

(Un)learning with Absence: A Dialogue with Critical Feminist Educators in Scandinavia

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Abstract

Feminist pedagogy in higher education is concerned with making visible the sites of women, trans, non binary and queer peoples' oppression and marginalization in the classroom. Yet this consciousness raising is not met with a pre-defined set of pedagogical tools. Instead, educators often find themselves having to work with absence. Committing to a pedagogy that teaches and works with what is absent raises a whole set of dilemmas and questions for gender studies educators. In this annotated dialogue, a group of five early career researchers and teaching-research faculty come together to discuss the implications of this commitment. We discuss collectively which conversations and issues we see as not well represented in teaching materials to our pedagogical advantage. An absence framework presents a fascinating opportunity to interrupt the very notion of 'learning' and what it entails. As we are all interested in questions of teaching and unlearning as a kind of transformative practice, we also ask how we can make visible other perspectives and genuinely integrate them without relying on a 'one-time' performance model that tokenizes marginalized identities.

Keywords

feminist pedagogy, absence, critical consciousness, dialogue

Introduction

We are a group of gender studies educators located in Norway, a country that scores among the highest in international ratings of gender equality. These statistics, as well as a national image deeply invested in egalitarianism and Nordic exceptionalism (Diallo, 2023), create a context where educators have to engage pedagogical strategies to counter broader societal discourse that presents Norway as an inherently good, peace-promoting nation whose history lies outside of European imperialism (Gullestad, 2006; Keskinen et al., 2012). Within this context, we all work to create classrooms where we can scratch below the surface and make visible the longstanding as well as emergent arenas where inequality, marginalization, discrimination, and violence occur. A common interest that unites this group is the desire to discuss how we deal with teaching and learning processes that make space for marginalized perspectives and standpoints that are either absent or silenced within normative accounts.

The teaching approaches that we discuss in the following dialogue are the result of thinking with critical and feminist pedagogy frameworks. To frame our dialogue, we draw from a broad definition of feminist pedagogy, which refers to teaching and learning grounded in or guided by feminist theory and addresses power dynamics inherent in the traditional university classroom (see, for example, Branlat et al., 2023; Diallo & Miskow Friborg, 2021; hooks, 1994; Jong et al., 2017). A feminist focus in the classroom centers the interconnectedness of the self, the curriculum and the learning community. Further, emphasising broader social change has been important to its further development (Shrewsbury, 1987). bell hooks (1994), who has written extensively about feminist pedagogy, emphasizes the classroom as a community where knowledge is produced in a collective, bottom-up endeavor that involves both students and educators in dialogue rather than a one-way flow to students from a pre-established disciplinary canon. This approach also holds an openness to the situated and particular perspectives of the classroom-participant, allowing socio-cultural contexts and specificities to play an active part in the classroom-setting (hooks, 2010).

An important goal for many feminist educators is to make visible marginalized perspectives and identities and to raise awareness concerning the multiple and complicated positions from which we gain our knowledge of the world. The further inspiration for our dialogue comes from a recently published special issue of the journal *Feminist Pedagogy* that aimed to explore feminist educators' experiences of teaching in what is referred to as the 'absence lens' (Wenzel, 2023, p. 1). An absence lens in gender studies education would ask educators to tune in to marginalized perspectives missing from text, films, and other narratives: "These [missing] viewpoints and identities may then become misrepresented, excluded from the classroom, or ignored by the instructor. In response to this absence, educators may "utilize an absence lens to focus on what is not present in materials rather than what is" (Wenzel, 2023, p. 1).

We see the absence lens as particularly useful in teaching because it calls our attention to the lack of a pre-defined set of pedagogical tools. Instead, educators often find themselves having to improvise and fill in important gaps in teaching materials. Committing to a pedagogy that teaches and works with *what is absent* raises a whole set of dilemmas and questions for gender studies educators. In this annotated dialogue, a group of five early career researchers and teaching-research faculty come together from different positions in academia and activism to discuss the implications of this commitment. We discuss collectively which conversations and issues we see as under-represented in teaching materials to our pedagogical advantage. An absence framework presents a fascinating opportunity to interrupt the very notion of 'learning' and what it entails. As we are all interested in questions of teaching and unlearning as a kind

of transformative practice, we also ask how we can make visible other perspectives and genuinely integrate them without relying on a 'one-time' performance model that tokenizes marginalized identities.

