488). This conception of the masculine voice is important when considering a feminist perspective on higher education as it represents the overarching privileging of empiricism and objectivity associated with acceptable structures of knowledge that inform university curricula. There is therefore a danger that critical pedagogies perpetuate the very system they proposed to dismantle; as Carmen Luke articulates, 'from a feminist position, the discourse of critical pedagogy constructs a masculinist subject which renders its emancipatory agenda for "gender" theoretically and practically problematic' (Luke, 1992, p. 25). Further comments from Jane Kenway subsequently criticised the lack of attention feminist pedagogues interested in foregrounding difference gave to 'the intersections between economic and cultural resources - the economics of culture - and other differences and pluralities' (Kenway, 2001, p. 60) and called for a reinsertion of the economic dynamics of gendered, classed and racialised oppressions into pedagogical discussions. The presence of the neoliberal university that competes within a global market becomes more prominent here, as Kenway calls for investigations into 'how contemporary education is implicated in, and might yet challenge, economic exploitation, marginalization, deprivation, and cultural domination, nonrecognition, and disrespect' (Kenway, 2001, p. 62) and further highlights the elaborate hegemonic network that informs both teaching practice and curriculum development, which must be reflexively accounted for through feminist pedagogies.¹

The complex links between critical and feminist pedagogies are, however, significant and it is possible to conceive of feminist pedagogy as an offshoot of sorts to critical pedagogy which, according to Ellsworth, nonetheless 'constitutes a separate body of literature with its own goals and assumptions' (Ellsworth, 2013, p. 211, note 2). Notable, though, is an assertion that 'critical pedagogy has evolved into a theory that has no clear disciplinary borders' (Weiner, 2007, p. 63), which, perhaps paradoxically, facilitates its positioning in relation to feminist pedagogies. Feminist pedagogy thus itself occupies a kind of split consciousness in which critical pedagogy is an ambivalent constituent of it. Indeed, Emily F. Henderson argues that 'the differences between feminist and critical pedagogy are often blurred, and at times intentionally so: reclaiming feminist pedagogy texts for the critical pedagogy tradition ... can strengthen a unified front for critical pedagogy' (Henderson, 2015, p. 82).²

There is, however, no distinct definition of 'a feminist pedagogy,' – hence my preferred usage of the word 'pedagogies' throughout this article. Nonetheless, there are ways of approaching feminist pedagogies as such that they incorporate (some) common themes. Weiler has proposed that feminist pedagogy express specificity in the following ways: 'in its questioning of the role and authority of the teacher; in its recognition of the importance of personal experience as a source of knowledge; and in its exploration of the perspectives of people of different races, classes, and cultures' (Weiler, 1991, p. 449). Another crucial aspect of feminist pedagogies is to situate students' and teachers' positionalities within particular contexts and 'to take the learners' points of connection and to link them with larger social issues' (English & Irving, 2015, p. 111). I will return to these facets in my discussion of teaching and assessing Gender Studies in particular – however, feminist pedagogies may not be limited to academic subjects that are positioned as radical but can, and should, extend to all disciplines and even beyond higher education institutions (English & Irving, 2015, p. 106).

An overview of the complexities between critical and feminist pedagogies was necessary to draw attention to the often messy task of not only teaching a subject that presents itself as disrupting hierarchies of power but also doing so in a way that signifies a pedagogy that can be usefully characterised as 'feminist.' I argue that it is possible to maintain the emancipatory ethos of critical pedagogies while highlighting the multiple venues of teaching activity that can be reformulated through feminist politics (e.g. curriculum design, class conduct, assessment) to foreground 'a kind of communication across differences' (Ellsworth, 2013, p. 210) rather than centring assumptions of 'oppression' when considering student empowerment. I next detail the implications of feminist pedagogies in relation to Gender Studies and, importantly, to student assessment, which itself poses the risk of subjecting students to ideals of empirical and objective truths and the 'right' kinds of knowledge.

3. Feminist pedagogies and gender studies

Under the initial banner of Women's Studies, scholars from a range of fields saw the study of gender 'as not only challenging the boundaries of existing knowledges and developing new areas of study, but also as legitimising the differing social and cultural experiences of women' (Pilcher & Whelehan, 2004, p. x). What would eventually become Gender Studies entailed 'analyzing women's and men's interactions and the processes of domination and oppression of women by men' as well as focusing on 'the way the organization and structure of society itself and its cultural and knowledge productions are gendered' (Davis, Evans, & Lorber, 2006, p. 2). The parallels between teaching Gender Studies and feminist pedagogies are clear: both involve drawing attention to hegemonic discourses and structures that inform the knowledge held as empirical truth with an emphasis on how such power manifests in gendered ways and both validate different ways of experiencing difference. Gender Studies ultimately seeks to afford students

analytical and discursive skills so that they may effectively understand and articulate the social inequalities arising from patriarchal institutional practices (with the end-goal of enacting change upon society). As such, Gender Studies is not concerned with the teaching of feminism, but rather encourages students to interrogate their own viewpoints with respect to the gendered dynamics of society utilising an empathetic and communicative approach.

