

‘It’s about dismantling power’: Reflections on co-producing a PGR-led feminist pedagogy workshop

Madeleine Victoria Pownall, University of Leeds, M.V.Pownall@leeds.ac.uk
Rumana Hossain, University of Leeds, ed13rh@leeds.ac.uk

Summary

Feminism is the pursuit of equality, which involves deconstruction and redistribution of power within previously rigid hierarchies. It aims to disrupt and challenge – offering more inclusive, critical, and intersectional ways of thinking about voice, agency, and power. Indeed, Higher Education scholars have noted that feminism and some pedagogic approaches to teaching and learning have strikingly similar aims (e.g. Shrewsbury, 1987). They both attempt to reallocate power dynamics, positioning teacher and learner as partners or co-creators, whilst acknowledging the capacity of education to *empower* and engage.

In this case study, we reflect upon a day-long Postgraduate Researcher (PGR) led Feminist Pedagogy workshop. We, two Postgraduate Research Students from Schools of Education and Psychology, co-designed and co-produced an interdisciplinary workshop that explored feminist pedagogy with a focus on critical discussion and shared experiences. The one-day event was aimed at PGRs, undergraduate and taught postgraduate students, postgraduates who teach, academics, and student support staff. Our aims were to inspire and motivate attendees to consider critical pedagogies in their professional practice, whilst initiating a conversation about the challenges of *doing* feminist work in the academy. On a more personal level, we hoped to use this space to develop our own understanding of how the principles of feminist pedagogy can be applied to our position as both learners and teachers in Higher Education (HE).

In this paper, we provide an overview of the Feminist Pedagogy workshop format and use delegate feedback to frame and inform our own personal reflections of the day. We conclude with a look to the future, considering how the themes and lessons learned from this day-long workshop can inform future teaching and learning practice and conversation.

Background to the Workshop

“The classroom, with all its limitations, remains a location of possibility” (bell hooks, 1994, p 207)

As we see it, feminism is about restructuring hierarchies and redistributing power. It is about equality, equity, and fairness. Due to this, it is inherently (and wonderfully) disruptive and challenging, with both a critical and creative lens. As PhD researchers at various stages within the PhD lifespan, we have been naturally drawn to critical discussions of learning, teaching, and academia. However, we felt a notable absence of explicit acknowledgement of critical pedagogies in our lived experiences within the classroom. Therefore, we wanted to run a workshop to create an

accessible and supportive space to explore feminist pedagogy with other institutional colleagues.

The seed for this idea was first planted in a Twitter dialogue between Madeleine Pownall and Dr Lucy Mercer-Mapstone. The conversation started with a discussion of the differences between 'partnership' and 'collaboration' in the context of co-working in HE. The focus quickly shifted to student-as-partners as an approach that fosters partnership as a tool to empower students as equal agents in their studies. In response to this, Dr Mercer-Mapstone shared her dialogue of feminist pedagogy (Mercer-Mapstone & Mercer, 2015), in which it is noted that feminism and 'student as partners' approaches have strikingly similar aims. They both attempt to deconstruct and reallocate power and agency. Specifically, they aim to reorganise a kind of power that is usually monitored and governed by patriarchal forces and conventions. Women attempt to shift power from patriarchal to equal through feminism in the same way that students use partnership and collaboration to situate themselves more as equals within Higher Education (HE). This concept felt new and exciting and we wanted to continue this conversation by creating a local space to critically explore how feminism can inform teaching and learning practice.

The workshop structure and plan was also largely inspired by Rumana Hossain's previously successful workshop on 'The Invisible Woman: Dealing with Erasing', a day-long mini-conference that aimed to shine a light on the ways in which women's voices are appropriated and silenced in academia. We both had a desire to bring these conversations of feminist-informed teaching and learning more publicly within the context of our institution and planned this workshop to start this initial dialogue with both PGR and teaching colleagues. Therefore, the workshop planning started with a conversation whereby we collectively appreciated the biases, assumptions, and expertise that we were bringing to the project. Over the first few weeks, we discussed and debated the purpose, audience, and 'take home message' of the workshop. Most notably, we discussed whether we wanted the workshop to be an exclusive space for PGRs, acknowledging the unique position of postgraduate researchers in academia, or whether exclusivity is misaligned with principles of feminist pedagogy itself. We decided, as per our aims of inclusivity and supportiveness, that the workshop should be open to all, with a particular emphasis on early-career or postgraduate delegates.