Dialogue

Jennifer:

In higher education, learning is primarily seen as something additive or gained through a series of pedagogical encounters – a course, study abroad, a laboratory experiment, or a seminar. Students are supposed to emerge from these experiences with *more* knowledge or skills if such learning activities are to be counted as a success. The absence framework is compelling because it allows us to focus on what is not necessarily there in the beginning. What is not often discussed in pedagogy is the necessity of *unlearning* as a first step toward any kind of transformative process. Unlearning is letting go of our prior assumptions, ways of thinking, and the 'self' that we were before. This process is why deep, transformative learning is difficult; it involves both ontological and epistemological shifts in learners. The threshold concept framework describes this nicely. The introductory course on women's, feminist, gender, and sexuality studies I teach is, first and foremost, about unlearning. Unlearning socialization processes through careful examination, unlearning patterns of thinking that reproduce dominant ideologies, unlearning that gender is biologically grounded, and unlearning that feminism has no place in the academy—these are a few key opportunities for unlearning to happen.

france:

I enjoyed preparing for our conversation today. My experience lecturing within gender studies is almost exclusively as a guest lecturer, so I only get that one interaction with the class. I really want to make it count because the rest of the course usually deals primarily, but not exclusively, with cis-genderism, particularly with cis-gender women. Because the lecturers usually do not tend to have very much background in trans studies, it is very easy to fall into a pattern of conflating gender with *cisgender*. This conflation especially happens when so much of the gender studies scholarship is cis-centred. When I get a chance to teach, I take that opportunity to address what this cis-centring does to the representation of trans people. When trans people are introduced within gender studies, usually, it is within a victimizing framework, with cis-people portrayed as perpetrators or victimizers. This portrayal means I have to ask the students to step back from what they take for granted, things they have learned and encountered previously. I ask them to pose challenging questions that they might feel are daunting or even pointless in their everyday lives, which can be very difficult, but that is what I aim to do every time because I have only that one encounter with them. I try to show them how we are all implicated in structural gender norms; therefore, it is in everyone's interest to try to address them and figure them out collectively. I hope this critical reflection initiates a process that will live beyond my one-time appearance as a guest lecturer.

Oda-Kange:

Thank you, france. I think what I want to pick up on what you said is about creating a shared space between students and teachers, where students and teachers feel like there is space to share their stories—and storytelling is a means to bring the absent into view. And in that way, understanding how we are all implicated in these different violent structures that exist in and beyond academia... When we talk about gender and race in class and so on, we must try to

establish a space in which we really take seriously what these structures mean in our lives, both within the classroom and among us, but also when we step out of the classroom. And I think that is part of what I bring with me. I grew up at the International People's College in Elsinore, where teaching and learning did not just happen when people sat down for class, but it was as much in the dining room or outside the school or when the students came over to our house because we lived on campus. It was about learning to live together. And I think that is, that is at least what I try to do... Whether it is a short guest lecture or a longer time, you have to develop the relationship between the participants in class in order to create space for theories of social justice.

Nico:

I can definitely relate to that. I understand both my research and my teaching as inextricably linked to the queer, trans for trans (t4t), and grassroots organizing and social justice struggles that I am part of and the different spaces where I (un)learn, co-create, and share knowledge. I think of and bring with me the different tools that we use in those spaces. In that sense, I do not see university teaching as something completely separate from other teaching activities I do, and I think of creative ways that I can use those tools and strategies in university classrooms as well. In that light, I also understand transformative pedagogies as pedagogies that work towards liberation and radical societal transformation. Meaning that when I teach, I think about how I can both invoke and build on the students' curiosity and sense of responsibility in interrogating and ultimately also dismantling the white supremacist colonial capitalist heteropatriarchy. This has largely involved sharing tools developed in the context of grassroots organizing and tools I have had to learn and unlearn along the way.

