CONCEPT
The Journal of Contemporary Community Education Practice Theory

Vol. 14, No. 1, Spring 2023

Towards an inclusive, critical feminist pedagogy.

Camilla Fitzsimons, Associate Professor, Maynooth University, Ireland.

For as long as I have been involved in adult education, this has overlapped with a commitment to feminism; in fact, my first paid job in adult education (after ten years working as a nurse) was to set up a consciousness-raising women's group in North Dublin in the 1990s. This was one of hundreds of women's group that emerged across the Island of Ireland from the 1970s onwards. Bríd Connolly (2001, p, 1) described these as spaces for "women to see themselves as active participants in Irish society, women who might otherwise, through socialisation, perceive themselves as operating within the private sphere only". Women's participation in Irish society had been severely curtailed up to this time, in the main by a deeply sexist, church-state coalition that culturally and legally carved out a post-colonial 'Irishness' where the ideal for a woman was to be married, a homemaker and largely silent (Fitzsimons and Kennedy, 2021).

Although considerable change has been advanced, much of which was because of feminist struggle (Connolly, 2002), many women and girls continue to face discrimination in social, political, intellectual, cultural and economic attainment. The World Economic Forum (2022) have dubbed this the 'gender-gap' and have estimated that, at the current rate of change, it will take over 130 years for this gap to close. At its most extreme, this gap includes bans on women's education and limits on their freedom to work or travel, sometimes because of particular laws, other times because of coercion within intimate partner relationships. Millions live under restrictive laws that curb reproductive healthcare and gender-based violence is a regular occurrence across the globe. Meanwhile, in the workplace, women are routinely paid less for the work that they do even when they hold similar roles and have much the same qualifications. Even the climate crisis disproportionately effects women and girls who are at a greater risk of violence when they are forced to migrate (Stapleton,

http://concept.lib.ed.ac.uk/ Online ISSN 2042-6968

Polakowski, & Quinn, 2022). Girls are also more likely to be the first in a family to be withdrawn from education.

These are some of the reasons why I continue to work with groups where the specific ambition is to advance women's rights (see Fitzsimons & Connolly, 2015; or Fitzsimons 2022 for examples of this work). This is alongside my work as a fulltime academic in a department of adult, community, and further education; spaces where, regardless of the gender of those involved I work hard to illuminate the many social injustices that prevail in today's world. I'm not the first adult educator to take an active interest in critical education within social movements in fact there is a long tradition that dates back many years (e.g., see Lovett 1975; Kirkwood and Kirkwood 1989; Crowther et al. 2005, Newman 2006; English and Irving 2015). Mostly, this tradition encourages 'praxis' – a cyclical process of reflection and action that is directed at the structures we seek to transform.

The approach that underpins this critical pedagogy typically draws from values and methods attributed to the Brazilian educationalist Paulo Freire and further expanded by others including bell hooks, a prolific critical pedagogue and feminist writer in her own right. Freirean philosophy argues education is never neutral: it either maintains the capitalist status quo, or it seeks to transform it. Critical pedagogy challenges 'a banking approach to education' where seemingly passive learners ingest a dominant fixed knowledge that is fed to them by the 'expert' educator be they a schoolteacher, a university lecturer, union official or a workplace instructor. hooks describes this depository model as "based on the assumption that memorizing information and regurgitating it represented gaining knowledge that could be deposited, stored and used at a later date" (hooks, 1994, p. 5). Banking techniques aren't just tired teaching methods, it is an approach to education that provides fertile ground for instilling capitalist epistemology making it almost impossible for us to imagine living any other way.

In today's world, critical pedagogy is about disrupting an often deeply engrained 'neoliberal logic' where we internalise the principles of neoliberalism - a capitalist system of free-market economics that prioritises market wellbeing over citizen wellbeing and that divests control of public facilities like transport, education,

http://concept.lib.ed.ac.uk/ Online ISSN 2042-6968

housing and even welfare to private interests. Only then, we are told, can these essential services run smoothly and without the burden of bureaucracy and old-fashioned trade union agreements. The role cast for ordinary people is to work hard, so they can catch the slipstream of entrepreneurial success. Women are told to 'lean in' and push forward so that they too can share the spoils of a flourishing market and take their rightful place at the tables of power (Sandberg, 2013).

