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Bridging in feminist pedagogy through student-led fieldtrips: A report from the Netherlands¹

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Introduction

In this paper we reflect on our use of fieldtrips that were organized by students in teaching feminist geography in the Netherlands. We contextualize our evaluation both with an analysis of the position of feminist perspectives in Dutch geography and also with a discussion of our joint attempts to offer a course on feminist geographies in the Netherlands. Indeed, despite what some outsiders might expect of a country known as progressive and liberal,² it has proven extremely difficult to develop feminist approaches in Dutch geographies and to create and sustain such courses on feminist geographies at Dutch Universities. Geography in the Netherlands has a stronger empirical and policy focus and is, in general, less ‘abstract’ and ‘critical’ than geography particularly in the UK. In addition, popular perceptions of gender issues and emancipation in the Netherlands suggest that the emancipation question has been largely solved. Students considering taking the Gender, Culture and Space course as part of the bachelor curriculum in geography then are likely to have a more quantitative than qualitative, and a more applied than theoretical orientation. At the same time, they will not have been much confronted with issues of exclusion and inequality on the basis of gender, unless they are from an ethnic minority background.

¹ A full length version of this paper appears as “Teaching feminist geographies in the Netherlands: learning from student-led fieldtrips”, *Documents d’Analisis Geografica*.

² At least until recently. See Ian Buruma, *Murder in Amsterdam; The death of Theo van Gogh and the limits of tolerance* (New York: Penguin Press, 2006) for the discussion of the two recent political murders (Fortuijn in 2002, Van Gogh in 2004) and the changing political debate about multiculturalism and tolerance.

Feminist geography in the Netherlands

Feminist geography in the Netherlands currently seems to lag behind the United Kingdom and the United States in terms of researching gender issues and including gender perspectives in teaching geography. In both the UK and the US, feminist geography has moved from making women visible (e.g. 'On not excluding the other half')³ to a critical engagement with underlying political structures and a strong theoretical focus. Dutch Geography does embrace the diversity of human experience but is still somewhat in denial in relation to the significance of feminist thinking (and teaching) in Geography. This has not always been the case. As Linda Peake has demonstrated in an overview of feminist geography teaching in 1989, Dutch geography was one of the forerunners. The University of Amsterdam introduced an elective course 'Geographical Women's Studies' as early as 1983, followed by the departments of geography at the Universities of Utrecht and Nijmegen. However, feminist geography teaching was initiated by feminist students and by staff with part-time and/or temporary positions and most initiatives disappeared after a few years. The group of feminist geographers at the University of Amsterdam initiated an international network for gender studies in geography⁴ as part of the ERASMUS programme of the European Union. Between 1990 and 1998 this network organised a one week intensive course 'Geography and Gender' each year. The network was a joint program of 6 European universities, characterized by varied and innovative teaching methods in a multicultural setting.⁵ The program ran successfully for several years, but, after its eighth year, capitulated to the lack of financial support. In 2004, a new attempt at reviving gender studies in geography was initiated at the University of Groningen where a course was organized as a result of the creation of a temporary Chair in Gender and Geography: Gender, Culture and Space.⁶ In spite of positive evaluations by students and a considerable number of student registrations for the course to begin with, in its second year it was already

³ Janice Monk and Susan Hanson, "On not excluding half of the human in human geography," *Professional Geographer* 34 (1982): 11-23.

⁴ Joos Droogleever Fortuijn, "Internationalising Learning and Teaching: a European experience," *Journal of Geography in Higher Education* 26/3 (2002): 263-273.

⁵ Maria Dolores Garcia-Ramon and Janice Monk, "Infrequent flying: international dialogue in geography in higher education," *Journal of Geography in Higher Education* 21 (1997): 141-145.

