

High Heels and High Expectations: Feminist Teaching in a Neoliberalist University

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ABSTRACT

This study aims to examine the suitability of feminist student-centred active learning pedagogy in large-scale classroom settings in a contemporary neoliberalist university context. In the current individualist culture in the academia where students implicitly have adopted a customer-like mind-set, they need to be rational in terms of what they study and how they use their time. We argue that feminist values are what makes student-centred active learning successful and will enhance the academic expertise of students. However, the values of inclusiveness, low-hierarchy, co-construction of knowledge, and empowerment of feminist pedagogy need to be revisited in the contemporary context. Low-hierarchy may signal to students that they have the ‘upper’ hand. Instead of engaging actively in the classroom, they challenge the course content and pedagogical practices. On the basis of our case study data, we claim that this attitude is inherently gendered. Thus, paradoxically, teachers in feminist classrooms need to be careful about the role of ‘service provider’ and assume more assertive leadership roles in order to ensure successful learning outcomes.

KEYWORDS

*student-centeredness, gender, feminist teaching, tensions, assertiveness/
køn, studerende i fokus, feministisk undervisning, spændinger, selvsikkerhed*

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Thanks for the course, I will absolutely continue in gender studies and will continue to see the world more sharp-eyed. I also got motivation to do my BA thesis on a gender-specific theme. (2014, feedback no. 42)

The aim of this article is to explore the benefits and challenges of student-centred active learning pedagogy (Armbruster et al. 2009) teaching an introductory course on Gender Studies in a Finnish University. We explore the tensions in ‘teaching/learning’ (Biggs 2003) gender in a large-scale course (with an enrolment maximum of 100 students) with a diverse group of students, and examine ways to resolve these issues. The objective of student-centred active learning pedagogy is to recognise how students differ in terms of how they learn, and to create course assignments that respond to this diversity. The core aim is to support and motivate all students and to aid deep learning, where knowledge is created through students’ activities and will lead to comprehension and conceptual change. Moreover, the student-centred approach means a constructive alignment of course content, assignments, and evaluation so that these different elements serve the learning goals and purpose of the course and whole curriculum (Biggs 2003; Lindblom-Ylänne & Nevgi 2009).

We argue that teaching gender in line with student-centred pedagogy in contemporary neoliberalist university settings requires a novel assertive leadership. Thus, the ways in which the values of feminist pedagogy are put into practice may need revisiting with regard to individualist and consumerist culture present in the teacher-student relationship. Teaching gender with an active-learning pedagogy informed by feminist values is a deliberate choice for us. The way we teach follows the same feminist

ethics and practices we have used and based our own research on (see for example Mauthner & Birch 2002; Ackerly & True 2010; Jyrkinen & McKie 2012; Penttinen 2013). Thus, we hope to give a sense of what feminist research is about in our interactions with the students. We understand the values of feminist pedagogy to be inclusiveness, low-hierarchy and equality among students, that students are ‘knowers’, not solely receivers of knowledge, and the importance of creating a sense of community and empowerment within the classroom (Chow et al. 2003). Yet, even though these values are intended to allow students to participate in the co-construction of knowledge within the classroom setting, not all students are ready to take on an active role. Conversely, they might have a completely different idea about what studying gender is or should be than the model we present in class.

In this article we focus on our experiences in teaching the course *Introduction to Gender Studies* in a Finnish university for two consecutive years, 2013 and 2014, with two teaching assistants. We build our analysis on the interaction with students during lectures, de-briefing on teaching after class, teaching diaries and student feedback for the two consecutive years. Our main emphasis is on the attitudes, implicit assumptions of students and teachers, and the clash of expectations in a contemporary neoliberalist university setting, and how to resolve these tensions in order to ensure successful learning outcomes. Within neoliberalist university culture we refer to processes of the corporatisation of universities, which also redefine relations between students and teachers (Feigenbaum 2007) and the culture of strident individualism, competition and self-sufficiency that characterise the neoliberalist learning environment and form a stark contrast to feminist and anti-racist values.

We base our study on our wide track record in teaching gender studies at differ-

ent levels – basic, intermediate, advanced and doctoral level courses – in many disciplines and universities over the past decade. We analyse how the students received the student-friendliness, inclusiveness, low-hierarchy principle and equality in the classroom and what kind of resistances and acceptances our approach raised. As we have the possibility to compare the feedback from years one and two, we discuss how our slightly renewed, more assertive classroom ‘grip’ during the second year impacted on the students, the atmosphere and feedback. We discuss also how our own embodiments – as women, as feminist scholars, of a particular age, class and ethnicity, with our own taste in clothing – seemed to have had somewhat surprising effects on students.