Because Gender Studies aims to dismantle social hierarchies that support inequality, Gender Studies instructors are encouraged to employ feminist pedagogy in their teaching practice. Holly Hassel and Narisa Nelson note that teaching practice for Gender Studies should be 'feminist in nature, focused on helping students bridge the gap between the personal and political within an academic context' (Hassel & Narisa, 2012, p. 144). They suggest that in such a classroom, 'individual experience [is] used as a way of understanding social structures that supported or promoted patriarchy within and outside the university walls' (Hassel & Narisa, 2012, p. 144). A goal of Gender Studies is therefore to recentre the perspectives of women and marginalised identities within a setting (i.e. higher education) that is still male-dominated in terms of how it is structured.

Gender Studies likewise questions universalised, canonical forms of knowledge informed by the canon of so-called dead white men (Cranny-Francis et al., 2003, p. 112) in its highlighting of people's lived experiences and links these to wider social and political questions (for instance, regarding work, life, domesticity, power, and so on), while also drawing attention to thinkers whose contributions have been undervalued in other fields. Gender Studies students are encouraged to reflect on their own experiences as gendered beings and link these experiences to broader discourses and cultural practices that enable inequalities to exist on institutional and structural levels. As noted by Hassel and Nelson, in the teaching of Women's Studies, 'individual experience was used as a way of understanding social structures that supported or promoted patriarchy within and outside the university walls' (Hassel & Narisa, 2012, p. 144). An integral aspect of Gender Studies is therefore a focus on lived experiences through self-reflexivity (on the part of both the instructor and the students) and an awareness of how students' experiences of difference (including those enabled by privileges they may possess in terms of gender, race, class and so on) link to bigger political issues. Intersectional approaches, which take into account the facets of identity that simultaneously affect people's lives (e.g. gender, race, sexuality, ability, class), are encouraged, with Gender Studies syllabi focusing not only on gender as a locus of oppression, but specifically incorporating the different experiences people have in relation to these other factors (Hill Collins, 2009, p. 299). Core components of Gender Studies therefore include the bringing forward of the contributions of marginalised peoples to society, an emphasis on individuals' lived experiences as being symptomatic of overarching political issues and the interrogation of commonly held essential ideals around gendered existence (Crabtree, Sapp, & Licona, 2009, p. 3).

The approaches highlighted in the theoretical constitution of Gender Studies as a field have an interesting relationship with pedagogy. The ethos of Gender Studies directly correlates to the poststructuralist feminist pedagogies of Ellsworth, Lather and others, which similarly highlight the ways in which students and teachers experience difference and reject universalist ideals of knowledge and, in doing so, disrupt the positioning of the instructor as 'emancipatory authority' (Ellsworth, 2013, p. 195). In 68 👄 M. KENT

the interests of consistency, not to mention Gender Studies' overall ambition to draw attention to – and therefore empower – those who are socially marginalised, it is important that instructors themselves carry out a pedagogical approach informed by the intersectional feminist sentiments of Gender Studies. The idea that the subject 'should reflect feminist politics both explicitly and implicitly' (Smith, 2013, p. 135) or involve 'teaching with a feminist politics of responsibility' (Revelles-Benavente & Ramos, 2017, p. 2) has been explored by proponents of feminist pedagogy (Villaverde, 2008, p. 119–142; Luhmann, 2012).

However, exactly how to incorporate a feminist approach to pedagogy into the Gender Studies classroom is not necessarily a straightforward process and is challenging due to a number of factors. Importantly, Gender Studies, as it is taught in the UK and US, as a discipline must still function within hegemonic parameters of higher education in a neoliberal capitalist framework despite its insistence on radical intervention. A wider managerialist emphasis on the 'performance' of students and staff in relation to university budgets and providing students with a quantifiable service places further limitations on proponents of liberal humanities fields such as Gender Studies (Leathwood & Read, 2009, p. 141) and the neoliberal drive for 'quality' often recreates wider social inequalities linked to gender, race and class (Žarkov, 2015, p. 270). Significantly, students' work is still marked and graded according to standardised criteria, which are considered to be in line with empirical modes of communication and knowledge acquisition (Leathwood & Read, 2009, p. 142). These factors pose a problem for both Gender Studies and feminist pedagogies, among their twinned goals are aiding the dismantling of such inequalities through the adoption of flexible, what I refer to as messy, learning and teaching practices that account for 'dispersed, shifting, and contradictory contexts of knowing that coalesce[] differently in different moments of student/professor speech, action, and emotion' (Ellsworth, 2013, p. 209).