⁶ Bettina van Hoven, "'Can you write a memo on why we have to do gender, please?' An experiential account of teaching gender geography in the Netherlands," *Journal of Geography in Higher Education* (forthcoming).

struggling, retaining only five Master students. In 2006, therefore, the last gender course in geography in the Netherlands was on the verge of disappearing. The transformation in feminist geography in the Netherlands from forerunner to lagger-behind can be understood in relation to the specific characteristics of Dutch academic geography on the one hand and the Dutch policy context on the other. First, Musterd & De Pater⁷ characterised human geography in the Netherlands as an applied and practical science, historically strongly imprinted by spatial planning and regional-economic policy rather than an interest in socio-cultural processes. Overall, Musterd and de Pater characterise Dutch geography as “wary of the post-modern slant” and “cling[ing] to the practical, social relevance of their discipline”.⁸ Second, gender issues are not very prominent in social and political debates and the overall discourse maintains that the emancipation question has been more or less solved. Moves for emancipation are primarily targeted at ethnic minority women and women in developing countries: at ‘other’ women. As a result, students who are considering taking elective courses are not very inclined to elect a course on gender and geography. The lack of attention given to emancipation and gender issues in the public debate and the lack of personal experiences of gender discrimination further discourage participation in a gender course. It is in this context that lecturers of the Faculty of Spatial Sciences in Groningen and the Department of Geography, Planning and International Development Studies of the University of Amsterdam took the initiative to organize a feminist geography course as a joint programme. It is important to emphasise that this paper is the co-production of three lecturers and one student on this course. The paper thus responds to calls to include student voices in published research as a “logical extension of feminist pedagogical practices”.⁹

⁷ Sako Musterd and Ben de Pater, “Eclectic and pragmatic: the colours of Dutch social and cultural geography,” *Social & Cultural Geography* 4/4 (2003): 549-563.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 555.

⁹ Kelly Coate Bignell, “Building feminist praxis out of feminist pedagogy: the importance of students’ perspectives,” *Women’s Studies International Forum* 19/3 (1996): 316.

Feminist pedagogy and the entrepreneurial model of education

Feminist pedagogy is understood to be concerned with gaining an insight into gender relations and making these visible.¹⁰ There is an explicit mission to stimulate social change in society at large but also in the classroom. Therefore, an important aspect of feminist pedagogy is to actively involve students, and to make use of experiences grounded in their own life-worlds in the teaching programme as such experiences are perceived as a learning resource for all. Using students' own experiences as learning resources highlights the role of positionality in producing knowledge and helps illustrate ways in which the personal is political. By taking up individual students' experiences and, in turn, linking these to the literature, it is possible to identify underlying mechanisms which may affect gender-differentiated experiences in different places (around the world) in similar ways. Last but not least, using personal experiences is beneficial in attempting to raise consciousness and ultimately "transform [students] from passive recipients of knowledge to active knowers who see themselves as agents of social change".¹¹ Several authors have pointed at difficulties in achieving this aim of empowerment and mobilisation. Large classes make it challenging to involve students actively and invite them to discuss their own experiences. Even in small classes, students may resist speaking freely, for example, due to underlying expectations that their lecturers are the experts or due to the fact that they will receive a mark for their course which they do not wish to jeopardize by being confrontational.

In the discussion of barriers to implementing feminist pedagogy, the masculine model of teaching and learning has been much criticised. In this model, students are judged based on the degree to which they understand and reproduce the lecturer's (or course handbook's) definition of truth. Although independent thinking is encouraged, it is encouraged once the "official interpretation" is thoroughly understood.¹² This masculine model is appropriate in the context of developments which force higher education "into the entrepreneurial spirit of the market". Lambert and Parker¹³ note that this "banking

¹⁰ Michelle Webber, "Transgressive pedagogies? Exploring the difficult realities of enacting feminist pedagogies in undergraduate classrooms in a Canadian university," *Studies in Higher Education* 31/4 (2006): 453-467.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 455.

¹² Jen Marchbank, Gayle Letherby, Kay Lander, Angela Walker and Andrea Wild. "Empowering and enabling or patronizing and pressuring? Opening dialogues between staff and students," *Gender and Education* 15/1 (2003): 79.

¹³ Cath Lambert and Andrew Parker, "Imagination, hope and the positive face of feminism: pro/feminist pedagogy in 'post' feminist times?" *Studies in Higher Education* 31/4 (2006): 471.

concept of education” reduces teaching and learning “to the act of teachers depositing knowledge *in* or *upon* students for them to store and reproduce, leaving no opportunity for dialogue, critical exploration, reflexivity and praxis.” Ultimately, they claim, students are reduced to consumers and teachers to providers of a service (see also Parker and Jary¹⁴ on the ‘McUniversity’). The Gender, Culture and Space course therefore aims to combine feminist geography as content with feminist pedagogy that focuses on participatory learning and teaching and on relating personal experiences to theoretical knowledge.