We will first discuss how we constructed the introduction to the gender studies course in alignment with student-centred active learning pedagogy and the importance of this particular course in relation to the whole curriculum of Gender Studies. We then move on to identify the main sources of tensions in teaching and learning gender, and how we were able to anticipate and alleviate some of these issues during the second year. We will end the discussion by evaluating the potential of feminist active learning pedagogy in the context of a neoliberalist university setting.

IMPLEMENTATION OF STUDENT-CENTRED PEDAGOGY IN THE INTRODUCTION TO GENDER STUDIES COURSE

The main reason to adopt active learning and student-centred pedagogy is the recognition that even though traditional lectures serve as a means of disseminating large bodies of information to attendees, they often lead to superficial learning and passive students. Placing students in the centre of learning moves the emphasis from teaching to learning. This improves the students’

motivation to study and enhances learning outcomes (Biggs 2003; Armbruster et al. 2009; Lindblom-Ylänne & Nevgi 2009). Moreover, an active learning pedagogy improves the development of core knowledge and transferable skills which are important in other courses and studies as well as in working life.

The imperative objective of student-centred active learning pedagogy is to create a learning environment that responds to and recognises how students are diverse in terms of how they learn. In practice, this demands a combination of different kinds of assignments and teaching methods within one course. In comparison, a traditional lecture format may appeal only to students who are able to concentrate on listening for extended periods of time, but do not benefit students who learn better by participating in small group discussions or writing short assignments. The core aim in adopting student-centred pedagogy is to support and motivate every student who signs up to a course to allow a deeper approach to learning, so that not only the highly motivated, ‘good’ students learn, but also allowing the students that are only superficially interested in course materials to be drawn into the learning process. This requires a different set of professional expertise from the teachers compared to the traditional university setting, and it also demands respect for the diversity of students (Lowenstein 2010). Lastly, the student-centred approach requires the constructive alignment of course content, assignments and evaluation so that these different elements can serve the learning goals and purpose of the course (Biggs 2003; Lindblom-Ylänne & Nevgi 2009). Incorporating feminist values into student-centred pedagogy means paying attention to how gender concretises in the interaction between students and teachers, how students participate in class discussions and respond to each other, and even the physical organisation of space in lecture halls and classrooms.

The Introduction to Gender Studies course is of the utmost importance for our curriculum, as the first course(s) either motivate students to continue with or drop out of studies in this field. The introductory course is crucial with regards to students' future plans and choices, but also for teachers and the discipline overall. Students who attend the course represent many faculties and almost all disciplines – social sciences, humanities, theology but also areas such as medical research and computer sciences. In addition, students from business schools enrol in the course through the student exchange system. Therefore, a wide range of students attends the introductory course.

We adopted the active learning pedagogy in the design of the course, the range of course assignments during class, and the small group discussions. The format of the introductory course comprises two 90-minute lectures and one 90-minute small group tutorial per week for a period of six weeks. The five tutorials are organised in groups (each with a maximum of 25 students) in order to discuss the readings, which are available in advance on the course webpage. The course evaluation consists of lecture attendance (10%), participation and active discussion in tutorials (40%), and the final exam, which consists of two essay questions (50%). The tutorials were led by doctoral students who act as teaching assistants (TAs) and aimed to decrease the embedded power relations between teachers and students. In the first year, 2013, the student performance was assessed by numerical evaluation, but based on the feedback from students and TAs, the evaluation was changed to simply designate a fail or pass based on attendance and reasonable activity in the discussions. In practice this ameliorated the active discussions as the student's participation was no longer numerically evaluated.

Participation in the course has become more heterogeneous during the last years,

as the positive experiences of students and the knowledge of the new teaching methods we use have spread among students through social media and word of mouth. One example of student feedback received in 2014 emphasised this latter point: "Thank you. I endorsed the course warmly also to my student colleagues" (2014, feedback no. 32). In order to create as safe and fruitful a learning space as possible, we have put a lot of emphasis on creating a friendly atmosphere during the sessions and in our communication with the participants, for instance via our Moodle messages.¹ Our goal – or rather, the goal that the university set for us – is to attract as many students as possible to complete 25 ECTS, which constitutes a minor at Bachelor level. This comprises five courses worth 5 ECTS each. The core idea is that students take first the introduction course, and then follow the curriculum for the entire year, and complete the minor the following spring. The maximum number of students in the introductory course is 100.²

We use student feedback as an important tool to develop teaching methods and best practices in Gender Studies. During the introduction course we collect student feedback in order to take stock of the course, adjust teaching methods and clarify course goals. The feedback at the end of the course serves as an important tool to develop the teaching methods, and assignments for the following year and to follow up on student satisfaction. The final feedback is collected in an anonymous paper-format questionnaire, which is designed for and used across all Gender Studies courses.

