

Toward a Transformative Pedagogy: Queer-feminist reflections of the classroom

Niharika Banerjea

Abstract

The classroom space is one of the most complex epistemological sites in contentious democracies such as India. Transactions between teachers and students, and among students—mediated by gender, sexuality, caste, race, class, tribe, ethnicity, ability, language and religion—demand a pedagogy that will interrupt hegemonic spaces of knowledge production such as the family, neighborhood, media and state apparatuses. This paper reflects on the possibilities of a queer-feminist pedagogical praxis, while attempting to interrupt the ‘normalcies’ in classroom spaces. I argue that queer-feminist pedagogies cannot be reduced to ‘addition’ of marginalized groups and ‘excavation’ of subjugated knowledge to feed an already growing institutional repertoire of ‘diversity management policies,’ but need to deeply engage with embodied subjects in the classroom, and question the everyday categories through which knowledge is organized and institutionalized within higher educational policy spaces.

Author Profile

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Introduction

Intellectual discussions around gender-sexuality in the classroom are tied to larger socio-legal efforts for inclusivity within democratic nations. Social movements rallying to incorporate differences within the abstract universal subject exist simultaneously with efforts against management of the universal subject. Higher educational institutions in a democracy such as India are not outside these struggles, but integral to the ‘relations of power’ (Foucault 1997) in which discourses and practices around ‘accountable democracy,’ ‘representation’ and ‘rights’ are claimed and contested. Consequently, the classroom is not a neutral vessel that transmits one-way information from the teacher to the student but is a contentious site that transacts intellectual relations through gender-sexuality, race, caste, class, ethnicity, ability, language and religion. In other words, pedagogical sites in the liberal arts and humanities are integral to developing critiques of normativities, normalisations and exclusions that bind the family, community and state, and discussing discursive strategies on how to reshape and reconfigure ‘regimes of truth’ (Foucault 1976). This paper reflects on the role of gender-sexual identity of the teacher in the classroom. While the challenging relationship of queer teachers to pedagogy and the contours of a queer pedagogy have been widely discussed¹, the implication of ‘coming out’ to neoliberal structures, where differences are also managed, and its relation to a queer-feminist pedagogy is hard to come by.

In this paper, I undertake a brief autoethnography² of the transactional self in the classroom to delineate how I attempt to interrupt the management of difference through pedagogical strategizing, which I view from the queer-feminism standpoint. I argue that a pedagogy that operates by just adding marginalized groups will only end up feeding an already growing institutional repertoire of ‘diversity management policies. The task is, therefore, to question the categories through which knowledge about difference is organized and institutionalized within higher educational policy spaces.

I am a queer teacher located within a time and space which, on the one hand, celebrates the incorporation of gender-sexual differences in democracies such as India and the United States, and on the other, is witnessing closures of freedom³ through disturbing practices of domination. Hence, I ask myself, what strategic role can I play in the classroom that will prepare the students to spot these contradictions? After all, scholars have marked how queer identities—

¹ Grace, Andre P., Fiona J. Benson. 2000. Using Autobiographical Queer Life Narratives of Teachers to Connect Personal, Political and Pedagogical Spaces. *International Journal of Inclusive Education* 4(2):89-109; Shlasko, G.D. 2005. Queer (v.) Pedagogy. *Equity & Excellence in Education* 38(2):123-134

² An autoethnographic lens helps me to “self-critically attend to the cultural, geographical and historical specificity of the conditions of production” of “knowledge claims.” Duncan, Nancy. 1996. Introduction: (Re)placings. *BodySpace: destabilizing geographies of gender and sexuality*. Edited by Nancy Duncan 1-10. London and New York: Routledge

³ Foucault, Michel. 1997. The Ethics of the Concern of the Self as a Practice of Freedom. *Ethics: Subjectivity and Truth*. Edited by Paul Rabinow. The Penguin Press: Allen Lane 1: 281-301. I use freedom to mean the space to negotiate relations of power, a core aspect of political practices in contentious democracies.

moving from figures of death to life—are implicated in homonationalist processes (Puar 2007; Banerjea and Dasgupta 2013). As a queer teacher, therefore, I find it imperative to situate and interrupt the transactional self and text in my pedagogical practices, with the hope that students will learn to critically navigate the management of gender-sexuality according to the language of communal and market-oriented democracies.

To elaborate on this discussion, I have organized this paper around classroom and institutional experiences across two universities. I was employed at the University of Southern Indiana from 2007-2015 and since September 2015, I have been working at Dr. B. R. Ambedkar University Delhi (commonly known as Ambedkar University Delhi). In this paper, I do not make a comparison of my classroom and institutional experiences between these two sites but use those to create some preliminary arguments about a politics of interruption and its relation to a queer-feminist pedagogy, which has the potential to transform pedagogical practices.

