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EDUCATION AND INTERNATIONAL DEVELOPMENT WORKING PAPER 46

Teaching for equality and the politics of feminist and decolonial education: From polarised debate to collaborations for change

Collaboration in Higher Education: A New Ecology of Practice

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8.7 Teaching for equality and the politics of feminist and decolonial education: From polarised debate to collaborations for change

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Reader Notes

- The course *Teaching for Equality?: The Politics of Feminist and Decolonial Education* was created through the collaboration of junior and senior colleagues of our faculty at the University of Amsterdam to move from polarised debate to collaboration for change.
- In collaborative courses we can de-centre dominant teaching practices and the curriculum. This creates space for turning critical theory, in this case decolonial and feminist pedagogy, into practice.
- Co-creation and collaboration can lead to discomfort, which requires always reverting to practices of care and responsibility within the whole classroom, by both students and teachers/facilitators.

Keywords:

student-teacher co-creation; education intervention; critical pedagogy; decolonial feminist pedagogy; transformative higher education

Introduction

> It is rare that any professor, no matter how eloquent a lecturer, can generate through his or her actions enough excitement to create an exciting classroom. Excitement is generated through collective effort (hooks, 1994, p. 8)

The course *Teaching for Equality?: The Politics of Feminist and Decolonial Education* was created through the collaboration of junior and senior colleagues of our faculty at the University of Amsterdam. The course encourages a collective effort for analysis and imagination on how to foster education equality in our university, and in society. It emerged from discussions among students and teachers about tensions between our educational practice, the feminist and decolonial theories of our courses, and the politico-institutional realities of the (neoliberal) university (Rizvi, 2017; Icaza & de Jong, 2018; Diversity Commission UvA, 2016). The course responds to experiences with educational inequalities by centering the following question: to what extent and how can students and teachers collaborate towards (educational) equality (for conceptualizations see Lynch & Baker, 2005; hooks, 1994)? We strive to answer this by putting feminist and decolonial theories into practice, regarding the context described above. In this chapter we reflect on our collaborative effort to teach and learn from and with students, teachers, and activists, focusing on the core assignment: the education intervention. In the conclusion, we reflect on the wider applicability of such an intervention exercise in the university classroom.

Educational intervention

The elective course is part of the social science *Gender & Sexuality Studies* minor and is open to Bachelor students of all disciplines. It consists of eleven two-hour interactive seminars across two months, facilitated by a teacher and guest lecturers. At the heart of the course is the notion that mitigating inequality in education is a collaborative effort. To put that into practice this course is co-created with students in a way that destabilises the norm of prescriptive teaching. Each session introduces a new theme, e.g., feminist and decolonial pedagogies and student activism (Freire, 1968; hooks, 1994, 2003; Merry, 2020; The University of Colour, 2018). The teacher-facilitators decide on the themes and literature in the course, but actively encourage students to provide input on the course content through class conversations and assignments. To cater to diverse learning strategies, students have the option to engage with academic and non-academic written, oral, and visual material. Next to a reflection assignment, where students critically reflect on their own and a peer's experience with education inequality, collaboration centres around the course's core assignment: the 'education intervention'. Following Giroux (2003) and Freire (1968), this course sought to move away from the hierarchical relationship between teacher and students so that both become participants in the classroom.

The 'education intervention' encourages students to take the lead in their educational process by envisioning, together with other classroom participants, how to foster equality in or through education. They are challenged to engage with the feminist and decolonial (ideal) perspectives in the course material, to co-create their own format for a class session - and then to deliver it. The intervention consists of three parts, which allow students to step-by-step build up their collaborative potential through group work and peer feedback:

1. *Student Discussion Leaders*: three discussion leaders per session co-create a classroom exercise of about 30 minutes relating to the session's theme, putting together creative ideas for course material and possible guest speakers. Participants and the teacher would often discuss their ideas for the session beforehand in a meeting and over email to create a coherent session.
2. *Education Intervention Presentation*: In the final three sessions of the course, groups of 2-3 students prepare an education intervention tackling (education) inequality to implement in the classroom. Students share preparation materials with the class (e.g. academic articles, podcasts, exercises). After that, the class gives dialogic feedback in light of the theory and the practical and institutional limitations.
3. *Intervention Reflection Essay*: Emerging from the class discussion and feedback, students individually write a 1500-word paper where they contextualise, reflect on, and redevelop their intervention addressing its limitations while taking the theory and the politico-institutional context into account.