In Table 1 we present the figures of the student feedback collected at the end of the course in 2013 and 2014. The respondents are all students who were present at the last class lecture. Students were also informed beforehand that the final feedback would be collected on the last day. These numbers indicate a general trend in the course – namely that the course has been more suc-

Table 1. The feedback of students from the 1st and the 2nd course
[scales 1=poor, 5=excellent]

The questions	Year 2013 (N=47)	Year 2014 (N=58)
Filling the aims of the course	4.4	4.6
Clarity of the whole	4.0	4.4
Literature	4.1	4.2
Work methods	4.0	4.4
Atmosphere	4.2	4.7
Student's own input	3.5	3.9
Learning	3.9	4.4
Teachers' success	4.2	4.4
General evaluation and rate of the course	4.2	4.5

successful in the second year. The feedback supports our own notions based on our teaching diaries, debriefings and shared experiences.

In the following sections we discuss the main tensions in teaching and learning gender and the adjustments we made in order to achieve a better learning environment in 2014. With tensions we refer to conflicts that can be overt, visible, and acknowledged, or covert, invisible, and function under the radar in the classroom (Pasque et al. 2013). We address here the tensions that focus on our teaching and ourselves as teachers.

TENSIONS IN TEACHING AND LEARNING GENDER

As already mentioned, the implicit assumption in feminist pedagogy is that students will respond positively to low hierarchy and be grateful when they are included in the co-production of knowledge in classroom setting. The embedded understanding is that students are eager to learn, and it is

the traditional authoritative learning environment that leads students to become passive. But what happens when these 'students' come into the classroom as individuals, who have adopted a rationalist approach as to what and how they should be studying, and evaluate courses based on whether they like them or not – as in the 'thumbs up/thumbs down' of social media? Perhaps they do not see the relevance of learning as transformation, but rather perform the role of a consumer who wants their needs to be met, and feel entitled to complain when the 'product' is not exactly what they expected. Students may not have problems being active in the classroom, but have trouble with assignments that challenge them to move beyond their comfort zones. In this case they are not open to change, which is implicit in the feminist pedagogy project.

The first source of tension we identify is this consumerist ideology. In such an approach the teacher is not an authoritative figure, as in the traditional top-down teaching approach, nor a facilitator of transfor-

mative learning, but a service provider who delivers a product that the consumer/student has ordered. As Feigenbaum (2007) notes, students live in a consumerist, post-modern world in which the university cannot be considered an external haven for democratic learning. In other words, students have to think in rationalist terms about what they study in order to enhance their chances in the fragmented and insecure job market after university. The following example shows how time use – precious time, according to tight timetables in neoliberal rhetoric – was criticised in student feedback concerning the very first lecture:

During the first lecture perhaps *a bit too much time was used for covering the material* that was already given in the handout. Also *the time spent* to introduce so many people participating in the class seemed senseless. During the first lecture, we could have gone into the topics of the course. (2013, feedback no. 7; our emphasis)

We chose the first session to go through course practices so that we might save time later on. We incorporated small group exercises so the students could get to know each other in order to build a safe and welcoming learning environment. Moreover, it was important for us that the diversity of the students was acknowledged openly in the large classroom. In spite of this, some students felt that these exercises and information on our practices was a waste of (their) precious time. We view these kinds of evaluations – feedback without a concrete basis – as an implementation of a ‘facebook culture’, in which students give a thumbs up (or down) as to whether they like the course or not. However, a problem arises when liking something is based on whether it meets the needs and expectations of the student as an individual, because assignments that challenge their comfort zone can be met with resistance. Anonymity in a large classroom may be one

such expectation, and is challenged when a student is asked to introduce themselves to the person sitting next them.

Secondly, a problem arose in classroom discussions and in student feedback when it became clear that some students take the minor in gender studies in order to learn more about their own gender and sexuality. They turn to gender studies in order to gain new perspectives on and a deeper understanding of their own personal experience in a society and culture that is marked by heteronormativity. In this case the objective of the teachers to introduce the students to a multidisciplinary feminist and gender studies curriculum, in order to give them a strong base for more advanced studies in this field, can be met with resistance, as it does not provide outright answers to personal challenges. In a way this is also a semantic misunderstanding, as for some students gender studies means literally the study of gender and sexuality, while for the teachers it refers to the multidisciplinary and transdisciplinary scholarship of Gender Studies.