4. Creative-critical assessment as feminist assessment

Assessment represents 'the clearest manifestation of power within the educational context' (Reynolds & Trehan, 2000, p. 268). There is an inherent power imbalance involved in student assessment, positioning instructors as gatekeepers assessing the validity of students' work against set criteria for what counts as 'good work' or 'correct knowledge.' Hellen A. Ochuot and Maropeng Modiba similarly note that 'assessment has historically served primarily as a summative tool for controlling the selection of knowledge and its role as a disciplinary measure of teaching and learning' (Ochuot & Modiba, 2018, p. 478). From a feminist perspective, grading 'is the instructor's prerogative and imposed power by institutional hierarchy to determince the value/worth of students' work without the student deciding' (Chitnev, 2019, p. 35). Indeed, Chitnev's ethnography on feminist assessment practices in higher education provides an insightful overview of the working challenges feminist pedagogues encounter in attempting to align their teaching philosophies with student assessment (Chitney, 2019). She likewise concludes that '[i]nstructors experience tension and discontent in assessment because their pedagogy is restricted by a university assessment policy that serves to a patriarchal, hierarchical institutional structure rather than facilitates learning' (Chitney, 2019, p. 204). Overall, Chitney found that

the following types of assessment are compatible with feminist principles: formative instructor feedback, peer- and self-assessment, diagnostic assessment and formative assessment of teaching. These findings are consistent with some suggestions of feminist scholars who advocate participatory assessment, self- assessment, and participatory evaluation as feminist methods of assessment.

(Chitnev, 2019, p. 194).³

It is easy to deduce how these listed forms of assessment align to feminist pedagogies in their querying of the authority of the instructor and focus on student activity, community and self-reflection. I would, however, want to avoid drawing dichotomies between forms of 'sanctioned' (and therefore feminist) forms of assessment and those that are not. To this end, it is important to note that creative-critical assessment (and other forms of 'alternative' assessment such as those listed by Chitnev) was offered alongside essaybased options in my own experiences of teaching Gender Studies to provide students different ways of addressing and accessing forms of knowledge based on their own skills and choices.

Creative-critical assessment represents a response to the standardisation and marketisation of higher education while also potentially remedying a further shortcoming of critical pedagogy: that of concrete solutions to assessment. For all its discourses of emancipation and liberation from confines of hegemonic structures of knowledge, the manifestation of these sentiments in critical pedagogy's stance to assessment has been unfulfilling (Reynolds & Trehan, 2000, p. 270; Keesing-Styles, 2003; Fobes & Kaufman, 2008, p. 29; Serrano et al., 2018, p. 11). More significantly, neither critical pedagogies nor feminist pedagogies have suggested creative-critical formats as being conducive to the radical politics underlying these approaches. Creative-critical assessment formats are an additional means through which students can develop their ideas and present arguments without the restrictions of essay-based submission formats.

Drawing from some of the theory around qualitative arts-based research can provide insight into why this particular format can function alongside other alternative assessment formats as a means of addressing power issues in higher education. Through the assessment, the Gender Studies students I taught effectively became researchers and then chose the format through which they represented this research for assessment – the creative-critical format was essentially a means through which arts-based research could be undertaken. According to Tom Barone and Elliot Eisner, arts-based research encompasses 'the idea that research that can be conducted using nondiscursive means such as pictures, or music, or dance, or all of those in combination' (Barone & Eisner, 2012, p. 1). This questions a commonsensical assumption that 'we tend to think about research as being formulated exclusively – and of necessity – in words the more literal, the better' (Barone & Eisner, 2012, p. 1).

Comparative approaches to creative and arts-based research have been referred to as 'scholartistry' (Neilsen, 2002, p. 212; see also Knowles & Promislow, 2007, p. 515; Savin-Baden & Wimpenny, 2014, p. 21; Shanks & Svabo, 2018) and 'a/r/tography' (Springgay, 2008, p. 37–41). Arts-based research approaches reflect an interrogation of socially informed binaries called into question in feminist pedagogies (science/art; empirical/ theoretical; rational/emotional). This is unsurprising, given that both research and teaching are core components of higher education institutions – they are both sites of



discursive struggle in which particular forms of knowledge (dependent on politics and society) are privileged. Susan Finley further elaborates on arts-based research:

By its integration of multiple methodologies used in the arts with the postmodern ethics of participative, action-oriented, and politically situated perspectives for human social inquiry, arts-based inquiry has the potential to facilitate critical race, indigenous, queer, feminist, and border theories and research methodologies. As a form of performance pedagogy, arts-based inquiry can be used to advance a subversive political agenda that addresses issues of social inequity.

(Finley, 2007, p. 71)

These researcher-focused discussions are relevant to students who, in their undertaking of assessments, become researchers themselves. However, the lack of emphasis on pedagogy in these accounts of arts-based research is disappointing and poses opportunity for further development in the future. Similarly, while these accounts do refer to the uses of arts-based research in the interests of specific social justice movements and, indeed, characterise the origins of arts-based research within the domain of early Women's Studies endeavours (Hopkins, 2007; Leavy, 2015, p. 25), the uses of these arts-based approaches to feminist pedagogies is not mentioned.