But neoliberalism exacerbates inequality rather than alleviating it (Allen & O'Boyle, 2013; Coffey, et al., 2020) and sustains patriarchy – something I interpret as a structure of male privilege and female subordination and not as something held by individual men that individual women can overcome. It's role in a capitalist system is clear – patriarchy essentialises gender-roles through strict binary divisions that naturalise men as courageous, competitive, and good leaders and women as nurturing, caring and empathetic. The principal function of these gender-norms isn't to oppress women for the sake of it, it is to uphold the heteronormative family which, despite the romantic narratives that often dominate, is mostly an economic unit. It is the space where we are socialised into believing, as Sarah Jaffe puts it, "the work of cleaning, cooking, of nursing wounds, of teaching children to walk and talk and read and reason, of soothing hurt feelings and smoothing over little cries comes naturally to women" (Jaffe, 2021, p. 23). Such is the dependence on this central role for females, the charity Oxfam estimate the unpaid care work carried out by women and girls adds up to at least $10.8 trillion each year, and that's when it's costed at minimum wage (Oxfam International, 2021). This same assumption, that women are naturally better carers, allows for high levels of exploitation in largely feminised industries.

Many women to work outside of the home and increasingly take up high status paid positions however their successes don't rest on their individual capacity to shrug off imposter syndrome as corporate feminism implies but on their relationship to capital and their proximity to 'whiteness' – something Ruby Haman (2021) describes as a shifting, political concept that refers to certain privileges enjoyed by people whose identities most resemble Western European heritage. These same privileges are denied to people whose exploitation and vulnerability to violence is justified because there are not white and who become mere 'cameos' in the narratives of white

http://concept.lib.ed.ac.uk/ Online ISSN 2042-6968

feminism (Zakaria, 2021). Structural racism (and classism) enables privileged women to lean on the labour of mostly migrant and working-class women so that they can progress within neoliberal capitalism (Arruzza, Bhattacharya & Fraser, 2019, p. 11), sometimes because of the direct care poorer women provide, other times because of how consumer goods are kept low (whilst profits stay high) through minimum wage structures that are barely above the poverty line and the international use of overseas labour in so-called 'developing' countries where people endure poor terms and conditions of employment and where the trade deals agreed with multinationals are mostly anti-union. These factors cut through the once coveted presumption of 'sisterhood' many feminists held dear; a myth bell hooks describes as, "a false and corrupt platform disguising and mystifying the true nature of women's varied and complex social reality" (hooks, 1984, p. 41).

Rejecting often unchallenged models of feminism that seek equality with male counterparts in an unchanged world means also setting aside the well-worn waves analogy as a white-centric, grand narrative that conjures a shared choreography of actions with the same political ambitions amidst an underlying message that women the world over must follow in the footsteps of their enlightened European and North American 'sisters' (Browne, 2014). The replacement should be a commitment to 'intersectional feminism', an expression first coined by Kimberly Crenshaw when describing how the lives of African American women do not exist on one singular axis of oppression (Crenshaw, 1991). Gender, race, ethnicity, class, citizenship (or lack thereof), perceived ability and cis and/or hetero identities work together to create structures of power. The absence of these privileges manifests as oppression not singular to one or the other characteristic but as something that feed-off and compound each other.