The *binary approach* [talking about women and men in presenting the research on gender] even in the lesson in queer studies caused a feeling of exclusion. (2013, feedback no. 1)

Sometimes I had the feeling that the lecturer did not notice that the participants are different and there are people who are so called representatives of such groups discussed as e.g. sexual minorities or transpeople. (2013, feedback no. 2)

When the motivation to take the course is specifically to explore and/or strengthen one’s own gender identity, the relevance of the course materials on the development of feminist scholarship within academia or the basics of feminist epistemology may be misunderstood as irrelevant, as these do not directly address one’s individual concerns.

At its extreme, materials on feminist theorising can be viewed as an exclusionary practice, as the above quotes suggest.

Moreover, the difference between feminist and gender scholarship and activism is sometimes difficult to understand. As teachers, our objective is to offer a course that builds a foundation for developing academic expertise in the field of Gender Studies and we were surprised by the resistance on the part of the students to engage in developing their academic skills when the course content was not what they expected. At the same time, the low hierarchy between students and teachers was counter-effective, as some students took this opportunity to question the course content and curriculum. In other words, when the course content was not what they expected, some challenged our professional expertise in knowing what gender studies *is* and what topics the introductory course should include.

Some parts of the material seemed *old-fashioned*, there is certainly better, more topical and appropriate material available (?). (2014, feedback no. 11, our emphasis)

The whole course was intended to present the origins and developments of feminist and gender studies, and therefore the texts were carefully chosen to explore these. In the introductory course we also wanted to offer literature primarily in Finnish, as many students signing up to the course are at the beginning of their studies less accustomed to read scientific texts, and when they do, the texts are typically in English. Often students – particularly those in the introductory courses – are not yet capable of evaluating the ‘wholeness’ of scientific discussions in a larger disciplinary context, as the above quote shows. Therefore the duty of teachers is to lead the planning of the courses and the pedagogical choices.

Thirdly, a tension that greatly surprised the teachers was the resistance or discom-

fort some of the students expressed with regard to our appearance, sexuality and aged. For instance, teaching queer studies from a position of a heterosexual middle-age, middle-class, female teacher with apparently feminine markers such as fashionable clothes, make up, jewellery and indeed high heels was met with opposition. The expertise of the teachers in gender studies was challenged as their physical appearance was marked by femininity and heterosexuality. In this case the low hierarchy also enabled the students to question the teachers’ authority in a manner that crossed the boundaries of private and public. This, we assume, would not easily happen with male teachers (see, for example, Crabtree & Sapp 2003).

Surprisingly, even though the students come into the class with a critical attitude towards gender norms, there were implicit assumptions that teachers should also embody more formal, masculine or queer markers of appearance. The hierarchic dualisms that valorise masculine over feminine therefore appeared to inform some of the students’ attitudes. During the first year we received student feedback in the middle of the course critiquing the fact that two ‘cis’ women were teaching the course on gender, and thus implicitly reiterated the heteronormative values in classroom setting. We were both surprised by these comments, and discussed how difficult it is to receive feedback that focuses on one’s appearance, gender, and sexuality (de-briefing session, 27 October 2013). We felt disheartened, as we had put so much effort into careful planning, enabled easy access to course literature through the Moodle pages, and practiced the most up-to-date teaching methods.

We recognised this as highly problematic, both as an infringement on personal boundaries and representative of how deeply embedded gendered notions of leadership are, even among those who are aware of hierarchic gender order. It reflects

how women in leadership roles are more likely to be judged by their appearance than men (Trethewey 1999; Granleese & Sayer 2005; Shilling 2004; Jyrkinen 2014). Our feminine appearances triggered some students to question our professionalism in the academic field of gender studies. Also, we regarded this student feedback as customer mentality at its most extreme: not only are students expecting that the introduction course will offer what they have implicitly expected, but also that the ‘package’ in which the course is delivered should meet their expectations. In the following section we discuss how we were able to resolve the tensions between different student expectations.