Notably, despite positioning itself against traditional disciplines, Gender Studies must still exist within the confines of higher education and its conventions, resulting in limitations on the field's potential for radical intervention. The standardised means of assessing students according to particular criteria means that students taking Gender Studies must often demonstrate their learning in accordance with these criteria. Carole Leathwood and Barbara Read draw attention to the gendered dynamics among people participating in Higher Education: both students and academics are discursively constructed within traditional Higher Education practices (Leathwood & Read, 2009, p. 141). The authors argue that

in order to succeed at university, students must learn the "rules of the game" of communication in the academy – both orally in seminars and tutorials, and in written form in the language they are encouraged to use when writing essays.

(Leathwood & Read, 2009, p. 142)

Essay-writing, and the language required of students' writing, is considered by these authors as a means of assessment that leads to discrepancies in how students' work is valued as 'objective' and 'rational' as opposed to articulating arguments related to experiences (Leathwood & Read, 2009, p. 142). Not only does Gender Studies' focus on lived experience destabilise these traditions, the option of a creative-critical assessment also calls into question the absolute validity of the essay format.

Managerialist discourses increasingly inform academic practices in higher education, including through monitoring and evaluating both academics' and students' 'performance' (Leathwood & Read, 2009, p. 141). Emphasis on performance according to criteria considered couched in patriarchal institutions can be seen to reproduce social inequalities (Leathwood & Read, 2009, p. 144). This poses a problem for Gender Studies since one of its goals is to aid in the dismantling of such inequalities through the adoption of nontraditional (ostensibly 'feminine') learning and teaching practices. Despite this, however, as Pilcher and Whelehan note,

[Gender Studies] students are required to write standard essays, or sit exams in order to demonstrate that they have understood the key debates in that area in such a way that returns them to the very discursive norms that are being challenged in the classroom. This is one of the paradoxes of teaching feminism in the academy.

(Pilcher & Whelehan, 2004, p. 177)

This must be considered alongside other limiting factors facing Gender Studies and other disciplines, including the marketization of higher education within a neoliberal context, which, again, recreates gender, racial and class hierarchies through an emphasis on profit and verifiable outputs (Žarkov, 2015, p. 270). The creative-critical assignment confounds these dominant practices through an emphasis on alternative means of argumentation through a physical object or work of art that refers to subjects' lived experiences.

As a discipline situated within this complex web of institutionalised knowledgemaking, Gender Studies values expressions of course material through alternative means. This is why creative-critical submissions are well suited to Gender Studies as a means of reflecting the disruptive intentions behind the field *and* behind feminist pedagogies that inform the ways in which it is taught. The creative-critical submission has the potential to confound institutional marking criteria (for instance, written communication would be an inappropriate criterion in a photographic submission), thereby querying the absolute integrity of such criteria and providing a venue for the discussion with students of what it is that instructors are looking for in their students' work and how their knowledge of a subject and accompanying debates can be demonstrated. Additionally, research has determined that creative assignments may benefit students by increasing engagement, motivation and satisfaction (Snyder, 2012, p. 165), leading to the further transgressive potential of this assessment format.

5. Not here to teach feminism: testing out the creative-critical assessment

As noted earlier, I chose the zine format as my means of carrying out the creative-critical assessment. Because this was to be submitted for assessment as part of the postgraduate certificate in higher education, my topic was effectively chosen for me (pedagogy); however, I selected the particular emphasis on feminist approaches to teaching Gender Studies. The selection of the zine medium was justified through the reflective essay I undertook to supplement the zine as providing an appropriate venue for the discussion of feminist pedagogy due to the political potential of zines and their historical links to feminist movements (Piepmeier, 2009; Poletti, 2008; Wright, 2018). To reduce ambiguity, I was explicit in my discussion of exactly how my zine was relevant to feminist pedagogical issues in the supporting essay. This was to fully demonstrate my understanding of the topic (to the hypothetical instructor) and the issues relating to the module. Not only have zines been characterised as useful sites for the articulation of countercultural politics (in particular feminism), they have also been recognised as beneficial pedagogical tools. This adds another layer of reflexivity to this project – it is a zine about teaching that can be used as a tool for teaching.

Zines (pronounced *zeen*; short for 'magazine' or 'fanzine') are self-published works, often taking the shape of a pamphlet or booklet, articulating particular topics or issues deemed important by the creator of the zine. They are 'alternative, do-it-yourself (DIY)'

(Berthoud, 2018, p. 4) publications, a form of independent media (Guzzetti & Gamboa, 2004, p. 48) defined in opposition to mainstream consumption and production practices (Duncombe, 1997, p. 105) and created to serve 'personal expression opposed to the conventional norms and values associated with the commercial publishing industry' (Guzzetti, 2017, p. 233).

With roots in the activities of science fiction fans who created fanzines centred on the science fiction stories they consumed in the 1930s (Duncombe, 1997, p. 1), zines are amateur products relishing the DIY aesthetics of their makeup (Triggs, 2006) and created by individuals characterised by Stephen Duncombe as

everyday oddballs ... speaking plainly about themselves and our society with an honest sincerity, a revealing intimacy, and a healthy "fuck you" to sanctioned authority – for no money and no recognition, writing for an audience of like-minded misfits.