We were particularly interested in capturing a diverse voice within this workshop, ensuring that we acknowledge our positions as postgraduate researchers within the design and format of the day. Indeed, we were aware that student engagement initiatives and discussions have been successful in recent years in relation to undergraduate students (e.g. Bryson & Hand, 2007), mature students (Wyatt, 2011), and commuter students (Jacoby, 2000). However, targeted work that fosters engagement from a postgraduate researcher (PGR) point of view has been notably lacking. Indeed, student engagement work that is not only *for* PGRs but also run *by* PGRs is also minimal. Indeed, PGRs are unique in that we regularly occupy the space of both learner and teacher. With this in mind, this one-day workshop aimed to foster student engagement practice for PGRs who teach, and also develop an understanding of how PGRs can use the principles of feminist pedagogy in their own learning.

Therefore, the aim, scope, and plan for this workshop were designed to be aligned closely with the transferable skills as set out by the Vitae Researcher Development Framework. A focus on these vital transferable skills was embedded into every aspect of the workshop structure. Here, we map the format of our PGR-led workshop directly onto the Vitae Framework and discuss how literature and experience informed our decision-making process throughout the workshop planning.

Collegiality and collaboration (Working with Others, D1 of the RDF)

Collegiality and collaboration are hallmarks of feminist theories of education (Chávez, Turalba, & Malik, 2006). Therefore, this workshop aimed to enable delegates to develop their communication skills. For example, a discussion panel was included which hoped to allow delegates the chance to share their experiences of feminist pedagogy principles in action, in a supportive, collaborative, and interactive space. We aimed to foster a real sense of collegiality in the discussions and feedback throughout the day. We wanted the workshop to embody the principles of feminist pedagogy, breaking down some of the barriers involved with hierarchies in Higher Education.

Critical thinking and evaluation (Cognitive abilities and Creativity, A2 and A3)

This workshop prompted delegates to consider how they may use creative approaches to inform their pedagogic practice. Feminist pedagogy is inherently critical, in that it supports teachers and learners to consider the wider context in which their pedagogy operates, in a way that is usually overlooked. This includes a wider appreciation of the gendered, political, and personal facets to the student experience. Therefore, whilst this workshop aimed to teach practical tools to embed feminist pedagogy into teaching and learning, it also followed a more reflective, evaluative focus, which was particularly present in the 'sharing experiences' and feedback plenary of the day. This is in line with the RDF's focus on inquiring, evaluating, and analysing.

Due to the personal reflective focus of the day, both the group activities and keynote aimed to foster a consideration of self-management and professional conduct, in the context of feminist approaches to education. We hoped that delegates would leave feeling inspired and keen to put these pedagogic principles into practice, but also with a renewed perspective on how teaching and learning can be used as tools to challenge inequality and inequity. We achieved this through direct reflective exercises, for example group discussions of the issues, challenges, and practicalities of feminist teaching and learning.

Professional and career development (B3)

The RDF notes that in the latter phases of the transferable skill development, student researchers should 'actively create and champion opportunities for others within and outside academia'. The themes of this workshop aligned with this. Although feminist pedagogy is rooted in a Higher Education context, it also develops skills and attitudes that are applicable to any working sector. For example, feminist pedagogy promotes tools such as co-mentoring, collaborative practice, and working in partnership. Appreciation and development of these skills will prepare PGRs for unique challenges present in different workplaces. As per the previously successful workshop co-hosted by Rumana Hossain on 'The Invisible Women: Dealing with Erasing', this workshop included a plenary in which delegates have time to think about their next steps, in the context of the themes discussed. This aimed to prompt

PGRs and other delegates to think about how the principles and approaches taught throughout the day may be applicable to one's own career development.

Equality and Diversity (D1)

We wanted the overriding theme of this workshop to be an appreciation and recognition of how equality and diversity can be promoted and fostered through pedagogic tools. The ethos was rooted in dismantling unequal barriers to teaching and learning success. It is important that this workshop is open to all staff, students, and PGRs in the University, irrespective of gender, ethnicity, ability, or race. This is a theme that is omnipresent throughout the feminist pedagogic literature; for example, McGuire and Reger (2003) note that although feminist pedagogy may be valuable for all academics, 'underrepresented groups can especially benefit from this type of relationship'.