On the surface, 'critical (intersectional) feminism' and 'critical pedagogy' appear comfortable bedfellows however the relationship between the two has not been straightforward. In part this is because the 'accepted truths' of critical pedagogy were produced and legitimated amidst conditions where women were unproblematically depicted as subordinated. In the seminal text Pedagogy of the Oppressed (1970) Freire draws solely from a male interpretation of the world and only describes men's

http://concept.lib.ed.ac.uk/ Online ISSN 2042-6968

realities. Although some people excuse his earlier work as typical of the time and praise him for retrospectively acknowledging his gender-blindness, he continued to claim universality and to underplay the specificities of women's lives in later works (Jackson, 1997; Ryan, 2001, p. 67). One of his most notable critics is bell hooks herself who repeatedly highlights the sexism in his writing. "There has never been a moment when reading Freire that I have not remained aware of not only the sexism of the language" she writes, or "the way he … constructs a phallocentric paradigm of liberation — wherein freedom and the experience of patriarchal manhood are always linked as though they are one and the same" (hooks, 1992, p. 147). Despite the anguish this causes her, she asks us to 'take the threads of Freire's work' (hooks, 1994, p. 52) and create an expansive philosophy that retains its focus on praxis.

My experience is that this re-orientation of Freirean ideology hasn't fully materialised rather much scholarship continues to draw from a 'canon' that was created almost exclusively by men and where its interpretation in European contexts normalises white-western ways of being. Many academic texts are still authored by men in a way that rarely (if ever) acknowledges gender-based inequalities within academia where women pick up the slack of occupational housework and student care to the detriment of their own research-led, academic career making (Mirsa, Lundquist, Holmes, and Agiomavritis, 2011; Thamar, Finnborg, and Thorgerdur, 2017) and where women are more likely to work in precarious non-tenured posts (O'Keefe & Courtois, 2019). Beyond the level of individual departments, universities increasingly extol the virtues of equality, diversity, and inclusion, but continue to be shaped by white, masculine signifiers where women of colour in particular are valorised when they are nondisruptive employees and where sexist and racist micro-aggressions are a regular occurrence (Ahmed, 2017; Ahmed, 2021; Hamad, 2021).

Feminist pedagogy that are truly inclusive must also engage with advances within gender theory most notably through the ideas of Judith Butler who argues that if people continue to perform gender in accordance with dominant cultural contexts, our world will continue to conform to masculinist norms (Butler, 1990). Suggesting gender is a performance means problematising male-female binaries and seeing gender as something we create through repetitive behaviours, performed time and

http://concept.lib.ed.ac.uk/ Online ISSN 2042-6968

again, where, as Butler (1990, p. 3) puts it "the feminist subject turns out to be discursively constitutied by the very political system that is supposed to facilitate its emancipation". They continue:

It is not enough to inquire into how women might become more fully represented in language and politics. Feminist critique ought also to understand how the category of "woman," the subject of feminism, is produced and restrained by the very powers through which emancipation is sought. (Butler, 1990, pp. 3-4).

This 'troubling' of subjectivities challenges each of us to risk the uncertainty of our gender-identity and reflect on how we too perpetuate the social constructs we seek to dismantle.

This perspective automatically calls out what is sometimes described as 'gender critical discourse' that erronously problematises the lives of trans and non-binary people. I'm not talking about the transition some people need to get familiar with trans and non-binary people as they emerge from the margins, or the time it can take to learn about transgender politics. I mean the deliberate insertion of discourse within the vernacular of feminism that argues "trans ideology" has become embedded in our institutions and that policy and legal changes to accommodate trans and non-binary people are bad for so-called "real women" (Stock, 2021). Stock and other 'gender-critical' voices openly urge us to return to "the more traditional concept of womanhood" and "the traditional category of men" (Stock, 2022, pp. 24-25) thereby deepening gender-essentialism and upholding biological determination.

This stance belies the reality that there have always been people who don't fit neatly into binary identities (Fausto-Sterling, 2000, p. 111) and that there are records of medical interventions since the 1920s (Gill-Peterson, 2018, p. 59). Lola Olufemi (2021, p. 60) succinctly describes the limits to this trajectory when she writes, "men are not inherently bad and women are not inherently good but the idea that one cannot escape one's own biology traps us all in the oppressor/oppressed binary with no hope of abolishing it". Critical feminist pedagogy means listening to the experiences of trans and non-binary people and rejecting discourse that not only seeks to discredit their lives, but that endangers an already marginalised group who already experience

http://concept.lib.ed.ac.uk/ Online ISSN 2042-6968

widespread discrimination and stigma in healthcare, education, employment, and housing (United Nations, 2022).