(Duncombe, 1997, p. 7)

The oppositional language used by Duncombe to describe zine-makers (or zinesters) is indicative of the anti-establishment attitudes that inform zines themselves. The zine I made was specifically created to look homemade. I avoided using the computer for the text content, instead writing it out by hand and gluing it in somewhat haphazardly. I have a tendency for perfectionism, which comes across in my own teaching (e.g. through immaculate slideshows accompanying lectures). The DIY approach and the embrace of imperfection by zines provided an opportunity for me to practice experimentation and acceptance of my creative output - without the luxury of erasing or deleting that which I personally did not find aesthetically pleasing. For a unique finish, I dyed the pages of the zine myself and created pages out of different papers from an array of sources stitched and glued together. This was to create a sense of 'bricolage' (Piepmeier, 2009, p. 102), making the zine out of readily available materials and limiting the input of mechanical processes to emphasise the personal nature of the zine as being representative of my experiences. In the spirit of 'a healthy "fuck you" to sanctioned authority,' the zine is a rejection of the neoliberal capitalism fueling the marketisation of higher education. The zine is not affiliated with any institution, carries no commercial branding and will not be sold for profit.

I chose to make a zine precisely due to the way in which zines speak to and stem from countercultural politics. These politics correspond to both Gender Studies and feminist pedagogies in their questioning of the kinds of knowledge that are positioned as acceptable or 'correct' within patriarchal institutions. In the 1970s and 1980s, zines evolved alongside the UK and US punk movements as a fan response to the lack of content addressing their specific interests offered by mainstream magazines (Moore, 2010, p. 246). The appeal of zines on the punk scene, therefore, directly correlated to their non-mainstream qualities and specific audience address (i.e. the 'like-minded misfits' Duncombe mentions). This was further enabled by the increased access to resources such as photocopiers within cities and suburbs in the US. Following the centrality of men to the punk scene, punks and the zinesters creating content for them were 'overwhelmingly male' (though women's early involvement in zinemaking should not be downplayed for the sake of argument) (Moore, 2010, p. 246). In the 1990s, zines became associated with third-wave feminism and the accompanying 'Riot Grrrl' punk music scene that originated in Washington, US. This particularly resonates with my own zine's focus on feminism within the field of pedagogy. Defined as 'an underground feminist youth movement committed to empowering girls through selfexpression and to combating sexism, homophobia, and misogyny' (Roberts, 2001, p. 263). Riot Grrrl gained traction within the punk scene as an outlet for the expression of women's experiences with the goal of promoting equality and recuperating girlhood. Created by and for women and girls, zines were adopted in the scene as a means of communicating shared experiences between women on the margins of society, relying on the agency of zinesters and their interest in facilitating dialogue between feminists (Roberts, 2001, p. 265). Like the punk zines of previous decades, zines associated with the Riot Grrrl movement remain oppositional to mainstream commercial interests, relying on a sense of community between zinesters for their circulation through exchange and gifting (Poletti, 2008, p. 243).

According to Alison Piepmeier, third-wave feminism is 'made visible in grrrl zines' (Piepmeier, 2009, p. 9). This notion of visibility follows the feminist goal of highlighting women's experiences in contexts in which they often become erased. With regards to this project, my aim was to make visible my own experiences within academia and the challenges present in feminist pedagogy while sharing these challenges with 'like-minded misfits' (e.g. fellow researchers and academics; students).

In the interest of pedagogy, I also decided to use the zine format because of its potential as a teaching tool. This has been noted by scholars such as Piepmeier, who proposes that girl zines can (borrowing a term from bell hooks) embody a 'pedagogy of hope' with an ethos of 'we can do it all' (Piepmeier, 2009, p. 155). Such zines specifically invite (or teach) readers to resist cultures of domination (Piepmeier, 2009, p. 157). Zines also speak to feminist pedagogy questioning of the lecturer-as-authority model of teaching through their blurring of boundaries between readers and producers (Piepmeier, 2009, p. 163). I aimed to encourage reader engagement with my zine (through the inclusion of a page that readers can sign), so as to emphasise the community focus of feminist pedagogy' that presents 'women as knowers' in the interest of equality (Gabai, 2016, p. 20). Through the creation of a vocational zine articulating and reflecting on my experiences as an instructor informed by feminist pedagogy, I aimed to exploit the radical potential of zines to express the challenges I encountered in my role as lecturer, as well as share what I learned, to promote an egalitarian learning and teaching culture.

Per the module's documentation, students undertaking the module will

finish the module with an understanding of key thinkers and thinking in the history of gender study and its related fields; ... understand how contemporary scholarship develops or moves on from this work; and ... have tested both key and emergent scholarship in the context of contemporary experience and practice.

