

Editorial

Pedagogy is a term that is more often than not heard in the context of school education, along with terms such as curriculum and assessment. However, in the context of higher education, pedagogy is a term that is seldom used. Academic council meetings in universities see fierce debates on what needs to be taught but not on how it needs to be taught. Critical approaches to education, on the contrary, have attached a great deal of significance to the ‘how’ question. This in turn, results in mindfulness about the location and nature of both the teacher and the student and the overall context within which the process of education unfolds. Teaching and learning are viewed as a process rather than a finite project. Critical approaches such as feminist approaches to pedagogy accept the importance of specificity of experiences of both the students and the teachers. Feminist pedagogy, over the years, has made it possible to generate feminist knowledge and draws greatly from the energies of feminist politics.

The close connection between experience/action/theory characterizes most critical approaches to pedagogy. Feminist politics and pedagogy have transformed and impacted the way knowledge is transacted, produced and circulated in the classroom. Most academic disciplines within the humanities and social sciences, and now increasingly STEM and performing arts have had to engage with questions of gender inequality in general and women’s oppression, in particular. This, most certainly, is a result of consistent feminist interrogation. The functioning of universities and research centers has also undergone a transformation with concerns about gender parity and dignity of all employees becoming key issues. The importance attached to non-discriminatory language, policies and decision making along with the existence of grievance redressal mechanisms that address caste/gender and sexuality/disability related injustices has now become an integral part of the university landscape in India and abroad. This is largely due to feminist campaigns.

The focus in this issue of the journal *Peace Prints* is on the broad themes of women’s education, feminist pedagogy and engagement within the academy. We see women’s education and its considerable expansion as a very important variable in the creation of democratic and dialogic spaces of learning/teaching. Transformative pedagogies, in turn, consolidate this process further.

Feminist pedagogy typically draws from the experiences of the students and the teachers and equally from the vast storehouse of knowledge generated by the women’s movement. In fact, it would not be misplaced to say that feminist educational practices are in a manner of speaking the academic and intellectual arm of the women’s movement. This gives classrooms practicing transformative pedagogies such as feminist pedagogy an edgy, exhilarating and at times exhausting character.

In such classrooms, questions of identity and difference, power and silence, violence, privilege and law figure repeatedly in discussions and conversations. The classroom, feminist or otherwise, is a microcosm. The distinction and privilege and the inequalities and oppression that exist outside of it also exist within it (Ludlow 2004).

It is common for classrooms in India, for instance, to have to grapple with questions of inequality and power with reference to caste/gender and other such social structures. A feminist classroom would be one that does not project these as some retrograde vestiges from the past, but as lived realities that intersect and reinforce each other in various forms (Rege 2010). Teachers, within this framework, do not occupy an Archimedean point in the classroom. The conduct of teachers is most certainly rooted in the conscious choices as well as the unconscious selfhood of the teacher; which in turn is determined by the political and social context of the teacher (Macdonald 2002).

Feminist classrooms attach a great deal of importance to experience and identity and often the teacher invites the students to share their specific experiences through which to generate liberatory knowledge in a collective way. Experiences are based on specific identities and locations within society and there is always the grave danger of projecting identities as always available and fully formed, rather than seeing them as porous, non-essentialized and historically contingent categories. Here, the role of the feminist teacher becomes very significant by attaching value to identities, while also arguing that these identities while being epistemically significant are also non-essential and variable through time and space (Macdonald 2002).

Experience, identity and knowledge are held to be closely interlinked as far as critical pedagogies are concerned, and that is true of feminist pedagogy as well. However, an easy flow in the direction of radical transformation and democratization need not always result from this linkage. Feminist teachers often report the difficulty they face when encountering stiff resistance to feminist explanations of for instance, sexual violence against women – resistance from women, who perhaps might have undergone such violent experiences. In other words, this serves as a warning to us, that experiences need not necessarily result in liberatory knowledge. They sometimes become the basis for perpetuation of unequal and unjust structures and practices. It is common practice for teachers practicing critical pedagogies to urge students to share their experiences. This has an important and immediate fallout – of politicizing the knowledge project within the classroom. This is so because experiences are bound to be varied and hence a multiplicity of truths will emerge in the classroom – feminist classroom would need to evolve a strategy which would be able to manage the diversity of experiences shared on the one hand and the mindless valorization of experience as the only basis for generating knowledge (Macdonald 2002).