This contribution began with my memories of work with women's groups in Ireland in the 1990s, a time when the role cast was much different than the Ireland I occupy today. But there is much work to be done if patriarchy is to be challenged, work that equally seeks an end to neoliberal capitalism. Critical pedagogy has an important role to play in ensuring this work meaningfully encourages transformative praxis and there are practical steps we can take to work towards this ambition.

Firstly, we must call out reductivist models of adult eduation that sideline the voices of those at the centre of a phenomeonon in favour of a fragmented, conceptual framing over dialogic engagement across contexts (Le Master, 2018). Personally, I cannot divest myself from my whiteness, cis-privilege or class privilege, but I can labour to create 'feminist bricks' (Ahmed, 2017, p. 14) that decolonise my reading and citation patterns. I can also seek out ways to give voice to those at the centre of a phenomenon who are often silenced without seeing this 'passing the mic' as an end in itself to the detriment of the urgent need to dismantle oppressive structures (Táíwò, 2022).

Secondly, we can avoid a growing performativity that surrounds intersectionalism that strips the concept of its Black feminist, anti-imperialist focus. This is when the word is used to create an illusion of change with little different behind the scenes (Nwanze, 2023) and when the catastrophic impacts of capitalism on the Global South are minimised (Mojab, 2015; Salem, 2018; Vergès, 2022). In a climate of increasing economic insecurity and dire predictions with respect to the health of our planet, we owe it to those most impacted by deteriorating global conditions to create alliances that are truly focused on change and not the performance of change so that together we might build effective alliances for change.

The author has been involved with the grassroots 'repeal movement' that fought for abortion rights in Ireland over a 35-year period and was a member of the Abortion Rights Campaign until 2022. She is currently the convener of 'academics for reproductive justice'.

http://concept.lib.ed.ac.uk/ Online ISSN 2042-6968

References

Ahmed, S. (2017). *Living a feminist life*. Durham and London: Duke University Press

Ahmed, S. (2021). *Complaint!* London: Duke University Press

Allen, K., & O'Boyle, B. (2013). *Austerity Ireland: the Failure of Irish Captialism*. New York : Pluto Press

Browne, V. (2014). *Feminism, Time, and Nonlinear History*. London: Palgrave Macmillan

Butler, J. (1990). *Gender Trouble*. New York: Routledge

Coffey, C., Espinoza Revello, P., Harvey, R., Lawson, M., Parvez Butt, A., Piaget, K., Thukkdan, J. (2020). *Time to Care, unpaid and underpaid care work and the global inequality crisis*. Oxford: Oxfam

Connolly, B. (2001). *Women's Community Education in Ireland*. Dublin: One Step Up. Retrieved from http://www.onestepup.ie/assets/files/pdf/womens_community_education_in_ireland.pdf

Connolly, L. (2002). *The Irish Women's Movement, from Revolution to Devolution*. London: Palgrave MacMillan

Crenshaw, K. (1991). Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence against Women of Color. *Stanford Law Review*, 43(6), 1241-1299

Crowther, J., Galloway, V., & Martin, I. (2005). *Popular Education: Engaging the Academy*. Leicester: NIACE. Leicester: NIACE

English, L. M., & Irving, C. J. (2015). Feminism in community: Adult Education for Transformation. Rotterdam: Sense publisher

European Union. (2020). *Precarious work from a gender and intersectionality perspective, and ways to combat it*. Brussels: Policy Department for Citizens' Rights and Constitutional Affairs Directorate-General for Internal Policies, UN. Retrieved November 28, 2022, from https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/STUD/2020/662491/IPOL_STU(2020)662491_EN.pdf

Fitzsimons, C., & Connolly, B. (2015). *Women's Reproduction and Rights*. http://mural.maynoothuniversity.ie/9425/

Fitzsimons, C., & Kennedy, S. (2021). Ireland's Dark History of Injustices Against Women. In C. Fitzsimons, *Repealed, Ireland's ongoing fight for reproductive rights*. (pp. 45-64). London: Pluto Press