My creative-critical submission demonstrates my understanding of key thinkers in the specific field of feminist pedagogy, drawing attention to the gendered issues in higher education. For instance, the zine includes pages defining feminist pedagogy as well as the challenges that might arise (such as bell hooks' 'contentious classroom'). This is elaborated on through reference to my personal experiences, such as the fact that I am

a perfectionist who finds it difficult to embrace chaos and let go of controlling the trajectory of a seminar and a summary of thoughts and feelings based on my first year as a lecturer. These were supported and further articulated on in the reflective essay accompanying the zine. The essay also included a summary of how scholarship around feminist pedagogy has developed out of the discipline of critical pedagogy and how it applies specifically to the teaching of gender-related topics. Scholarship and theory referring to the transgressive qualities of feminist zines were practically tested out through this project as it gave me insight into how such content communicates to readers and how it can be composed. The zine also includes a list of suggested further academic texts that readers can optionally investigate, highlighting the pedagogical qualities of the zine.

6. Challenges in assessing the creative-critical submission and strategies for consideration

In practice, marking the my students' creative-critical submissions posed some challenges but these were more or less avoided in my case because I was marking my own work, meaning I had no difficulty understanding my motivation and rationale behind the project. Nonetheless, students must still demonstrate engagement with academic theory in carrying out their projects, and reflect on these in the written part of the assessment, complicating the oppositional stance of the project by potentially putting the focus back onto essay-writing. Likewise, at the end of the semester, the students' projects had to be marked and graded through a traditional, numerical grade according to the institution's Master's level marking scale, again complexifying the radical potential of the assessment (and the course). Likewise, the rate of adoption of such practices by subjects other than Gender Studies may be slow, as Birut Zemits notes that

The dilemma for lecturers in the humanities is that, while ... "creative" forms of communicating ideas enhances the experiences of a student studying within arts focused areas, there is little tradition in the written disciplines of assessing the use of these media forms.

(Zemits, 2017, p. 174)

Indeed, when marking the student submissions, I turned to colleagues in the creative writing and filmmaking fields for advice on how to approach these projects, as these practical subjects likewise tend to include creative works alongside reflective essays for their assessments. However, while their advice was invaluable, it was still clear that the motivating factors for including creative-critical work were quite different between these disciplines, so it would be beneficial to continue to carry out further research and have more discussions around assessment specifically within Gender Studies.

Ellsworth's elaboration of difference became key to the materialisation of feminist pedagogies in Gender Studies classrooms and, indeed, in my own explorations of feminist pedagogies in relation to student assessment. In carrying out my own creativecritical assessment submission for my postgraduate certificate, thereby testing the Gender Studies module's assessment myself, my own subjectivity became a conglomeration of different positionalities: I was a student of the postgraduate course I took, but I was also the instructor of the Gender Studies module, whose assessment I was carrying out myself, occupying both positions of teacher and learner. It is also noteworthy that while I delivered the module, I did not design its content and learning outcomes the first time I taught it (I had more freedom the second time). I therefore occupied a position of comparatively less power than I would have had if I had been the designer, although this allowed me to further align myself with the 'student' aspects of myself.

The project culminated in a messy creative output in which I represented my own subjectivity as shifting and complex, one in which I was constantly reconstituting myself the more I learned about feminist pedagogies and Gender Studies. This is important due to the aforementioned emphasis on shifting subjectivities in poststructuralist feminist pedagogies. Specifically, it reemphasises the centring of difference that Ellsworth has hailed, as summarised by Amie A. Macdonald and Susan Sánchez-Casal:

Naming difference as the theoretical subject of the classroom provides a contextual frame that allows the multiple identities – and thus the authority – of teacher and student to shift according to changing circumstances and contexts in or outside the classroom ... the teacher moves between centered and decentered positions, not because she renounces all authoritative postures as dominating and coercive, but because she acts upon a revolutionized concept of experience and identity; this conceptual foundation enables the teacher to cultivate the ground for contesting and/or qualifying claims to know, while upholding cultural identity as a crucial factor in the production of knowledge.

(Macdonald & Sánchez-Casal, 2002, p. 7)

Macdonald and Sánchez-Casal ultimately query the perhaps inadvertently binaristic discourses of Ellsworth's calls to disrupt student/instructor hierarchies, proposing the 'theoretical triad of <teacher/student/difference>' in which 'neither teachers nor students are the most authentic knowers in the classroom, nor is either constituency automatically most equipped to guide the production of liberatory knowledge' (Macdonald & Sánchez-Casal, 2002, p. 7). Through undertaking this project, I moved between subjectivities, all informed by my own experiences and therefore not impartial, but nonetheless questioning traditional modes of knowledge-making and transfer.