RESOLVING TENSIONS AND ENHANCING LEARNING

We claim that the ameliorated student satisfaction in the year 2014 was due to our stronger leadership role in the classroom setting. Instead of highlighting low-hierarchy and friendliness as in 2013, we decided to take a more assertive role, as we realised that our feminist teaching and pedagogy aims had been misunderstood. We decided, for instance, to begin the course by ‘laying down the rules’ and explaining how these instructions serve the interests of the students as a whole. In other words, we maintained that not negotiating deadlines, assignments or participation is a matter of respect between students, not (solely) directed toward us. We purposefully changed our grip from a ‘service provider’ to leaders of teaching and learning processes throughout the course. We explained more thoroughly the reasons for experimental teaching methods – such as the ‘collage assignment’ in which students were asked to photograph the environment with the concept of heteronormativity in mind. The images were used as materials to create collages in a classroom setting to enhance new understandings through the juxtaposition, repeti-

tion and composition of images (Särmä 2014). In 2013 the exercise confused some of the students, as the following feedback from an anonymous student reveals:

In some sessions there was *too much play*, such as crafting, and thus for example queer and heteronormativity [as theory] were *taught only superficially*. (2013, feedback no. 23; our emphasis)

This shows how the methods of the course – learning by doing (here, observing the environment with queer lenses and the application of theory given in the readings) – were not understood as part of the teaching and learning process. Instead, the student sought traditional classroom lectures in which the teacher explains the theories, and the concepts are taught top-down. As we clarified the tasks thoroughly in the second year, the students felt more positively about the assignment, and enjoyed the learning experience:

Inspiring teachers, really a different course from the average courses at the University: glitter glue [for the session of collage in the theme queer and heteronormativity], name patches, self-reflections. Somehow ‘human’ and very inspiring approach. (2014, feedback no. 1)

As stated in the earlier section, some students take gender studies courses in our university in order to gain confidence on their own gender or sexuality. Teaching gender can therefore be a very sensitive and personal issue, which we realised in our first year. Even one slip or an ‘incorrect’ term was noticed:

Sometimes I got a feeling that the lecturer did not take into account that the participants are different and there are amongst us so-called different groups, and to talk about ‘sexual minorities’, ‘transpeople’ or ‘transsexuals’ can be insulting. (2013, feedback no. 2)

We took this critique very seriously, and in the beginning of the next course we opened up the terminology. We focused on the terminology accepted by the main organisation of LGBTI rights in Finland.³ In the Finnish language, the appropriate terms for ‘trans’ people are still not settled. On the other hand, the extreme focus on the correct terms was a challenge, as the course is about teaching and learning how gender studies has developed, and to cover the development of terminology in relation to activism and policies. For example, in the context of explaining the development of the feminist research agenda in studies of international relations and migration through the question “where are the women?” we realised that the use of the word ‘women’ triggered negative feedback. It was interpreted as reiterating a binary approach to gender. In the second year we asserted more clearly what purpose this discussion of the development of feminist research in social sciences served, contributing to the ways in which research questions are framed in contemporary Gender Studies.

In the second year we also gave clear instructions on giving constructive feedback and how this is an important generic skill. We highlighted it as a core skill throughout their studies, in particular in BA and Master’s thesis seminars and in working life, as many of the university students may end up in expert, managerial or leadership positions at some point in their future careers. We pointed out that whether one ‘likes’ or ‘dislikes’ the course or assignment is not relevant to the course, as our objective was not to please students but enhance learning and academic skills. We also pointed out that negative comments need justifications. This move in clarifying the purpose of feedback was based on the comments from the year 2013, such as:

It would be important to notice that *not everyone likes* speaking in public [in class or tutorials]. (2013, feedback no. 32, our emphasis)

[Negative in the course] was that *it was obligatory to be present* during lectures. *At least myself, I prefer courses* where the participants are present on behalf of their own will. (2013, feedback no. 42, our emphasis)

These comments illustrate individualist approaches to the learning environment. In addition, in Finland there is a desire, much related to old sayings about ‘academic freedom’ as well to current neoliberalist university programmes, to highlight the freedoms of students as individuals. The complaint about the ‘obligatory’ attendance in the lectures was somewhat unfounded, as absence could be covered by extra work.