Course approach and organisation

The course was a joint program of the University of Groningen and the University of Amsterdam and was taught partly in Groningen and partly in Amsterdam, by lecturers of these universities and guest lecturers from abroad. Specifically, the course aimed to explore ways in which gender roles, gender relations and gender identities are defined differently in different societies and how women and men are put in different positions in different societies. In addition to a general introduction to gender in geography, the course included cases based on ongoing research at both universities.

Considering the travel requirements for the students (the train ride between Amsterdam and Groningen takes approximately 2 hours and a half) the course was organized over four full days, rather than as two hours per session per week. Two days were spent in Groningen and two days in Amsterdam so that students had to travel only twice. This facilitated a variety of teaching methods including lectures; discussion initiated by viewing a documentary, and by analyzing gender aspects of army websites and body counts websites and war pictures awarded in the World Press Photo contest; out-of-classroom observation exercises, and the student-led fieldtrips. The group of students was diverse being made up of third-year bachelor students and master students, geography students and students from other disciplines (psychology, heritage studies, anthropology, planning), and Dutch students and exchange students from other countries in Europe and the US. This diversity provided the opportunity to include issues of cultural, national and academic diversity in the discussions.

¹⁴ Martin Parker and David Jary, “The McUniversity: Organization, Management and Academic Subjectivity,” *Organization* 2/2 (1995): 319-338.

Assignments

Students received several assignments throughout the course ranging from an ungraded ‘ice-breaker’ assignment and reading assignments to a graded essay and take-home exam. Master students were required to conduct a project on gender-differentiated experiences in the workplace ‘university’ as well. In addition to developing an understanding of relations between gender, space and society and being able to explain concepts addressed during the course, our aim was to involve the students’ personal life-worlds and experiences. The ungraded assignments gave opportunities for this. For example, students were asked to share responses to questions regarding their personal and academic background, as seen through a ‘gender lens.’ In addition, every meeting involved a literature assignment that allowed students to use their own experiences in making sense of the literature. These assignments offered students an entry point for sharing some of their own experiences and left it up to the student whether this would be an example/ observation or an opinion/ disagreement. The fact that the assignments did not receive a mark contributed perhaps towards creating a space for personal opinions. A third type of ungraded assignment was the ‘student-led fieldtrip’. In the remainder of this article we focus on the content and evaluation of these fieldtrips.

Student-led fieldtrips¹⁵

For this assignment, students were asked to develop a fieldtrip in their university town (Amsterdam or Groningen) taking gendered aspects of the city into account. They were asked to pay special attention to the intersection of gender with other characteristics that impact on processes of inclusion and exclusion such as age, sexuality, race and ethnicity, ability, social class etc. The students formed three groups: one in Amsterdam and two in Groningen (of which one was comprised of third-year bachelor students and one of master students). The students had a considerable amount of freedom in shaping the fieldtrips according to their own thoughts and wishes: they could determine the route, themes and way of discussing these themes as long as they were related to gender and as long as the total length of the fieldtrip did not exceed one hour. This format allowed the students to include their own experiences and thoughts related to gender.

¹⁵ Wike wrote this section discussing and reflecting on the student-led fieldtrips. She did this with the help of other course participants who communicated their experiences to Wike by email.

The way in which the students developed their fieldtrips shows that the format of the assignment did indeed encourage the students to include their own experiences and preferences. The students indicated that they started to develop their fieldtrips by brainstorming about which specific neighbourhood to pick and about the gendered spaces located in this specific neighbourhood. Students often came up with locations which represented a gendered space to them, because they were personally familiar with the location. John, for example, explains:

The pool centre is a place I often visit myself. Therefore I know from my own experiences that more men than women visit the place (John, male, Groningen).

^{16, 17}

The students felt that leisure locations in general are often gendered because the public using the location is primarily male or female. The quote above about the pool centre highlights this experience. Interestingly, the representation of a location in the media also led to its inclusion in the route, even though students did not have personal experiences of the location. This was the case, for example, for the selection of the neighbourhood in which the Amsterdam fieldtrip took place, i.e. the Bijlmer (in Amsterdam Southeast). Anne notes:

We came up with the Bijlmer, because of its reputation as a dangerous, woman-unfriendly Area (Anne, female, Amsterdam).