The University of Southern Indiana and Ambedkar University, both catering to the advancement of liberal arts education, are preoccupied with the question of diversity and the concern with social justice—commonly stated visions of several liberal arts institutions in contemporary democracies. Though these two institutions are different in terms of their historical emergence, across both the sites, the institutional logistics around faculty recruitment, cohort sizes, funding, governance, etc. are shaped by the exigencies of neoliberal restructuring of higher education. This has the following implications.

In the context of the United States, it meant the generation of a pluralistic culture of discrete ethnicities and races to be now studied and managed within higher educational institutions. While the ideologies of pluralism in the 1960s and 1970s jumpstarted this turn (Mohanty 1990), more recently, this can be traced to the ‘global turn’ in US higher education, where there is an explicit push to internationalize the curriculum in order to prepare students for the global economy (Hovey 2004). This is often known as the ‘food and festival’ approach to diversity education (Warren and Davis 2009). Seen in terms of a benign difference, it serves to bypass questions of dominance and resistance that are crucial to a decolonial educational practice (Mohanty 1990). One of the constitutive logics of the diversity turn can be situated within the state’s need to “have a knowledge of the rest of the world” in the wake of the post-Cold War era (1995 report of a working group on a research agenda for the internationalization of higher education, as cited by Hovey 2004, 243). But also, technological changes have brought people around the world closer, and we are faced with a new kind of globality, one that demands an instant engagement with and consumption of difference.

In the context of India, social justice interventions have begun to be deeply implicated by matters such as standardization of curricula and bureaucratic calculations of inclusion. Due to this, classroom transactions are riddled with tensions around unmet demands for equal access and opportunities, and unequal playing fields between the dominant and marginalized. The question of social justice in higher educational institutions, while still not part of an explicit management vision, is deeply governed by prescriptive goals and checklist-oriented policies, which also reflect the logic of neoliberal markets. Situated against these contexts, this paper attempts to articulate a politics of interruption in relation to a queer-feminist pedagogy.

In the next section, I narrate two instances of experiences around classroom transaction within the University of Southern Indiana and Ambedkar University Delhi, drawing attention to the two moments of interruption that I engage in through self and text. Further, I make arguments about the politics of interruption and its relation to a queer-feminist pedagogy. I end with concluding comments around the need to interrupt the naturalized connection among the classroom, family and the state.

Sites

University of Southern Indiana

To reconstitute the boundaries and constitutive logics of this huge campus is challenging, if not impossible. Due to this, the university has been steadfast in subscribing to a ‘diversity approach,’ with the explicit aim of seeking to incorporate students with different abilities, ethnicities, genders, sexualities and races. At the time of my employment, the institution posited that accepting, adding and then celebrating difference will help position its students favorably for the regional, national and global economies. A diversity committee, of which I was not a part, helped to realize that goal by developing activities to promote diversity as a value, enhance support networks for faculty, staff and employees of non-White backgrounds, and create international programming for both faculty and students. Against this background, the university measured the usefulness of liberal arts education by its ability to offer a course that has ‘global’ and ‘diversity’ content, thus maintaining the institution’s vantage in regional economic and political structures. It is within this context that I taught a course titled, Introduction to Sociology, to a class of nearly three hundred students every semester.

My challenge was to queer pedagogical practices in the classroom by rejecting the assumed direct relation between the classroom and the regional and global economies, and questioning the normative impulses within diversity education. Being a petite brown body in a class of largely White working and middle-class students, I was already carrying diversity on my sleeve. While this was important for the students to confront and engage with difference, it was also peculiarly positioned to feed the need to consume this difference to keep legitimizing neoliberal educational structures. In other words, my brown body already preceded me in every semester, setting the terms of interaction I so carefully attempted to articulate and regulate. So, during the first few classes of this course every semester, I would carefully posture my body through some boring formal clothing and make an attempt at passing as just another Midwestern college professor.

Contrary to a politics of visibility and the often unquestioned deployment of ‘coming out’ narratives and its usefulness for a critical pedagogy in the classroom, I deliberately did not begin the semester by announcing my sexual orientation. The self-citation process I had thought would only add one more point of difference to the ‘Indian woman with a dialect’ identity. So, in a sense, I used to make a strategic attempt at passing.

Passing, argues Brueggemann and Modellmog “marks the site of an ethical choice” (2002, 313). As I entered the classroom, I conformed to a certain bodily reading—like a middle-class college professor—while interrupting the consumption of a brown queer body. With this began

my semester-long task of queering the analytical space in the classroom by explaining to the students that the terms of recognition are not ours alone, and that our racialized, sexualized, gendered and classed bodies, and our selves are both subjected to norms and the agency of their use.