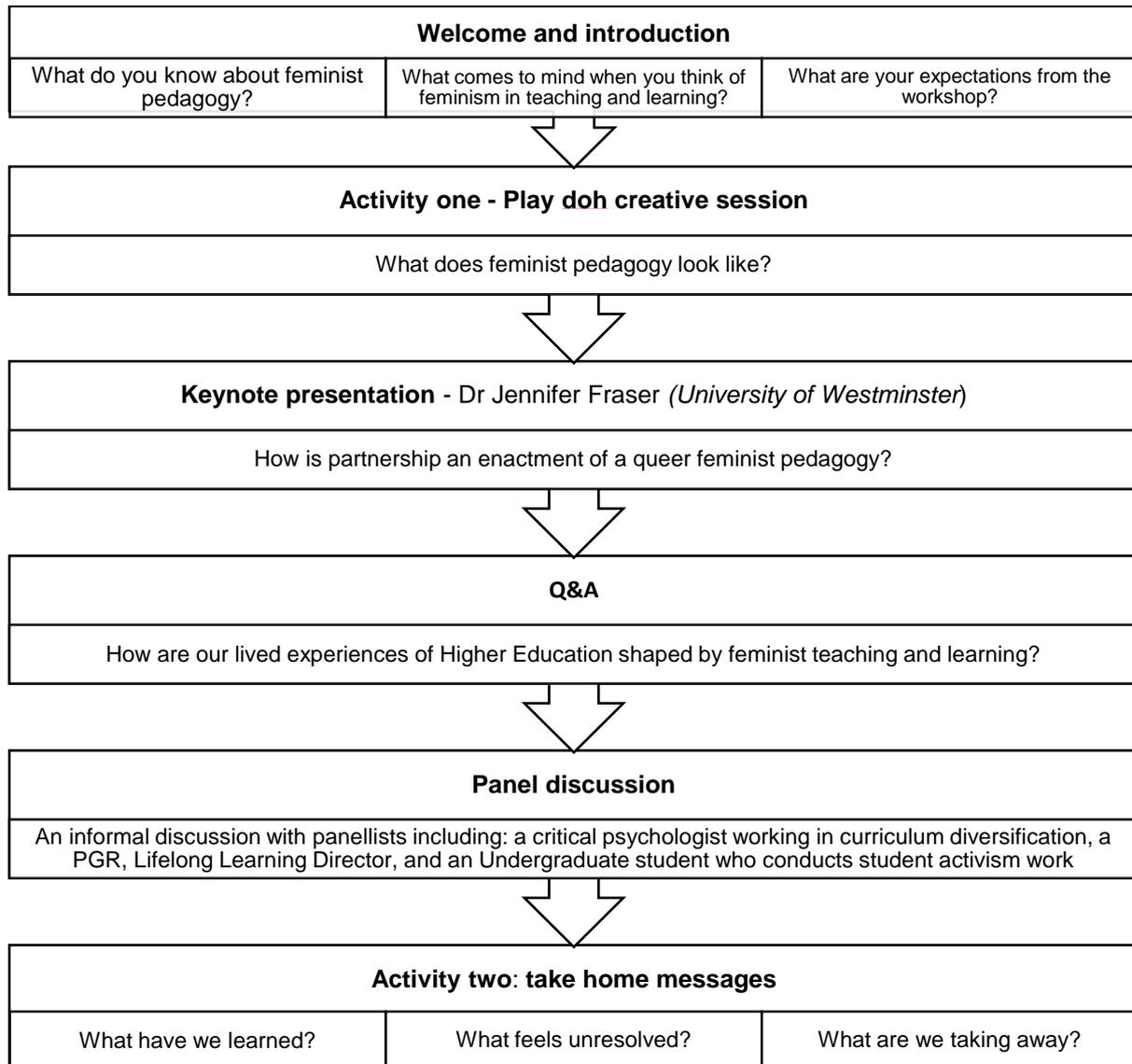
Workshop format

Following our interpretation of the Vitae Researcher Development Framework and appreciation of our projected aims and purpose of the workshop, the next thread of conversation was concerned with structure and format. We were deeply conscious of ensuring that the workshop embodied the principles we were working to promote, namely: equality of power and voice, disrupted sense of hierarchy, and careful application of 'expertise'. Therefore, to negate issues of paternalism and to create a sense of embedded dialogue, we opted to start the workshop with a series of open-ended questions and a playful interactive session.

To set the tone for the workshop, we initially posed opening questions to the delegates, asking them to come together and summarise in small groups their initial responses and expectations of feminist pedagogy. From this we learned that delegates had relatively mixed initial experience with feminist approaches; some explored in great detail the nuances and complexities of feminist work and posed specific theoretical questions they hoped to explore, whereas others had no prior knowledge in this area yet ended up with interesting keywords that inform feminist pedagogy. To share initial thoughts and continue exploring delegate's understanding of feminist pedagogy as a teaching and learning approach, we started the workshop with a playful and interactive activity. We invited delegates to construct a play-doh model of what 'feminist pedagogy' looks like to them. This activity was collaborative in groups and aimed to gauge a sense of the unique positionality of each delegate.