The Bijlmer, a high rise extension neighbourhood constructed in the 1970s, has a negative reputation that reaches beyond the city, as is illustrated by the national press and television.¹⁸ The neighbourhood is well known because a plane crashed into the middle of it in October 1992. Because of the extensive media attention continuing long after the plane crash, even students from Groningen would have some expectations about the place. This distinguished the fieldtrip in Amsterdam from the fieldtrips in Groningen; the students from Groningen taking part in the fieldtrip to the Bijlmer had some expectations beforehand, while the students from Amsterdam probably did not have such expectations in relation to Groningen.

¹⁶ The names used are fictional.

¹⁷ Students were asked to answer some open questions about the student led fieldtrips by email. Quotes found in this section originate from replies to this email.

¹⁸ Paulle, 2005.

In addition to personal familiarity and media representation, students selected locations because of the public interest they believed particular places to serve, for example the public library or the market place. Students experienced these locations as gendered, because the public and/or the people offering the service (at certain times of the day and at certain days of the week) were primarily male or female. A format the students used to discuss this male/female bias were small, 'on the spot' investigations of how many men and women were seen at the particular location performing a certain activity. By asking these questions, the environment was directly part of the topic under study. The focus on the visibility of certain characteristics, like gender, shows that the students mainly think about the actual, physical occurrence of men and women at specific locations when they think about 'gendered spaces' in their own environment. Students also focused on the 'physical', or embodied aspects when discussing the intersection of gender with other characteristics. For example, during the fieldtrip in Amsterdam, students pointed to the ethnic composition of inhabitants and visitors in certain space. This could be observed through the presence of people on the streets but also 'special purposes' buildings such as cultural institutions or the Hindu primary school *Shri Laksmi* we stopped by.

An explanation for the focus by students on visible (gender) biases in the use of places, is that these immediately visible issues distinguish fieldtrips from the discussions inside the classroom. The situation of physically being there, added elements to the analysis: the participants were able to smell, hear and see the topic they were discussing. For example, by visiting the Bijlmer in Amsterdam the participants could see and feel/ sense for themselves what the environment was like. Therefore, they could draw conclusions from a broader spectrum of observations than they would if the same discussion had taken place in the classroom. The experiential/ 'sensorial' dimension was an important input in the discussion whilst, at the same time, the 'rational' dimension remained significant since theories learned in class could directly be applied to the environment.

More general discussions about gender emerged when the students took the history of places into account, for example at the public library in Groningen. The public library is located in the city centre. However, until 1990 the building used to be occupied first by squatters, then a women's café and a women's library. After 1990 the building was transformed into the pu-

blic library and the women's café and library were moved to another location, subsidized by the municipality. Recently, the financial support from the municipality stopped because the municipality believed that the emancipation question has been solved. Without financial support, the women's library had to close. In re-telling this story, the students initiated a discussion about whether or not the emancipation question has really been solved and whether facilities such as a women's library are still needed in today's society.

More recent social developments were also mentioned in the discussions, for example the phenomenon of the 'Ladies Night'. The term 'Ladies Night' is used to promote certain activities by companies in the Netherlands. It is used both for activities where only women are allowed to participate and for activities where women for example enter free while men have to pay. Discussion about this phenomenon came up while visiting the cinema and the casino during the student-led fieldtrip in Groningen.

A kind of widely promoted gender discrimination, started at the Holland Casino in the Netherlands [...] and is now also used at the cinema's, in disco's and even soccer-clubs, and there are probably more companies willing to apply it: the Ladies Night (John, male, Groningen).

Not everybody agreed to this view. Whilst some students regarded the Ladies Night as a form of gender discrimination, others regarded it as a clever marketing trick: once you attract the girls to come to your place, the boys will follow. In the discussion the Ladies Night came to symbolise broader processes in society, such as sexualization and commercialization and the way gender plays a role in these processes. As had already been the case during the fieldtrip in the department store, students had the feeling that gender is used as a marketing strategy. After the fieldtrip to the department store and the three student-led fieldtrips, the students came to the conclusion that gender plays a role in many domains of the society.

