
Introduction

Teaching Gender and Diversity in Higher Education

BY CONNIE CARØE CHRISTIANSEN,
STINE THIDEMANN FABER AND
DIANA HØJLUND MADSEN

Teaching gender and diversity in higher education is an activity that almost all gender studies scholars are engaged in. In many courses taught today, gender and diversity is a frequently recurring theme whether the teaching activities are part of ‘traditional’ academic disciplines or part of specific women’s and gender studies programmes. Yet, how to teach gender and its intersecting categories is rarely up for debate in academic journals.¹ This special issue of *Women, Gender & Research* tries to make up for this by focusing on university level teaching in gender and diversity and related pedagogical reflections and practices across all academic disciplines.

The idea of focusing on gender and its intersecting categories in teaching is linked to feminist debates about *situated* and *embodied* knowledge (for instance Haraway 1988 and Harding 1993) rather than considering teaching students and our own scholarly knowledge as disembodied and

aperspectival (Stitzlein 2004). Thus, the special issue emerges from an idea of promoting that perspectives matter – also in teaching.

Teaching gender and diversity in higher education is not a straight-forward practice, not least because the teacher is him/herself a gendered person, situated in an academic context and/or learning environment which is also gendered in specific ways. This means that unless we critically reflect on “who we are and what we bring to the teaching situation” (McNeil 1992: 24) we may continue to stumble over our own blind spots in terms of how our private as well as professional lives are gendered and how this might affect our teaching as feminists and gender studies scholars (Cranny-Francis et al. 2003). For this reason, the point of departure of this special issue is that teaching gender and diversity in an academic setting requires reflection and awareness of our own ‘situatedness’. Still the subject matter may constantly escape the teacher, having his or her own blind spots or naturalized power-knowledge strategies.

The fact that we, as teachers, are dealing with students with a variety of backgrounds and experiences also calls for critical reflections on our pedagogical approach, and for more critical analyses of the possible implications for our teaching practices. The students gendered (as well as racialized, sexualised, classed, etc.) backgrounds and experiences – which, although there may be shared elements, are not identical with the background and experience of the teacher – enter the classroom and thus becomes part of the learning environment and the knowledge production. This fact calls for reflections on our teaching practices, the teaching methodologies applied, and the framework in which our teaching takes place, just as it calls for critical reflections on the “power relations in the teaching situation and more awareness of our priorities in this context as precisely *our* priorities” (McNeil 1992: 25).

Accordingly, this special issue of *Women, Gender & Research* is dedicated to outlining, analysing and discussing how gender and its intersecting categories are taught in higher education in different contexts. The issue contains contributions from Denmark (articles by Horn and Henriksen), Norway (article by Wallewik and Haaland), Sweden (essay by Fahlgren), Finland (article by Penttinen and Jyrkinen), as well as Brazil (article by Pinto).

In recent years, higher education has faced a series of institutional and structural transformations and the workload of scholars have intensified following higher demands for productivity and impact factor, and with the increasing focus on performance measurement and assessment (Pereira 2015). These changes not only affect the everyday professional lives of gender studies scholars; it also affects the study programmes and our teaching practices as today’s performative/neoliberal universities also entail a commodification of education (see for instance Pereria 2016; also see Penttinen and Jyrkinen’s article in this issue).

The idea for this special issue emerged not only from an engagement in debates on teaching as the sharing of *situated* and *embodied* knowledge (cf. above), for instance through oral tradition, but also from the intensified focus on research which tends to overrule the focus on education in today’s universities (at least in Denmark) as the intensified workload of everyday scholarly lives makes little room for collective reflections on university pedagogy. It is our experience that this subject, throughout time, has already been negligently treated, and debates about pedagogical insights and approaches (whether teaching gender and diversity or other topics) have had a tendency to be shoved into the background or maybe even to be left in silence – partly because it is considered to require individual assessment and solutions shared only informally among colleagues, rather than collec-

tive dialogue and coordinated responses. It is our experience that pedagogical approaches to teaching and learning are under-documented practices often made invisible within everyday scholarly life. Therefore, we welcome the articles in this special issue; each contributor introduces important reflections on their teaching experiences and practices.

Following this brief introduction, the opening article *Teaching Gender in a Transnational Perspective – Challenges, Resistances and Strategies* by Christiansen and Madsen argue that it is necessary to qualify transnational feminism as a framework which does not simply observe that feminism is ‘global’ and to be found on other scales than the national; teaching gender in a transnational perspective implies asking questions about cross-cultural connectedness, unequal mobilities, and power asymmetries, also between women. Three aspects of teaching gender are subsequently discussed: The meaning of gender as a term is multiple, rather than universal, and may involve translation, as examples from Yemen and Ghana demonstrate. ‘The global’ figures in teaching strategies, which calls for the question of how gender studies figures in neo-liberal institutional settings, and how transnational gender cooperation could take place. Finally, a feminist pedagogy is often invoked, but what would be its contours if reading-translating gender would be a core task?