Scholars of feminist pedagogy have suggested that feminist classrooms would do well to move away from the more conventional dyad of teacher/student. Instead, they advocate the placing of this relationship within a dynamic and constantly changing context characterized by the discovery of differences. Teachers and students should ideally be seen as “meaning making communities” which acknowledge that epistemic wholeness can be achieved only by taking on board the epistemic consequences of specific identities on the one hand, while also acknowledging the historically contingent nature of these identities (Macdonald 2002).

Scholars and writers on critical pedagogy admit that classrooms experimenting with critical pedagogical approaches such as the feminist approach cannot escape being characterized by a certain amount of conflict, dissonance and a lack of resolution. Conflict is inevitable as diverse social locations would throw up diverse sets of ‘truths’ and it would not be possible to resolve

many of the tensions and unanswered questions. Feminist classrooms are often confessional spaces where teachers and students make it their business to know each other as human beings with distinct and significant lived realities that matter. Feminist educators hence, typically, take an active interest in the lives, families and social backgrounds of their students, much like black teachers in segregated schools in America did (hooks 1994). It is often productive if teachers take the first risk, linking confessional narratives to academic discussions in order to demonstrate how experience can illuminate and enhance our understanding of academic material (hooks 1994).

Yet another challenge often is the reluctance and resistance of the students with privilege when encountering the social and political consequences of their privileges. It is very difficult to get students to admit to their privileges. To get them to accept that their lives impact others negatively and unjustly is the next and more difficult step. A feminist classroom is characterized as a space wherein students would eventually ‘take risks’ and admit to their privileges and question themselves and their assumptions (Macdonald 2002). The role of the teacher in a feminist classroom is of paramount importance, for the feminist classroom by collapsing the distance between the learner and the object of inquiry – turns the students themselves into objects of study. In such an atmosphere, the teacher has to handle the discomfort and animosity that is produced with care and compassion. It should also be the space that enables students from marginalized communities to speak and learn about oppression while not claiming to possess uncontested epistemic authority about ‘their people’ (Macdonald 2002).

Feminist approaches to pedagogy seek to move away from the binary of the teacher/student and to de-centre the authority and position of the teacher within the classroom. This approach advocates that neither teachers nor students are the most authentic or authoritative source of knowledge. The implication is that objective knowledge can be generated within the feminist classroom through a sustained focus on difference (Macdonald 2002), as distinct from a caricatured post-modernist pedagogy of the unknowable. Feminist classrooms ideally encourage students to examine their own and each other’s deeply held belief and justification for such beliefs. It is through this exercise that a community of learners is created where, the teacher and the students are co-travelers in the project of meaning making.

The Exclusionary Ways of the Academy

Social and cultural networks that extend and exist outside the classroom and the university need also to be recognized by the teacher as structures and networks that have the potential of reinforcing exclusionary practices and process in the classroom. These networks and social ties, for instance, keep opportunities, suggestions, advise, letters of reference and tips for furthering prospects in higher education limited to a small circle of students and teachers who share an easy familiarity and a similar background of privilege (Priya 2019). Feminist educators need to acknowledge the skewed ideas of merit on which the academy is based to a large extent. This notion of merit is individual oriented and does not recognize that the structures of higher education and learning are rooted in privilege and power. Writing about her days in graduate school, bell hooks recalls that individual white male students who were seen as “exceptional”, were often allowed to chart their intellectual journeys, but the rest of the students, especially those from marginalized backgrounds were always expected to conform (hooks 1994).

Feminist pedagogy, therefore, requires that the teachers examine their own privileges and access to power networks. Transformative pedagogy calls for engaged scholarship and an active process of self-transformation. It requires the teacher to move away from a sole focus on individual merit and learning to group work and work with the community rather than work on a community. Listen to a young student of Economics:

I strongly believe that we need more economists who would work for our people and not just work on our people, economists who know what a policy means to the people on the ground, who know the meaning of policy implementation, whose imagination is built by their experiences, in order to aim for an egalitarian society and who also know the pain of appropriation. Let me use this opportunity to share the dream of 'Bahujan Economics' to assert the identity of the oppressed in the 'discipline left untouched by untouchables'. Who else but economists from the Bahujan communities would understand the importance of amalgamating the demand for dignity with that for economic freedom? And who else other than Bahujans, who form the backbone of the country's economy but have always been left at the receiving end of everything be it two meals a day or dignity, would have a better understanding of it? Because if we keep on letting others judge us on the parameters set by them, our entire energy will be wasted in justifying our existence and regretting becoming part of their space (Priya 2019).