Ambedkar University Delhi

In the sociology program, offered at the School of Liberal Studies, I teach a course called, Social Theory I to approximately fifty students. This course traditionally introduces students to ‘classical thinkers,’ the ‘forefathers’ or the ‘founding fathers,’ who shaped the parameters of sociology. Setting aside the question of an almost uncontested masculine framing of the discipline’s ‘birth’ and ‘development’—again through reproductive logics—a primary challenge that I faced was how to transact beyond an add and stir approach. In other words, what could I do beyond simply adding a few women sociologists, who are also considered key to the emergence of the discipline, to reframe the masculine rendering of the subject matter? An add and stir approach does question standardized curricula and thus intervene within neoliberal envisioning of syllabi structures, but it is limiting when it comes to interrupting tacit *heteropatriarchal* frames with which students enter the classroom space. I use *heteropatriarchal* to mean a set of norms, which emerge from a naturalized linkage between family, caste, class and community. This deployment is useful to understand marginalized subjectivities, which are produced at the intersections of such linkages. Because of this, I do not find much use in ‘coming out,’ unlike in my earlier institution. This is not a deliberate attempt to strategically pass but to be cautious about becoming consumed in pink economies,⁴ which are complicit in reproducing the same *heteropatriarchal* frames that we are trying to critique. Hence, we spend the first few classes interrogating the paradoxical nature of higher education, which while explicitly vouching social justice goals, also operate to consolidate social hierarchies. This interrogation is tied to the stated task of the need for theorizing—done in conversation with select feminist texts. Most students take this opportunity—in their required journal writings—to critically reflect on their educational experiences prior to entering the university. This, in turn, helps me segue into a discussion of modernity, its sociological dilemmas and *heteropatriarchal* hierarchies, though texts are classified as both ‘classical’ and ‘feminist.’

A key goal of this course is to claim some living relation with modern, capitalist and *heteropatriarchal* norms that govern lives. But having said that, a semester-long teaching of Social Theory I differently does not undo histories of sedimented norms and miraculously change the epistemological frames within which we attempt to understand *heteropatriarchal* renderings of modernity and its exclusions. Yet, because of the reasons highlighted above, I see that my pedagogical departures around this course do have the potential to interrupt the add and stir approach to social justice goals and its consequent deradicalization.

⁴ Pink economies refer to economic sectors that construct ‘sexual others’ as consumer citizens, thereby, creating industries and sexualized spaces (Bell, David, Binnie Jon. 2004. Authenticating Queer Space: Citizenship, Urbanism and Governance. *Urban Studies* 41(9):1807-1820.). Pink economies on a smaller scale already emerged in India before the reading down of Section 377 of the Indian Penal Code; following the decriminalization of ‘unnatural sexual acts,’ pink economies are projected to grow. (Agence France Presse. 13 September, 2018. India’s ‘Pink Economy’ Set to Boom After Court Ruling. *The Hindu*.; BW Online Bureau. 8 November, 2014. The Pink Economy. BW Businessworld. <http://www.businessworld.in/article/The-Pink-Economy/08-11-2014-70508/>).

Interruption and Queer-feminist Pedagogy

I understand critical pedagogy—mediated by gender, sexuality, caste, race, class, tribe, ethnicity, ability, language and religion—to contain an ability to intervene in hegemonic spaces of knowledge production. Proponents of queer pedagogy add to this by talking about a deliberate interference in the “production of ‘normalcy in schooled subjects’” (Bryson and Castell 1993, 285) and an openness to “flexible and innovative notions of archiving, canonicity, disciplinarity and intellectual labor” (Halberstam 2003, 364). A queer-feminist pedagogy, drawing from queer and feminist praxis, ensures this interference and flexibility by writing the experiences of gendered and sexually marginalized subjects into understandings of race, gender, class and nation.⁵ Central to this is a teaching of intersectional realities through interdisciplinary knowledge (Lewis 2011).⁶ A queer-feminist pedagogy, I argue, can be furthered by interrupting naturalized linkages between local/global economies and *heteropatriarchal* orders in a dis/non-comforting way. In other words, a politics of interruption, in addition to intersectional and interdisciplinary practices, may be thought of as a supplement to addressing the predicament of normalcy, erasure and silence, especially, when it is tied to routinized and familiar diversity and social justice checklist-oriented policies.

When students enter higher educational institutions such as the University of Southern Indiana and Ambedkar University Delhi, they are already poised to engage with issues of diversity and social justice—whether they like it or not. But at the same time, the awareness of the necessity to learn through the lens of diversity and social justice is also limited to what does not trouble their complicit selves. Hence, it’s somewhat expected that discussion about marginalizing structures and marginalized groups will take place to help students ‘broaden their horizons.’ Added to this, if one of their teachers begin the semester by declaring she is queer, then it may be comforting for most students, as they can directly see her on the ‘other side’ and/or identify with her. This immediate identification and consumption of difference, though important for generating empathy, does not do much to undo a comfortable and complicit self that inhabits *heteropatriarchal* orders. Hence, it is ultimately counterproductive to a radical understanding of diversity and social justice. As Kumashiro argues, “The desire to learn only what is comforting goes hand in hand with a resistance to learning what is discomforting, and this resistance often proves to be a formidable barrier to movements toward social justice” (2002, 4). A queer-feminist pedagogy can deploy a modality of interruption, which can become political when it helps destabilize normative and comfortable posturing of diversity and social justice.