Jennifer:

You are all so right that in gender studies, we might make use of the absence framework to catalyze transformation. When we call attention to perspectives that are absent and probe into the mechanisms of what lies at the center – this process can be a painful journey for both educators and students. Because there is so much at stake – identities, experiences-- but there is also always a risk for failure. I also see the possibility of creating a lot of joy and opportunities for community building, as Oda-Kange describes. The learning community in which you grew up sounds like it was about building something up, experiencing joy together, and generating creative forces.

The pedagogical processes you describe seem to engage students in processes that go far beyond the 'official' curriculum—on the contrary, they point to its absences and silences. Engaging with cis-centrism, the need to infuse the classroom with pedagogical tools from activism, and addressing the lived implications of oppressive structures both in *and* outside the classroom—these strategies lead us to face the absences collectively.

Ingvil:

Thank you all. It seems you are all saying that, for you, the transformative here is trying to make or enable some kind of societal change, and that the classroom serves as a shared space for knowledge production. But it is also what you said, Oda-Kange: a lived space. So, how do we deal with the classroom as a lived space? There is a contrast between this way of thinking about transformative pedagogy and the ways in which it is now brought forth by higher education: as preparation for the workplace, transforming into a 'worker' or transforming into somebody who can accomplish tasks and has transferrable skills. You are all drawing on a

different kind of legacy. Feminist pedagogy has been mentioned, and there are traditions here for encouraging democratic participatory classrooms. How can we bring those traditions into our teaching now when faced with a fairly neoliberalist approach to transformative pedagogies?

Oda-Kange:

I can say something about that. Nico and I have been working together, and our friendship grew from teaching a class together where we allowed ourselves to dream about the classroom we wanted to have (Diallo & Miskow Friborg, 2021). We have been working a lot with refusal as a tool, and also unproductiveness, or refusing to produce workers, as you said, but also refusing to produce knowledge in a certain way that has to have a certain goal. Instead, we use the classroom to enable something that does not have this certain end to it or is not about coming up with ways to fix structural oppression but instead, imagining together how to counter-archive (Haritaworn et al., 2018) to live differently and how to center different voices instead of buying into a pre-conceived idea of what education should be. I think Nico also said in their introduction that it is also about liberation instead of offering scripts or packages of knowledge.

Nico:

Some of the tools that Oda-Kange and I have been working on together, and continue to build on, are decentering and centering, but also dealing with the forms of resistance that we meet in the classrooms, which are not here-and-now solutions, as you were saying, Oda-Kange. It is also about how we *notice* changes, transformation, and classroom resistance--sometimes, you see it in the classroom quite immediately in the ways that students ask new questions. Another example is the way in which Oda-Kange and I have been working with shifting the gaze with the students in their research and in their learning. So when, for instance, discussing marginalization and oppression, instead of pointing to the marginalized and putting the spotlight on the marginalized, we assist the students in shifting the gaze to the structures and to interrogating the structures. This process of shifting the gaze is often met with resistance quite instantly. We then talk to the students about what this resistance does, and we talk a lot about how we can sit with discomfort in the classroom. In our teaching, we see these transformations quite slowly, but they are visible in the ways that students ask new questions and ask critical questions to themselves about how they engage in learning and co-creating knowledge, which questions they ask when they do research, and how their own positioning is related to that as well.

france:

I have been thinking about the framework of care as a pedagogical tool. I have been trying to apply it in that one opportunity I get with each class as a guest lecturer on trans studies. In the beginning, I felt a sort of duty to stand up for students who were affected by uninformed comments from other students. Trans-negativity in my guest lecture classrooms does not happen often, but there have been a few occasions, and I am sure there will be more. Over time, I have begun to see things differently. I have started to realize that students who were bothered about the course materials or topics we were discussing were not speaking out of hatred or ignorance; they were speaking out of fear. They were starting to feel marginalized in a way – their gender identities were being removed from the spotlight and questioned for their validity as primary, natural, and default. It is a jarring experience and tends to stir up insecurities, especially if not handled sensitively by the dialogue leader.