As mentioned, this special issue consists of five articles:

In the article *Gendering Global Studies*, Horn reflects on the experiences with teaching gender in a specific course on international relations. She accounts how the focus on gender in the often depersonalised area of international relations can be unsettling for many students and how she tackles the resistance among some students. She also reflects on the pedagogical aspects

with a focus on diversity and inclusion introducing an intersectional perspective in the teaching. Thus, the article advocates for more focus on gender in the teaching of international relations and provides some inspiration for how this can be done.

In the article *Teaching Gender within International Relations: Experiences from a Brazilian University Classroom*, Pinto, who teaches international relations at University of Brasília, adopts a teaching strategy which invites students to include a gender perspective in international relations more generally. Pinto notes that students are reluctant or in fact resist and argue against the relevance of a gender perspective for their disciplinary field. Pinto suggests that the resistance is also due to the inner tumult, which such a realization has on a personal level. Pinto has adjusted her teaching strategies accordingly and suggests a relational pedagogy drawing in emotional levels in appealing to common ground through identification with *the Other* as a method which appeals to some students.

In the article *Reflections on Gender and Diversity in Cross-Cultural On-line Teaching*, Wallewik and Haaland discuss how they as teachers of a course in ‘gender and culture in everyday life’ at University of Agder, Norway, which occurs in a partly virtual class-room setting, take advantage of the multi-cultural origins of the students and invite cross-cultural reflection on gender by invoking experience-notes, i.e. lived everyday experiences in which the gendered nature of social interaction becomes clear to the individual student. To the surprise of the authors, in spite of the cultural diversity of the students, they do not find it easy to escape dominant gender ideologies.

In the article *Promoting Gender Sensitivity in Social Work*, Ann-Karina Henriksen (Metropolitan University College/Aalborg University, Denmark) deals with an impor-

tant question concerning gender and diversity in social work education and the need for new pedagogical practices to develop students' critical reflections in relation to how social problems are shaped by gender structures and unequal power relations.

In the article *High Heels and High Expectations: Feminist Teaching in a Neoliberalist University*, Jyrkinen and Penttinen discuss the clash between teachers' and students' expectations as a central challenge in feminist teaching at neoliberal universities. The authors describe three tensions (or challenges) grown out of their teaching experiences from a specific gender studies course in large-scale classroom settings.

In the essay *Gender Studies in Europe – Challenges, Trends and New Perspectives*, Fahlgren reflects on Nordic perspectives in gender studies and gender teaching. With a point of departure in the experiences from a European workshop roundtable with Nordic participants, she argues that even in Sweden, gender studies and teaching is met with some resistance and not as highly thought of as other academic disciplines. However, she ends on a more promising note, giving an account of new gender programmes and a growing interest among students.

The intriguing photos illustrating this issue is a selection from the *Billboard Festival Casablanca 2015* in which Nordic and Moroccan contemporary women artists collaborated to present their own personal and artistic female images in the public space of Casablanca, Morocco (<http://www.billboardcasablanca.org>). The photos have kindly been put to our disposal for this issue as a courtesy of Hanne Lise Thomsen who was in charge of the project, funded by KVINFO and the Danish-Arab Partnership Programme.

NOTE

1. A recent exception being the special issue “Women’s/Gender studies and contemporary changes in academic cultures: European perspectives” in the journal *Women’s Studies International Forum* (edited by Mia Liinason and Sabine Grenz), which was announced as this special issue was entering its final phase.

LITERATURE

- Cranny-Francis, Anne; Waring, Wendy; Pam Stauropoulos & Kirkby, Joan (2003): *Gender Studies. Terms and Debates*. Palgrave Macmillan, New York.
- Harding, Susan (1993): Rethinking standpoint epistemology: What is “strong objectivity”?, in: Alcoff, Linda & Potter, Elizabeth (eds.): *Feminist epistemologies*. Routledge, New York.
- Haraway, Donna (1988): Situated Knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective, in: *Feminist Studies* 1988/14/3.
- McNeil, Maureen (1992): Pedagogical Praxis and Problems: Reflections on Teaching about Gender relations, in: Hinds, Hillary, Phoenix, Ann & Jackey Stacey (eds.): *Working Out: New Directions for Women’s Studies*. The Falmer Press, London/Washington.
- Stitzlein, Sarah Marie (2004): Replacing the “View from Nowhere”: A Pragmatist-Feminist Science Classroom, in: *Electronic Journal of Science Education*, 2004/9/2.
- Liinason, Mia & Grenz, Sabine (2016): Women’s/Gender studies and contemporary changes in academic cultures: European perspectives, in: *Women’s Studies International Forum*/54.
- Pereira, Maria do Mar (2016): Struggling within and beyond the Performative University: Articulating Activism and Work in an “Academia Without Walls”, in: *Women’s Studies International Forum*/54.

Connie Carøe Christiansen is Senior Advisor at KVINFO – the Danish Centre for Research and Information on Gender, Equality and Diversity. *Stine Thidemann Faber* is Associate Professor at FREIA – Centre for Gender Research, at the Department of Culture and Global Studies at Aalborg Universities.

Diana Højlund Madsen is Assistant Professor at FREIA – Centre for Gender Research, at the Department of Culture and Global Studies at Aalborg Universities.