Following this, Dr Jennifer Fraser (Director of Student Partnership, University of Westminster) delivered a keynote address, in which she prompted delegates to think about how working in partnership with students can be considered an enactment of a queer feminist pedagogy. This, naturally, sparked a question and answer session, whereby delegates shared their experiences and frustrations with embedding feminist principles into teaching and learning. In order to ensure that the workshop had some element of partnership and co-production within it, the afternoon was spent hearing from a panel of invited speakers, included an undergraduate student activist (leader of the 'Why is my Curriculum White?' local campaign), a critical psychologist, and a Lifelong Learning Director. Again, this panel discussion also raised important points and provided useful embodied commentary to Dr Fraser's scholarly keynote presentation.

We aimed for every section of the day to be rooted in specific questions that are asked of the delegates, ourselves, and the wider HE context. Therefore, the overall format of the workshop was as follows:



Effectiveness and impact

This workshop was designed to be a PGR-led space that allowed other postgraduates, undergraduates, and staff to share their experiences and learn from one another. In total, 37 delegates attended and of these, 12 were postgraduate researchers, 18 were self-defined academics, 5 were educational developers or support staff, and 2 were undergraduate students. Here, our discussion of effectiveness, impact, and future plans will be rooted in the voice of the delegates of the workshop, interspersed with our own personal reflections and lessons learned.

To ascertain the impact of the play-doh creative session, we discussed with delegates their models and used this to guide the remainder of the day. Delegates explored voice, power, authority, and positionality in their models together. Some demonstrated the principles of feminist pedagogy through the relationship between student and learner, acknowledging the unique positions of both parties. Others took a more holistic view, creating models that showed what feminist teaching and learning spaces look like, representing creative and collaborative spaces with shared frustrations and concerns. This activity was successful in breaking down some of the barriers associated with formal and more academic-based activities. It also successfully allowed us to understand the initial understanding and experiences of delegates in the room. This helped us to shape the discussion section more appropriately. A selection of some of the models are shown below (consent was obtained from all delegates to disseminate materials from the workshop):

Model 1. Metaphor of 'braving stormy weather' by doing feminist work in normative spaces

Model 2. Multifaceted voices occupying different spaces & places



Model 3. The shapes are designed to be equal but are naturally different sizes, representing power, agency and voice

Model 4. Feminist pedagogy is about dismantling and re-building what we know



To assess the effectiveness of the workshop as a knowledge sharing platform, as a plenary activity we then asked delegates to write down set of ideas with specific take-away messages, lessons learned, and action plans in light of the discussions. We have synthesised the written take-home messages into one mission statement: The italicised text is taken verbatim from delegate's written feedback on our plenary activity.

"The workshop showed us how to centre student voices, identifying that we need to do the careful, slow, detailed work that's necessary for lasting change. We should build networks of pedagogies- drawing on each other to effect changes. We should also think and be careful about the use of language we use in everyday lives- generalisations, stereotypes, and name things. The workshop reminded us that it's not just about what you teach, it's about how you teach it and thinking about who you are teaching it to."

Delegates also used the time at the end of the workshop to reflect upon specific actions that they are taking forwards with the lessons learned in mind. Again, these have been synthesised and collated by us:

"Actions include the need to reflect on core texts and think beyond our disciplines. How can we develop student-staff dialogues in relation to this? It is important to have space to collect stories and share this across the university. The Women at Leeds network could host on events like this. They should go beyond feminism and feminist pedagogy. We can use this to think about applying feminist pedagogy in learning and teaching."

Some delegates approached us following the event to share their positive feedback, referring to the workshop as "fantastic, important, and productive" (*University Teaching Fellow*) and "positive, creative, and supportive" (*Life Long Learning Tutor*). Delegates also reached out to note how they felt "welcome", "included and very interactive" (PGR), and that the workshop "fostered ideas for collaboration" (*Widening Participation Officer*).

Reflections on the project

It was important that this workshop embodied the values of feminist pedagogy throughout. In this sense, we wanted it to be inclusive and welcoming to all. The main challenge of this in practice was maintaining a sense of criticality whilst also harbouring an accessible and non-threatening feel to the day. We knew that in the discussion element delegates would most likely be in contradiction with one another's ideas. We were highly conscious of our position within these interactions, aiming to celebrate differences in a way that does not inhibit or silence other voices.