Interruption, argues Leila Dawney, “is a corporeal moment—a particular relation that halts and disrupts the flow of experience, that is both habitual and yet not. It emerges from habitual modes of being, yet at once calls them into question through the sense of disruption that it engenders” (2012, 628). In this sense, interruption is a disruption, albeit a momentary one, of a routinized and thereby familiar mode of relation with and around a practice, idea or behavior. This could be by accident or chance. Interruption can also be understood as a deliberate cutting into the flow of the familiar. Considered in the context of the two sites I talked about in the

⁵ I deliberately leave out caste here, as there isn’t yet a discussion on how queer-feminist pedagogies can address marginalization around caste. I hope to engage with this in future.

⁶ I am aware of the rich body of literature around Black queer studies that have articulated the parameters of queer-feminist pedagogy. An elaboration of that is beyond the scope of this presentation and will be engaged with in a future development of this paper.

earlier paragraphs, halting the *habitual language*, including its embodiment of diversity and social justice, is interruption.

When liberal institutions paradoxically define themselves through prescriptive language, and practice of diversity and social justice, including a certain presentation of self and curriculum development, it is worrisome. It is often difficult to identify these goals as prescriptive. In explaining why, Kumashiro states, “We do not often need to be told explicitly...that the curriculum should include these things and not other things. Rather, we learn that the curriculum has ‘traditionally’ consisted of these things” (2009, xxxv). The question of tradition, thus, does get sedimented through a type of superficial inclusion when diversity and social justice practices become routine matters to be check listed at regular intervals. This feeds into the needs of contemporary capital, and also erases the history of lesbian feminists—across India and the US—to push the boundaries of women and feminist movements.

In the context of India, for example, lesbian and queer feminists struggle to counter the argument that questions of desire are an aspect of lifestyle and cannot be talked about in the same breath with poverty and domestic violence. Connecting the question of violence against lesbian women to questions of livelihood, disability, religion, location and now caste is the key to queer feminist politics. A pedagogy of ‘coming out’ in this context has the potential to reproduce exactly what the lesbian feminists historically have been trying to counter.

A politics of interruption, therefore—through an unfamiliar presentation of the body, self and curriculum—can be useful to think about a queer-feminist pedagogy that attempts to unlink naturalized truth regimes surrounding diversity and social justice goals.

A moment of halt can be used as an opportunity for interrogation and the scope to ask questions of naturalized regimes. In reference to the above narratives, I would like to draw attention to the two moments of interruption that occur in the classroom. One, through a deliberate attempt at passing and/or refusal to announce one’s sexual orientation in the classroom. Two, explicating Social Theory I at the crossroad of an interdisciplinary field of knowledge by a cis queer body (without relying on a formal coming out) brings the teaching of intersectional realities and, thereby, the possible radicalization of ‘disciplinary founding fathers’ and the unquestioned hegemonic male bodies who typically transact such courses.

Concluding Comments

A transformative pedagogy, I argue, among other things, needs to prepare students for an ethical practice that is not only responsive to difference beyond the communal and proximal, but is equally invested in the strategy of the response. In other words, preparation for democratic citizenship involves much more than awareness about your own and others’ rights as an abstract individual citizen. Equally important is to understand how and when to interrupt, so that the abstract universal subject is pried open whenever states, markets and communities attempt to bring about a ‘final solution’ through legal recognition and/or normalizing processes. I link pedagogical practices and democratic politics through this interruptive moment, arguing that the teaching-learning process is about the strategies of transaction as much as it is about the contents of that transaction.

In conclusion, I would emphasize that queer-feminist pedagogies, through a politics of interruption, offer something more than addition of marginalized bodies and excavation of subjugated knowledge. Though important, it also feeds an already growing repertoire of ‘diversity and social justice management policies.’ Further, the usefulness of interruption for a queer feminist pedagogical practice is not only about transaction in the classroom but outside of it as well. A predicament today is not one of erasure and silencing of queer and feminist bodies, but normalization of such bodies within well-articulated progressive goals. On the one hand, our queer and feminist bodies are desired because they meet diversity and social justice goals within higher educational spaces, and on the other, we are often disciplined when we talk as feminist beings. *Heteropatriarchal* ideologies, including its neoliberal expressions, are quick to ‘correct’ us through benevolent and patronizing speech. Hence, as educators, who work with/in the very spaces that constrain us, it is necessary to think what interruption as a political modality can help achieve.

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