Reflections on and for educational praxis

Transgressing institutional realities

'Teaching for Equality's' collaborative step-by-step set-up, transgresses (hooks, 1994) the classical "banking model of education" (Freire, 1968) dominant in educational institutions. The course was seeded by junior staff, some just transitioned from student to teacher, and co-created with senior colleagues, activists, and educators - who co-facilitate it with the students and their 'education interventions'. Through this collaborative process, the role of the teacher shifted from "teacher as information sharer" to "teacher as

intellectual" (Giroux, 2003), who engaged with and learned from the students' reflections and interventions.

Transgression may be experienced as disturbing by teachers and students (hooks, 1994; see also hooks, 2003; Freire, 1968) and whilst some students relished the room for creativity, something they are often not offered in other courses, others found it stressful and intimidating. Straying from traditional 'academic' norms and forms can make 'success' uncertain. For example, the student with dyslexia who argued for the inclusion of non-written materials in courses to facilitate the learning experience of students with dyslexia, went on to present their assignment in the more traditional academic, written format, despite encouragement by the teacher to present their ideas in an alternative format.

The course itself, while enriching and exciting, was challenging in diverse ways for teachers. In our case, it required additional care and engagement outside class hours, adding to emotional labour and work pressure. Further, grading students' work felt increasingly contradictory to the course's aim. Yet, the course provided room to turn the challenges into new possibilities. One group of students, critiquing the hierarchical student-teacher relationship in grading, presented a peer-to-peer grading form focusing on progress and process that they tested with the class. The exercise led to a thoughtful discussion about grading. Although the class agreed that grades lead to stress and inequality in the classroom (many shared personal experiences around this issue), some wondered how peer-to-peer grading, or no grading, would affect participation and motivation. For some, it felt freeing, but others did not feel as incentivised to participate without the extrinsic motivation of receiving grades. This intervention group subsequently integrated the class's feedback on

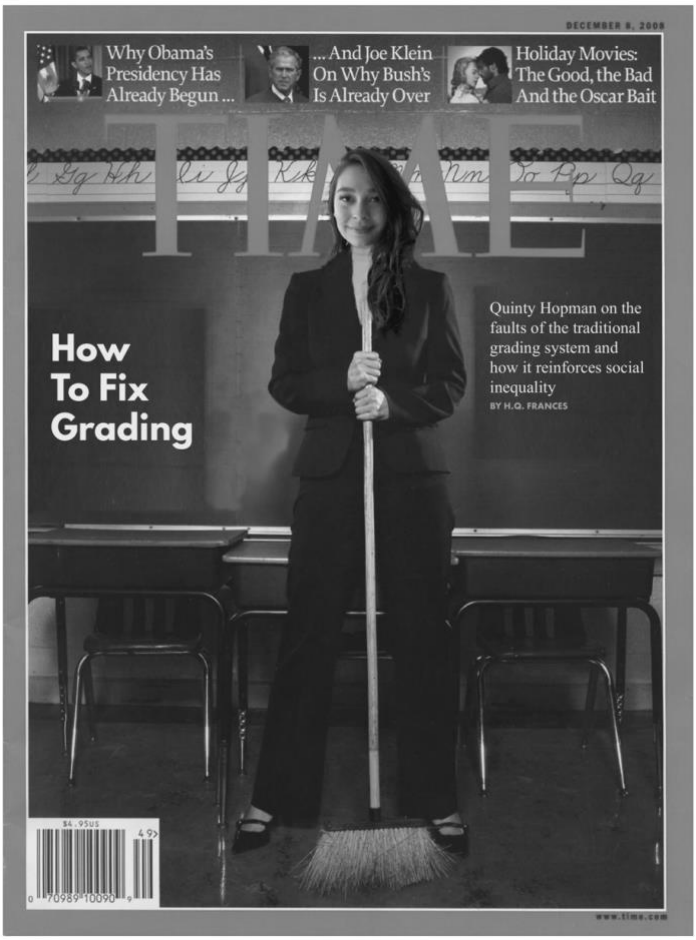

Figure 1: Excerpt of Quinty Hopman's Reflection Essay

the complexity of assessment via a podcast (Mala Iyer) and a magazine spread (Quinty Hopman, see Figure 1).

In the end, the class discussion led them to propose letting students themselves decide on how and whether to be graded on assignments. Even though it was not possible to change the actual way in which students were graded in the course, this collaborative intervention created a safe and open space wherein both students and teachers were able to dialogue about possible alternatives. In the process, teachers became more aware of diverse drivers of motivation and participation. Teachers were also able to express their frustrations towards the institutional limitations, which also made students more mindful of the teacher's agency.