And, so, I began to deal differently with these uninformed comments that came up, for example, who really 'counts' as a man or woman, or whether non-binary is a legitimate mode of identity and expression. Moreover, with my role as a trans person in a majority or only cis classroom, I try to make the barrier between cis and trans a bit porous so that a sort of kinship could be formed. After all, cis people face gender struggles, too, and so I help them see that. I think this helps foster a stronger sense of humanity between the cis students and the trans 'other.' This shared experience is particularly important in classrooms where there are no openly trans or gender-diverse students, and I am, in a sense, representing the community at large for these cis students. Then, I have to try to evoke a kinship to an abstract other. But, no matter the classroom make-up, I have been working toward being more caring and open, not just in response to any difficult remarks, but as a general demeanor throughout the lecture, so that the cis students feel more comfortable to open their minds to gender diverse experiences, identities and embodiments.

Jennifer:

Regarding a framework of care and how that provides us with a means to address student's resistance, I think it also provides alternative ways to relate to each other. For example, the relational processes that come from feminist ethics of care: interactions based on reciprocity, anticipation of needs, and helping others thrive--cultivating these actions in the classroom means going *against the grain* of our institutional positioning, bringing something to the classroom that is not there by default. We saw the importance of these processes during the pandemic when 'absence' manifested in new and distressing ways. People absent from university spaces, classrooms without students, the absence of a built-in care structure for the alienation brought on by the pandemic. It took a pandemic for universities to understand that care should be a more significant part of higher education.

Nico:

In the course that Oda-Kange and I taught together, we had a lot of hours, and it was quite an intensive semester course. It made such a big difference to be able to spend time together, get to know each other, build more trust, and slowly build a safer and brave space with the students. I can relate to your approach, France. I think a lot about when to care for *whom* in the classroom. Sometimes, it is necessary to step up and stop harmful behaviour that is happening. And then care both for the students that we think are immediately hurt by this but also the other students that *might* have been hurt by this behaviour. Because often there is also an expectation of who is and who is not in the classroom, invisibilizing many students. So, for me, care can also be about stopping harmful behavior and following up and talking to a particular student afterward; as you were also describing, France, to care for them in their process of grieving and unlearning. This is all complex, so I definitely rely on collaborations, for instance, my collaboration with Oda-Kange, and to have ongoing discussions with other teachers on how we can do this work and how we can learn from our mistakes in the process.

Oda-Kange:

I relate to what all of you, France, Jennifer, and Nico, are saying. It is important to recognize that, when coming into the classroom and having either limited time or a very big group, this pedagogical work is very tolling emotionally, sometimes physically, because it requires a completely different engagement from everyone who steps into the room. If it is successful, it can end up being very energizing and empowering. In situations with very big classes, I think we need each other like Nico just said. Also, I do not remember who used the word

vulnerability. As a teacher, I think it is also about being very open and honest about doubts and mistakes and what we don't know. In order for everyone to get through this together, we all need access to vulnerability. That also includes encouraging students to share something with each other. This sharing means having less focus on getting through slides but instead breaking things up into smaller groups, where students feel more comfortable speaking. Sometimes, that takes more teachers, but it can also be done if more things are made explicit and if we begin talking about what we can expect to happen when we embark on this journey at the beginning of a semester. We can expect to feel vulnerable, we can expect to feel hurt, and so on.

Jennifer:

Oda-Kange, you mentioned that we should let students know what to expect in terms of the embodied experiences connected to learning, unlearning, and resistance. You can almost imagine starting the course after three or four weeks of preparing students for transformative learning and what this means relationally. This type of preparation does not get adequate time on a syllabus where we have to cover a number of themes and modules.