The combination of observations, personal experiences and abstract thinking within both types of fieldtrips, enabled the students to link their own experiences to more abstract processes, like migration and globalization and place these in a gender perspective. The two types of fieldtrips were complementary to each other. The first fieldtrip showed the students how they can analyze their immediate environment from a gender perspective. Because

se of the detailed questions to be answered during this fieldtrip, the students realized how gender can be analyzed in relation to the (physical) environment in which 'it occurs'. This knowledge could be used again during the student-led fieldtrips that they had to develop themselves. The student-led fieldtrip added to the experience of the first fieldtrip, for while developing the fieldtrip themselves students were encouraged to think about how gender (and other differentiating characteristics) played a role in their own city. This model also somewhat removed the pressure on them to give 'the right' answers. When it is a question of a person's own environment and interpretation, there simply is no "wrong answer", and this allowed for more free association and thinking, as well as discussion. On the other hand, because there was no central guidance in developing the student-led fieldtrips, the fieldtrips were often less theory driven and therefore lacked some depth. This was clear in the discussions which often failed to reach a higher level than the (simple) discussion of visible aspects. More time for discussion between the students and among students and staff during and after the fieldtrips would help to overcome this problem.

Conclusion

Reflecting on the student-led fieldtrips in the context of feminist pedagogy, as outlined above, we feel that the fieldtrips have been a successful means of bringing in a more explicit (when compared with previous years) feminist pedagogy into our own gender geography teachings. To reiterate, a key aim of feminist pedagogy, as mentioned above, is to actively involve students in the teaching programme and explicitly draw on their own lived experiences as a learning resource for all. The role of positionality in producing knowledge can be highlighted in ways easily understandable for students. Drawing on students' own experiences also helps illustrate ways in which the personal is political. Last but not least, establishing links between the experiences of individual students and the literature, can help identify underlying mechanisms which may affect gender-differentiated experiences in different places (around the world) in similar ways.

From the student views illustrated above, it is evident that the fieldtrip (more so than other assignments) facilitated students' input into the course using their own everyday experiences and interests. In addition, they were able to contextualize these experiences, at least to some degree, in relation to theo-

ries explored in the classroom and in the course handbook. Having said that, it must be noted also that the way in which the course was organized prevented students and lecturers from thoroughly discussing and reflecting on their experiences after the fieldtrip due to lack of time. Nonetheless, the student views show that, in spite of their previous perceptions of gender issues as ‘belonging’ to minority women, students experienced that gender does play an important role in their everyday lives in particular and in Dutch society in general. Therefore, we might conclude that student-led fieldtrips may support raising consciousness and help “transform [students] from passive recipients of knowledge to active knowers who see themselves as agents of social change.”¹⁹

Whilst the use of student-led fieldtrips as a way of engaging students (and their everyday experiences) is relatively easy to organize, if time can be made available for such an exercise, we would emphasize that it can only be seen as a beginning in the attempt to engage with feminist pedagogy. Indeed, in our case, the course overall remained largely influenced by what the lecturers considered to be important, which was determined by their research – and perhaps personal backgrounds. In addition, the course still complied with standard assessment methods through essay writing and an exam at the end of the course. This may be an area for experimentation in the next academic year whereby students may, for example, have a greater influence on the themes central to the course and/ or help shape the course assessments.

¹⁹ Webber, 455.

Appendix 1: The Course programme

Meeting	Time	Teacher	Theme	Teaching method
1	11-13	Joos Droogleeve- Fortuijn and Virginie Mamadouh	Introduction	Lecture
AMS				
1	13-15	Bettina van Hoven	Introduction	Lecture
GRO				
2	11-17	Joos Droogleeve- Fortuijn	Gender and paid and unpaid work	Lecture
AMS		Joos Droogleeve- Fortuijn	Gender, space and everyday life	Fieldwork
		Tovi Fenster (<i>Tel Aviv University</i>)		Lecture
3	11-17	Linda McDowell (<i>Oxford University</i>)	Masculinities	Lecture
GRO		Bettina van Hoven	Masculinities	Reading seminar Video-based seminar
		Bettina van Hoven	Masculinities	
4	11-17	Katie Willis (<i>University of London, Royal Holloway</i>)	Gender and skilled international migration	Lecture
GRO			Gender and the city	Lecture
		<i>Janke Klok</i> (University of Groningen, Faculty of Arts) Students Groningen	Student-led fieldtrip	Fieldtrip
5	11-17	Virginie Mamadouh	Gender and the geography of war	Lecture
AMS		Ana Miškovska Kajevska (ASSR, University of Amsterdam)	Nationalism and feminism in the former Yugoslavia	Lecture
		Virginie Mamadouh Students Amsterdam	Gender and the geography of war Student-led fieldtrip	Workshop Fieldtrip

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