The zine itself represented a, to borrow a term from Barone and Eisner, 'sense of dizziness, of disequilibrium, [which] arts based researchers strive toward as they call into question that which has become the all-too-familiar' (Barone & Eisner, 2012, p. 23). The creative-critical format itself was unfamiliar to me, as it was to a lot of the students, and the fact that I undertook the assessment myself turned any sense of authority I had over the pedagogical situation on its head. The dizziness Barone and Eisner describe echoes Sara Ahmed's interest in critical wonder as a core component of feminist pedagogies: 'feminist pedagogy can be thought of in terms of the affective opening up of the world through the act of wonder, not as a private act, but as an opening up of what is possible through working together' (Ahmed, 2014, p. 181). To Ahmed, the emotion of wonder can 'open up lines of communication' in the classroom (Ahmed, 2014, p. 182). In approaching the assessment with an active stance of curiosity, the zine's dizzy sense of wonder came to fruition. Importantly, I shared the zine with the second cohort of Gender Studies students and discussed its merits as a piece of coursework with them, adding a communal component to the task, and signalling what Ellsworth refers to as 'pedagogy not in relation to knowledge as a thing made but to knowledge in the making' (Ellsworth, 2005, p. 1). With this in mind, it was interesting that a number of students in the second cohort ended up submitting zines themselves, potentially adhering too much to my example as the 'correct' way of carrying out the assessment and in turn positioning my interpretation of the task as an authoritarian perspective. This might have complicated the radical rationale behind the assessment and would need to be considered in future iterations of the module.

In the interest of self-reflection, it is important to contextualise my explorations of creative-critical assessment in terms of my own positionality. As a precarious early career researcher, I was compelled to carry out this project as part of a required degree, part of my employment contract, that, I would hope, enables me further access to future jobs in a highly competitive job market informed by neoliberal practices. This is part of a widely accepted culture of overwork, 'which for precariously employed academics often involves doing unpaid and unacknowledged work in order to fulfil duties in the hope of achieving a permanent contract' (Murray, 2018, p. 167). Having carried out his research in the hopes of expanding discussions on feminist pedagogies, I have a somewhat ambiguous relationship to this project due to its own functioning within the very practices I want to disrupt through my teaching. I would like to call on fellow feminist academics to test out their own assessments, however I am also greatly aware of the risk of presenting yet more voluntary work in the name of professional development.

This project has been insightful in providing some new avenues of academic exploration regarding feminist pedagogies and assessment. As an experimental project, its purpose was to allow me, an instructor, to determine the practicalities and challenges of student assessment in a way that was conducive to the task of feminist pedagogies. Accordingly, I was made aware of issues, of which I had previously been unaware, that instructors need to address when considering adopting creative-critical assessment forms. There is plently of scope to continue this research, especially in terms of obtaining students' own feedback on their experiences with the assessment. Likewise, if creativecritical assessment is to have traction beyond Gender Studies, disciplinary specificities must be considered, assuming that different disciplines would have a different relationship to creative-critical forms of expression. To conclude, I propose the below strategies for addressing the challenges of setting and marking creative-critical approaches to assessment in Gender Studies.

Provide students with an example of a creative-critical assessment submission, ideally from a previous cohort of students.

Integrate creative-critical activities into seminars and the module structure as a whole. This has the purpose of helping students form habits in creative research and practice. Weekly reflective blogs would also aid students in their awareness of these habits and foster criticality. Through this, creative-critical approaches to assessment would be normalised as another form of research skill available for students to articulate their understanding of particular subjects.

Encourage students to discuss their assessment submission plans to collectively generate new approaches to creative-critical research. This encourages collaborative thinking between students and further feeds into transferrable skills.

Break down the assessment into quantifiable segments, for instance by weighting the elements of the assessment so that the creative object counts for 50% and the essay for 50% (or, indeed, suggesting a 60/40 weighting). A drawback of this would be that it reifies the dominance of metrics and numbers in assessment results. However, a solution for

this may be to have students collaboratively devise their own set of marking criteria in a seminar, which would then be used to mark the assessments.

This article reflects on the experiences of using a creative-critical assessment option for students taking a specific course whose function it is to question traditional means of assessing students' academic knowledge and degree progress. The project undertaken here should be regarded as a starting point for what will hopefully be a lengthier examination of feminist assessment modes spanning across disciplines and student levels. I highly recommend that instructors 'test-drive' the assessments they set so as to complexify the relationship between students and instructor, particularly if they are interested in feminist pedagogies, individual circumstances permitting. Above all, the need for reflective practices has been highlighted, as feminist pedagogues must navigate the complex landscape of the institution and contradictory teaching practices. Further discussions with students addressing the reasons informing their assessment choices should be carried out so that measures can be taken to encourage future students to explore creative-critical assessment, ultimately resulting in a more inclusive and accessible higher education environment attuned to the politics of critical, if not feminist, pedagogies.

Notes

- 1. see Burke (2017) for a recent reimagination of feminist pedagogy that accounts for 'social justice struggles of redistribution, recognition, representation and embodied subjectivities' in relation to the intersections of neoliberal higher education practices within a global market, class participation and masculinised epistemologies.
- 2. Henderson further suggests the more reflexive term 'gender pedagogy' to signify the development of feminist pedagogies which 'in addition to its expectation of equal treatment' challenges commonsensical understandings of gender (Henderson, 2015, p. 82).
- 3. These forms of assessment have been discussed by scholars in the field of pedagogy in terms of their benefits for students (see, for instance, Bennett, 2011; Boud, Cohen, & Sampson, 1999; Nicol & Macfarlane-Dick, 2006; Orsmond, Merry, & Reiling, 2000) and, alongside Chitnev's ethnographical study, informed this statement.