Freire, P. (1972). *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. London and New York: Penguin

Hamad, R. (2021). *White Tears, Brown Scars: how white feminism betrays women of colour*. London: Orion Publishing Company

hooks, b. (1984). *Feminist theory from margins to center*. Boston: South End Press

http://concept.lib.ed.ac.uk/ Online ISSN 2042-6968

hooks, b. (1992). Bell Hooks speaking about Paulo Freire, the Man, his Work. In P. &. Leonard, *Paulo Freire: A critical encounter*. Taylor and Francis Group

hooks, b. (1994). *Teaching to Transgress*. New York: Routledge

Jackson, S. (1997). Crossing boarders and changing pedagogies from Giroux and Freire to feminist theories of education. *Gender and education*, 9(4), 457-468

Jaffe, S. (2021). *Work Won't Love you Back.* London: Hurst and Company

Kirkwood, C., & Kirkwood, G. (1989). *Adult Education; Freire in Scotland*. Open University Press

Le Master, B. (2018). (Un) Becoming Ally: Trans at the Intersections of Difference. *Women and Language*, 155-158

Lovett, T. (1975). *Adult education, community development and the working class*. Ward lock

Mirsa, J., Lundquist, J. H., Holmes, E., & Agiomavritis, S. (2011). The Ivory Ceiling of Service Work. *Academe*, 97(1), 22

Mojab, S. (2015). *Marxism and Feminism*. London: Zed Books Ltd

Newman, M. (2006). *Teaching Defiance: Stories and strategies for activist educators*. San Fransisco: Jossey Bass

Nwanze, L. (2023). Why we need to speak about Race in Further Education and Training. In C. Fitzsimons, & J. O'Neill, *Critical Perspectives on Further Education and Training*. London: Anthem Press

O'Keefe, T., & Courtois, A. (2019). 'Not One of the Family': Gender and Precarious Work in the Neoliberal university. *Gender Work Organisation*, 463–479. doi:/10.1111/gwao.12346

Olufemi, L. (2020). *Feminism Interrupted*. London: Pluto Press

Oxfam International. (2021). *Not all gaps are created equal: the true value of care work*. Retrieved April 18, 2022, from https://www.oxfam.org/en/not-all-gaps-are-created-equal-true-value-care-work

Ryan, A. B. (2001). *Feminist Ways of Knowing*. Leicester : NAIC publications.

Salem, S. (2018). Intersectionality and its discontents: Intersectionality as traveling theory. *European Journal of Women's Studies*, 25(4), 403-418

Sandberg, S. (2013). *Lean in: Women, Work, and the Will to Lead*. New York: Knopf Doubleday Publishing Group.

Stapleton, A., Polakowski, M., & Quinn, E. (2022). *The integration of non-EU migrant women in Ireland*. ESRI Research Series 148.

Stock, K. (2021). *Material Girls: Why Reality Matters for Feminism*. London: Fleet.

Stock, K. (2022). The Importance of Referring to Human Sex in *Language. Law & Contemporary Problems*, 85(1), 25-45.

Táíwò, O. O. (2022). *Elite Capture: How the Powerful Took Over Identity Politics and Everything Else*. London: Pluto Press.

http://concept.lib.ed.ac.uk/ Online ISSN 2042-6968

Thamar, M. H., Finnborg, S. S., & Thorgerdur, E. (2017). Academic career making and the double-edged role of academic housework. *Gender and Education*, 29(6), 764–780.

United Nations Human Rights. (2022, November 4). *Transgender*. Retrieved from United Nations Free and Equal: https://www.unfe.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/05/UNFE-Transgender.pdf

Vergès, F. (2022). *A Feminist Theory of Violence*. London: Pluto Press.

World Economic Forum. (2022). *Global Gender Gap Report 2022*. Geneva: World Economic Forum. Retrieved November 27, 2022, from https://www3.weforum.org/docs/WEF_GGGR_2022.pdf

Zakaria, R. (2021). *Against white feminism*. London: Penguin Books.

http://concept.lib.ed.ac.uk/ Online ISSN 2042-6968