Although this went well and the feedback suggests that delegates found the space to be useful and stimulating, if we were to run a similar workshop we would focus our efforts more on structuring and facilitating the discussions more closely. This would allow some of the more prominent issues to have time to be discussed together, rather than allowing the dialogue to run its natural course. Of course, both

approaches provide a different kind of listening and learning, but delegates also raised some specific areas that they felt could have been expanded on within the day. These include:

- sharing practical examples
- open conversation acknowledging difference and how privilege can (if not acknowledged) be a barrier
- space to learn from interdisciplinary colleagues.
- thinking through ways we can respond to the issues that have been raised.
- philosophical discussion regarding what is knowledge and it means for different academic areas.

The content of the discussion will have also been markedly different dependent on the experience, position, and knowledge of the delegates. As we refer to throughout in our background and aims section of this case study, we had planned for this workshop with fellow postgraduate researchers in mind, hoping to create a space that acknowledged our unique positions within HE whilst also introducing assumingly new and exciting ways of thinking about teaching and learning. The more varied and academic attendees meant that the conversations were afforded a more developed sense of experience and understanding of the complexities associated with feminist pedagogy.

Some delegates found the initial model-making exercise to be challenging, due to their conflicting personal understanding about what 'feminist pedagogy' looks like. Some fed back that they would have liked more guidance and suggested that if we run this workshop again we provide a brief definition of feminist teaching and learning to guide this starter activity. However, our decision not to impose our own definition onto delegates was intentional and thoughtful. Critical pedagogies should not impose or dictate ideas about the world, but rather should empower and support others to consider these questions for themselves (e.g. Darder, & Baltodano, 2003). Therefore, this highlighted a tension between knowledge sharing (i.e. *learning* about feminist pedagogy) and embodied feminist principles. We worked together to navigate these concerns.

These feedback comments represent some important areas in the context of feminist pedagogy, and will most likely form essential groundwork to our follow-up events and conversations. We were conscious that some issues and frustrations in the workshop may be left feeling unresolved and incomplete. We now hope to follow-up on these unresolved issues with another more specialised workshop, this time with a stronger focus on how we can apply the principles of feminist pedagogy specifically to student engagement practices.

Attendees shared some of their specific questions in the plenary activity of the workshop that they hope to take forward into their scholarship and teaching practice. These included:

- How can we deal with our positionality practically in seminars?

- How do we co-conspire with students instead of co-opting (recognize where the work has come from/ let students have the ownership) their ideas?
- How can we develop more strategies to work collaboratively with students and question mine and their positionality?
- Is co-production on students as equal partners useful and also challenging?

We plan to use these questions to form the basis of a series of feminist-inspired pedagogic events, focusing next on more specific questions and ideas within this framework. We also plan to create a PGR network of feminist teachers and learners, creating a space in which feminist pedagogy can be further explored in greater depth.

Acknowledgements

With sincere thanks to Dr Jennifer Fraser and Dr Lucy Mercer-Mapstone for their contributions to the planning and delivery of this workshop. We would also like to thank our panel members: Dr Glen Jankowski, Monisha Issano, and Dr Catherine Bates. This workshop was supported by a PGR development grant from Organisational Development and Professional Learning services at the University of Leeds. This project was also supported by the Leeds Institute for Teaching Excellence and the Women in Leeds Network.

References

- Bryson, C., & Hand, L. (2007). The role of engagement in inspiring teaching and learning. *Innovations in education and teaching international*, 44(4), 349-362.
- Chávez, V., Turalba, R. A. N., & Malik, S. (2006). Teaching public health through a pedagogy of collegiality. *American journal of public health*, 96(7), 1175-1180.
- Darder, A., & Baltodano, M. (2003). *The critical pedagogy reader*. Psychology Press.
- McGuire, G. M., & Reger, J. (2003). Feminist co-mentoring: A model for academic professional development. *NWSA journal*, 54-72.
- hooks, bell (1994) *Teaching to Transgress. Education as the practice of freedom*, London: Routledge
- Jacoby, B. (2000). Why Involve Commuter Students in Learning?. *New Directions for Higher Education*, 109, 3-12.
- Mercer-Mapstone, L., & Mercer, G. (2018). A dialogue between partnership and feminism: deconstructing power and exclusion in higher education. *Teaching in Higher Education*, 23(1), 137-143.
- Shrewsbury, C. M. (1987). What is feminist pedagogy?. *Women's Studies Quarterly*, 15(3/4), 6-14.

Vitae (2011) Researcher Development Framework. Accessed at <https://www.vitae.ac.uk/vitae-publications/rdf-related/researcher-development-framework-rdf-vitae.pdf/view>

Wyatt, L. G. (2011). Nontraditional student engagement: Increasing adult student success and retention. *The Journal of Continuing Higher Education*, 59(1), 10-20.