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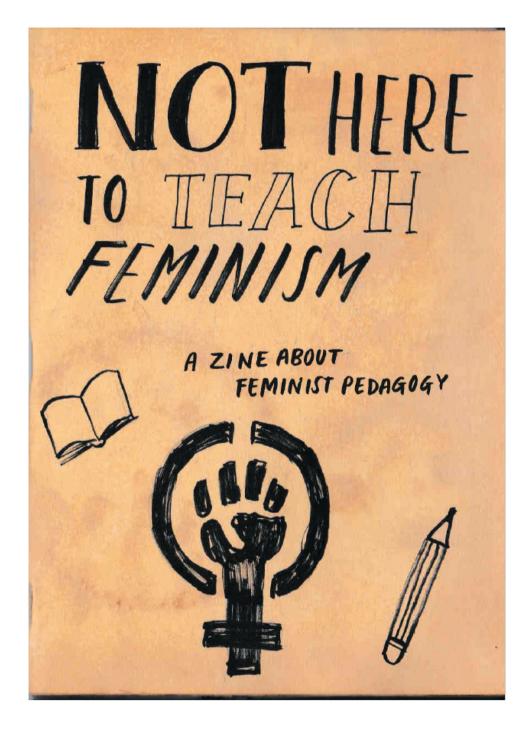
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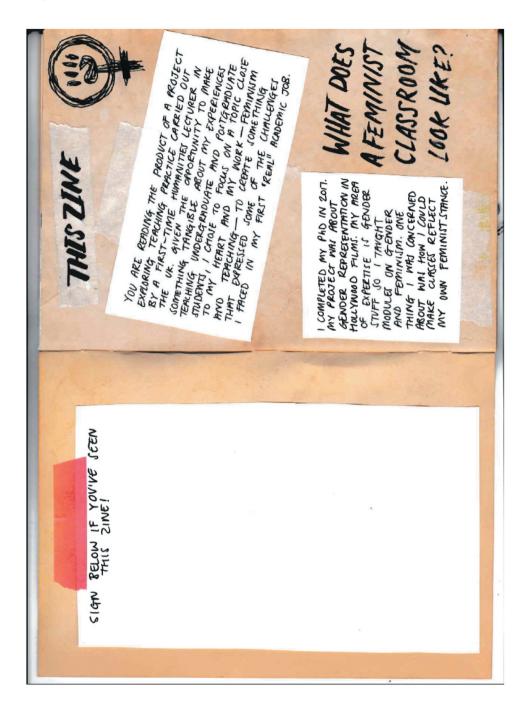
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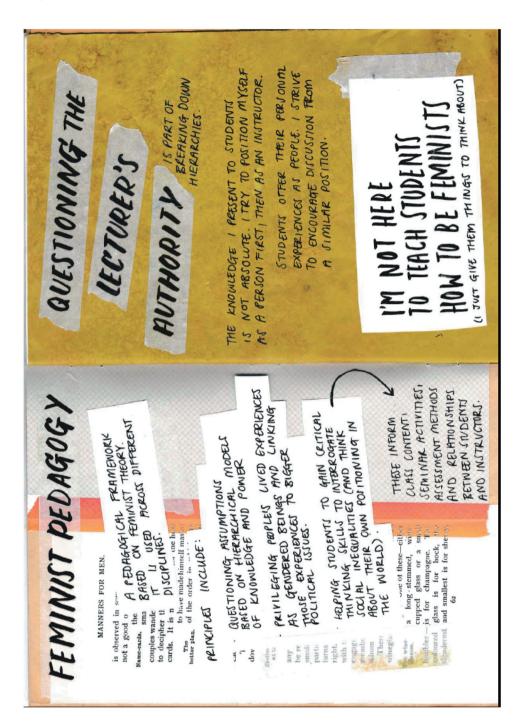
Appendices





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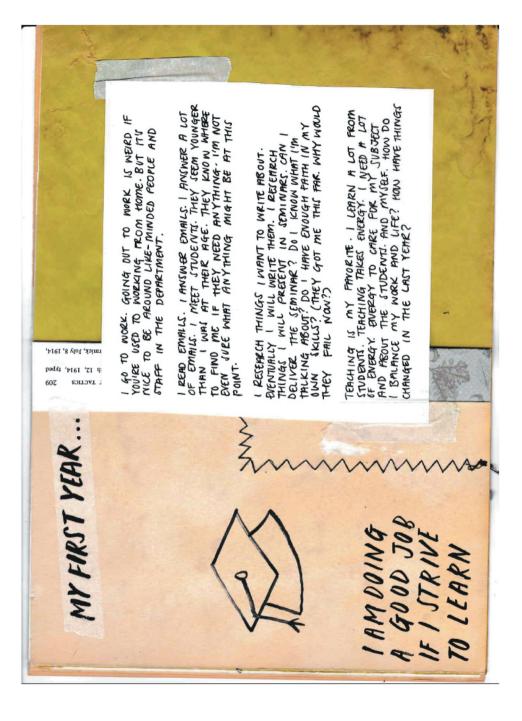














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