Political tensions and care

The course has revealed political tensions that we encounter in and around university. Working through these tensions requires collaborative care work, which should be not only the responsibility of the teacher but shared by all participants (Mehta, 2019; hooks, 1994; Berila, 2016). In our course we sought to create a space for collective engagement with inherently political critical theories of decolonial and feminist pedagogy; valuing personal experience as knowledge (hooks, 1994). At the same time, we consciously chose to discuss politico-institutional realities and (un)conscious biases which might interfere with the ideals of the abovementioned theories, thereby purposefully disturbing the notion of the classroom as a "safe space" (Ludlow, 2004).

The contrast between the possibilities within our classroom and the hierarchical structures 'outside', in the institution, could be disheartening to students. However, by envisioning collaborative interventions, we can meet those challenges with excitement, hope, and care for each other (hooks, 2003, referring to Freire). During the discussion of an education intervention by students Lynne Kavishe, Rozan Snoek, and colleague, the

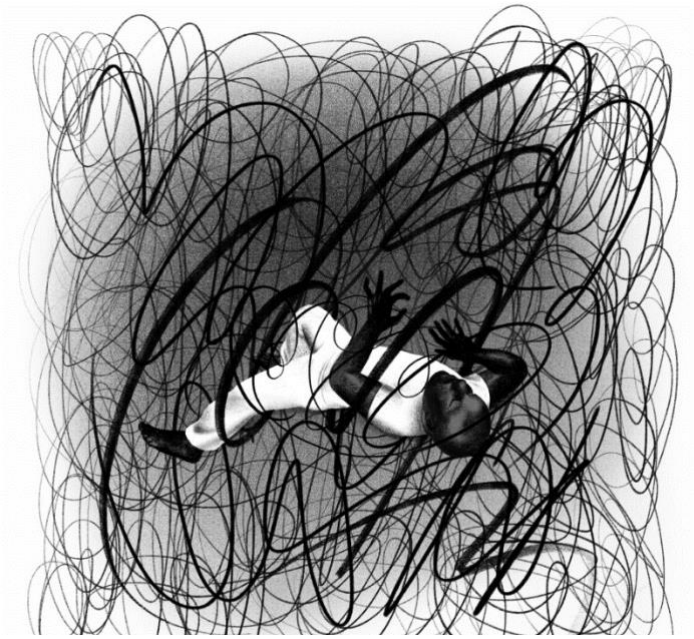

Figure 2: Artwork by Angie Wang used by Lynne Kavishe, Rozan Snoek and colleague in their education intervention presentation

classroom carefully and collaboratively formulated ways to include both discomfort and excitement in addressing political tensions. These students conducted an exercise, wherein artworks (see Figure 2) served as the starting point to discuss emotions around racism and mental health in response to 'colourblind' approaches in the Dutch education system (Sijpenhof, 2020; Herve, 2018). Afterward, the class offered sensitive feedback for the intervention's further development. They pointed to the risk of white students participating in the exercise consuming the traumas of students of marginalised positionalities (Mehta, 2019). They suggested including artworks expressing joy to do full justice to lived experiences. In their reflection essays, the creators took this feedback into account and suggested the inclusion of new images for the intervention, but also reflected on the possibility of explicitly discussing the consumption of trauma in their intervention. The whole class collaborated to centre experience knowledge and emotions, thereby creating a "contested space" (Ludlow, 2004) in which tensions can be met with care.

Conclusion

To what extent and how then can students and teachers collaborate towards (educational) equality in a course like the one we introduced in this chapter? The education intervention described in the three steps above offers students and teachers a sense of agency and shared responsibility - for action (Freire, 1968). The format encourages collaborative self-reflection, social scientific analysis of complex inequalities, and imagination inspired by critical theory to conceive creative interventions to tackle them. Most students actively tried to consider the real politico-institutional settings in which their intervention would take place and its accompanying limits. One could take the interventions one step further by asking students to try them outside the 'bubble' of the classroom. This may further support participants to implement their idea(l)s in their future (educational) careers, putting visions into practice.

We created the course to critically analyse how our education is embedded in (discourses of) inequalities, but also to collaborate as teachers and students and imagine how to work towards equality to bring about real educational change. We believe that similar educational inequalities are faced in many institutions across the world and that this format can be useful in many different educational contexts. One can also decouple the format from the topic of education and use it to bring critical theory into practice in other social science courses. Instead of an 'educational intervention' students could come up with an NGO or governmental intervention, being asked to take theoretical principles and common ideal(s) (such as equality) into account. Through critical peer and self-reflection, we learn that such interventions are always 'work in progress', requiring resources of time, energy and care, but when students and teachers collaborate, they generate excitement.

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