Ingvil:

I think engaging in these sorts of transformative spaces also requires some commitment, but talking about these wonderful strategies you have for your students leads us to a previous question: There is a lot of care work involved; we create these spaces, but who takes care of the teacher? What kind of community do we need to sustain this kind of critical pedagogy in gender studies?

france:

Something that really resonated with me was what Oda-Kange talked about, namely the vulnerability of teachers and the subsequent need for a community of support. In *Teaching to Transgress*, bell hooks talks about 'liberatory education,' saying that this type of education "connects the will to know with the will to become" (p.18-19). Breaking down the barrier between the theoretical and the personal is integral for students' personal growth within the classroom and, maybe more importantly, *beyond* the classroom. But it requires that the students, like teachers, become vulnerable in the classroom, which is difficult, because the material can be so personal. To help with this, bell hooks explains that the lecturer must be vulnerable when entering the space — demonstrating trust in the students by being open, humble, and keen to engage as a co-learner.

It is really difficult to do that if you yourself learned within a tradition that upholds the authoritative, powerful position of the teacher over the students. I think part of building a community that allows for transformative learning is developing a platform where we can speak honestly with each other about the things that we're struggling with, the things that matter to us, and the ways in which we want to innovate.

Nico:

When I was a student, and also through previous teaching experiences at university, and now as a doctoral candidate with teaching duties, it is definitely necessary to have searched for and found different kinds of communities of people who also experience marginalization within the neoliberal university. To be able to go through and keep being in these spaces both as a student and as a teacher. It makes a very big difference to have those connections,

collaborations, and communities. It is, of course, also important to have some institutional support for the work you are doing. When I think back on previous teaching experiences and some of the quite extreme anti-trans and anti-queer resistance that I have experienced, not only from students— that's an expected part of this process of learning and unlearning and working towards transformation—but especially when resistance comes from the institution, these kinds of networks and collaborations are so important.

Oda-Kange:

Definitely. Everything that you all said really resonates---especially that last thing you just said now, Nico, about experiencing marginalization yourself as the teacher and sometimes being the only one in an otherwise very white cis-heteronormative classroom. I think many different things are needed in terms of people and community to do this work and survive in the academy because it is such a difficult and oppressive institution. Enabling collaboration when it is not necessarily planned, talking to colleagues who are trying to do the same thing or experiencing similar things and sharing teaching materials, very practically going through preparations for lectures together, sometimes swapping or teaching with each other, coming in as guests and helping each other out. Community is also about having spaces to unwind and talk about the difficult things that happen in the classroom.

Conclusion

Understanding the gender studies classroom as a space of unlearning and learning with absence takes students and teachers into new spaces. In our experience, this creates an alternative learning space that shifts the focus from a process of acquiring pre-existing knowledge to one concerned with making visible already established knowledge regimes and the power structures that enable and maintain them. In this dialogue, we have centered a number of strategies we use in our gender studies classrooms to teach with such absences. First, we think taking time in the first weeks of class is important to prepare students for transformative learning. Part of this preparation is getting them to see themselves as embodied beings situated in personal, but also specific socio-cultural and normative, contexts. From our perspective, it may make the emotional journey of unlearning seem less daunting as they accept feelings like resistance and discomfort as essential to personal and academic growth.

We suggest that teaching with an absence framework benefits from opening the classroom to new forms of knowledge production: storytelling and sharing lived experiences with one another may help the classroom collectively produce new understandings, beginning to not only identify but also fill the absences. Further, we have pointed to the importance of feelings of joy and togetherness while processing and thinking through difficult topics together. Collective knowledge production is not limited to just the classroom, however. It can be used among colleagues and fellow educators: caring for one another, sharing resources, collectively planning, co-teaching, and generating fellowship around teaching are key to supporting each other as we face the risks that critical and feminist pedagogies entail. This dialogue is also an example of how it is possible to work collaboratively and collectively with continuously developing feminist and critical pedagogies.

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