Taking the ideas of feminist and liberatory pedagogy ahead, bell hooks argues that the movement should ultimately be towards what she describes as engaged pedagogy – a pedagogy that focuses on knowing, doing and contemplating – in order to generate well-being. This idea evokes the need for self-actualization of the teacher so that the teacher has a sense of well-being and can interact with the students as Thich Nhat Hanh has suggested, like a healer and a therapist.

This approach recognizes the connections between the private and the public aspects of the lives of both the teacher and the students. It looks for a union of mind, body and spirit thereby building upon the feminist challenge of the separation of the public and the private (hooks 1994)

From Safe to Brave Spaces

For long, universities and teachers emphasized on the need for safe spaces. However, a few years back scholars working on questions of pedagogy in the context of higher education, began to advocate the idea of brave instead of safe spaces (Clemens n.d.).

Engaged scholarship requires a pedagogy that can guarantee a brave space within the classroom, such a space would be one that allows for controversial issues to be discussed and not avoided, but would be a space where such discussions would be conducted with civility and where varying opinions would be accepted. It would be a space where students and teachers would freely acknowledge and discuss instances where a dialogue has affected the emotional well-being of another person. It would be a classroom where students would have an option to step in and out of challenging conversations. It is imagined as a space where students and teachers would show respect for one another's basic personhood, and no attacks to intentionally harm one another would be made.

Transformative pedagogy that seeks to create brave spaces within the classroom would have to commit to ideas of diversity and inclusivity so that students and teachers would be able to express themselves without fear of anger, ridicule and outright denial of their experience. Such a classroom would have to abjure all forms of violence: physical, emotional and psychological. Students and teachers belonging to the more powerful groups would have to confront the risk of facing their unearned privileges and the history of violence that their groups have practiced against others to sustain this privilege. This could sometimes result in students from more privileged groups expressing their discomfort by blaming the teacher rather than engaging with the history of violence.

Papers in this volume of Peace Prints deal with some of these issues.

Niharika Banerjea in her paper titled *Toward a transformative pedagogy: queer-feminist reflections of the classroom* argues that the classroom space is one of the most complex epistemological sites in contentious democracies such as India. She argues in her paper that transactions between the teacher and students and among students – mediated by gender, sexuality, caste, race, class, tribe, ethnicity, ability, language and religion – demand a pedagogy that would be able to disrupt and destabilize the hegemonic spaces of knowledge production such as the family, neighborhood, media and state apparatuses. Her paper reflects on the possibilities of a queer-feminist pedagogical praxis, while attempting to interrupt the ‘normalcies’ in classroom spaces. Niharika Banerjea argues that queer-feminist pedagogies cannot be reduced to ‘addition’ of marginalized bodies and ‘excavation’ of subjugated knowledges to feed an already growing institutional repertoire of ‘diversity management policies’. It must deeply engage with embodied subjects in the classroom, to call into question the everyday categories through which knowledge is organized and institutionalized within higher educational policy spaces.

Rukmini Sen’s paper titled *Court Visits and Learning Pedagogies: Access to sites of Justice* is built on experiential and reflexive practices around transacting a particular course titled Law and Society that the author has taught to master’s students in a public funded university in Delhi. The paper aims to explore the potential of classroom as a site of transformation through experiential learning and field visits. Visiting courts in Delhi is deployed as an intrinsic component in this course by the teacher with the aim of making students from a non-legal background encounter the seat/site of justice. Through experiential diaries and notes maintained on these field visits, it is expected that students would learn about the socio-economic context of the court as well as of the people who engage with the court processes. What forms of multiple meanings of law, court and justice does this pedagogy evoke? It is expected that this courtroom ethnography will help produce the legal terrain as a site with multiple meanings.

Speaking Memory: Testimonies to the Possibilities of Peace by Meenakshi Malhotra, wherein the author tries to engage with the pedagogical function of life narratives. She argues that engaging with life narratives helps turn the spotlight on submerged, invisible lives in order to bring them to the fore. Reading testimonies in class creates opportunities for students and teachers to bear witness to the lives and sufferings of others. She suggests that looked at in this way, life narratives can offer a genuine opportunity to represent diversity and talk about difference-social, cultural, sexual and ethnic inter alia- in the classroom.