In the feedback for the course in 2014, many students conversely expressed appreciation for the obligation to be present. We interpret this as a result of a clearer explanation of the purpose of attendance. In the second year the students reflected how attendance in class and in tutorials had enhanced their learning as they got to know each other well. Moreover, commitment to attending the course gave a sense of accomplishment. Several students reflected this in their answer to the question, ‘The (most) positive thing in the course was’:

... the obligation to be present, discussions with others, interesting topics, and suggestions for future readings. That it was explained clearly what the next topics will be. (2014, feedback no. 19)

... the obligation to be present and the readings. (2014, feedback no. 34)

We interpreted these comments on the obligation to attend lectures and to collaborate with other students as being the best parts of the course as hinting at something very important. The neoliberal university does not encourage collaborative learning or group-work except for inherently instrumentalist values. However, the obligation to be present and engage in active learning

with other students out of respect for them individually and as a community creates a sense of belonging and self-value. In 2014 at the end of the final lecture, we invited the students to express their thoughts as the intense period of working together was coming to an end. Many of the students took the opportunity to thank each other for the constructive learning environment and the safe place for expressing also different opinions. For the teachers this was a sign of success in a student-centred active learning pedagogy, as the students recognized each other as the main catalysts for their own learning, instead of the teachers.

CONCLUSION: PRACTICE OF FEMINIST VALUES IN NEOLIBERAL TIMES?

Our goal in this article has been to discuss the tensions of and resistances to teaching and learning gender with a student-centred active pedagogy informed by the values of feminist pedagogy. We have categorised the tensions under three themes and discussed how our new assertive grip ameliorated student satisfaction during the second year, based on student feedback from 2013. Here we will briefly summarise the relevance of this experience in relation to the development of 'best practices' in the context of contemporary university culture, which is characterised by the corporatisation of the universities in neoliberal times (Feigenbaum 2007).

The challenges in creating actual feminist classrooms in contemporary universities have been recognised and discussed in respect to student motivation (Chow et al. 2003; Webber 2006; Feigenbaum 2007). The foundations of feminist pedagogy include low-hierarchy in the classroom setting, sensitivity to diversity among students, and the idea of learning as transformation and as a source of personal growth. Based on our data and experience in a contemporary neoliberalist university setting,

students today have different expectations and attitudes than those of the past, which is something that has to be taken into consideration. With the advancement of a strident customer-like mind-set, students often come to the class as individuals who anticipate that the classroom is a place where their desires and expectations are to be met. Instead of taking responsibility for learning and developing learning skills, the response to course materials and assignments can depend on how much the student 'likes' the course topics, assignments, or even teachers.

For teachers, the competitive and market-oriented university means increasing competition amongst academic staff on outputs, such as publications and research funding. As a side-effect, neoliberal work contexts in universities often end up prioritising research outputs instead of teaching, although this is seldom admitted in university strategies (Slater 2015). The values of feminist pedagogy are somewhat contradictory to the values of individualism, rationality, productivity, and efficiency, which underline the neoliberalist project. Using feminist pedagogy can be a radical choice within the current university context, and/or a great contradiction to the culture of individualism and efficiency wherein students and teachers navigate their lives.

We maintain that the student-centred active learning pedagogy based on feminist values is an efficient and powerful way to enhance deep learning and conceptual change in the contemporary context. This requires that teachers are able to see beyond what students 'like' or say they need, and to guide them to recognise the value in 'learning by doing'. In other words, the values of feminist pedagogy must be communicated in an assertive and clear way in order that students can understand the practice of low-hierarchy, inclusiveness and equality, and how this offers them the possibility to take a more active and responsible role in the classroom.

Students who present consumerist and individualist mentalities are not the same oppressed or silenced others that the feminist pedagogy project sought to empower in its early stages. Yet this does not mean that students in contemporary universities do not need empowerment or care. On the contrary; in an individualist and competitive context the values of feminist pedagogy are even more pertinent. Recognition of the diversity of learners enables us to create an active-learning environment, in which each student is welcomed and respected individually. This enables the creation of egalitarian classrooms and learning communities in which students are primarily accountable to one another instead of the teachers.

Lastly, we have found it imperative to emphasise in the classroom setting how the skills acquired in a completed academic degree are transferable to working life outside and after university. In this way, we draw the students' attention to how teaching and learning is also 'work', and how it generates skills that are also needed elsewhere. Through communication on how seemingly abstract theorising, research and writing is not so abstract or far-fetched after all, the students are motivated to engage in active-learning, especially if they orientate towards their studies in rationalist terms. This in turn allows the students to appreciate the critical pedagogies and trust the teachers who have designed the content and assignments as relevant practices. In turn, students also gain the benefits of deep understanding and conceptual change, even if it was not what they were expecting.

NOTES

1. Moodle is an online platform used for sharing information and communication.
2. The alternative to the course is a literature exam, which is offered twice a year.
3. See Setä (2015) <http://seta.fi/hlbtqi/>

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