Linda Therese Luiz and Dr. Amrutha Rinu Abraham's jointly authored paper titled *A View of Gender Studies Syllabi, Classrooms and Examinations in Kerala* raises very important questions regarding the limits of societal transformation, women's empowerment and the role of feminist pedagogy and curriculum in a state such as Kerala. Kerala is known for its women-friendly statistical indicators on sensitive issues such as health, mortality, birth rate, age of marriage and so on. In Kerala, a state that is known for the comparative empowerment of women, the practices surrounding gender studies courses exhibit many contradictions. Linda Luiz and Amrutha Abraham's paper examines the philosophies behind gender studies papers and their encounters with the existing hegemonic gender regime during syllabus formation and classroom transactions, especially in the context of many colleges gaining academic autonomy. The paper also considers the nature and effects of gender studies evaluation methodologies in various disciplines in the light of the Revised Bloom's Taxonomy of educational objectives.

Priyanka Jha's paper *Her Story of Ideas: Reading Lives of Lesser Known Women* argues that over a period of time, women thinkers who have contributed to the construction of the modern ideas of nationhood, freedom, citizenship, rights and family (among many other concepts) have been systematically invisibilized and marginalized. This silence, however, is being challenged with the emergence of Indian/South Asian Political thought as part of the 'critical shift' in History and Political Science. Her paper argues that this new critical shift has, however, failed to find a place for women thinkers. Some of the questions that this paper asks are: do women thinkers think differently and were their imaginations of modern India substantially different from their male counterparts and indeed if there were some radically different visions, to what extent have they shaped the Indian nation state today?

Gender, Knowledge and Resistance in India is the title of the paper by Krishna Menon. This paper examines a history of modern education for women in the region. Do these spaces challenge conceptions of women's role in a traditional society? Or is it a mere token, or worse still does it reinforce the existing understanding about women's role in an unequal society? Do these institutions extend the surveillance and control of female sexuality and agency that are so typical of the role of families in South Asia? This provides a backdrop for an evaluation of the role played by women's studies as an academic discipline in this region and the possibility of resistance emerging from these centres. It focuses on the site of higher education in India and engages with a series of marginalities that have been produced and contested, both in terms of access to knowledge as well as what is considered knowledge. It further examines the contestations over exclusions based on caste, gender and sexuality within classrooms, educational institutions, and creation of the response of the law.

The paper by Bijayalaxmi Nanda titled *Transformational Feminist Pedagogy – A Journey from Class-room to Life Lessons* is a reflection piece. Here the author reflects on her foray into feminist pedagogy not by choice but serendipitously, and how the experience transformed her as a teacher. She shares the impact it has on her students and concludes that feminist pedagogy/pedagogies need to be recognised as a foundational tool for all fields of knowledge.

Meenakshi Gopinath, in her paper *Turning the Page, Countering Violence: A Challenge for Pedagogy* deals with the issue of violence against women and interrogates if the higher education landscape in India today is equipped to prepare the youth for countering it. She traces the

development of the discourse on violence against women in India in the past decade especially post the Nirbhaya Rape case of 2012 and the parallel developments in the composition of higher education in India. She makes a case for higher education institutes to ‘awaken young minds and touch deeper layers of consciousness’ to address violence of all kinds.

Children of the Stone: The Power of Music in a Hard Land by Sandy Tolan is a book reviewed by Diksha Poddar in this issue of *Peace Prints*. The book is a biographical account of Ramzi Hussein Aburedwan, a young stone-thrower who gradually moved on to become a violist and the founder of music schools in refugee camps in Ramallah.

Krishna Menon

Editor

References

Clemens, B. A. n.d. Retrieved January, 2020, from <https://www.gvsu.edu/cms4/asset/843249C9-B1E5-BD47-A25EDBC68363B726/from-safe-spaces-to-brave-spaces.pdf>

Hooks, b. 1994. *Teaching to Transgress*. New York: Routledge.

Ludlow, J. 2004. From Safe Space to Contested Space in the Feminist Classroom. *Transformations: The Journal of Inclusive Scholarship and Pedagogy*, pp. 40-56.

Priya, A. 2019, December. *For A Bahujan Economics- A Personal Statement*. Retrieved December, 2019, from The India Forum: <https://www.theindiaforum.in/article/bahujan-economics>

Rege, S. October 30-November 12, 2010. Education as “Trutiya Ratna”: Towards Phule-Ambekarite Feminist Pedagogical Practice. *Economic and Political Weekly* , pp. 88-98.

Sanchez-Casal, S., MacDonald A. A. 2002. Feminist Reflection on the Pedagogical Relevance of Identity. In Susan Sanchez-Casal, Amie A. MacDonald, eds., *Twenty First Century Feminist Classrooms- Pedagogies of identity and Difference* (pp. 1-28). New York: Palgrave Macmillan.