

Collaborative Teaching across Institutions: Reflections on Sharing Work and Creating a Feminist Space of Care

by Lori Chambers, Bailey Gerrits, and Nadia Verrelli

Abstract: Amid growing awareness of gender-based violence on university campuses, teaching about this issue is urgent. Courses on gender-based violence hold transformative potential: they can foster critical consciousness, challenge systemic inequalities, and contribute to broader social change. Yet, as bell hooks (1994) reminds us, transformative teaching demands more than intellectual rigor—it requires emotional presence, care, collaboration, and vulnerability. For instructors, especially women, racialized, and/or genderqueer faculty, this work often entails significant emotional labour. This paper reflects on our experience of feminist pedagogical collaboration and support across institutions as a means of resisting the neoliberal imperative and making emotionally-challenging and potentially transformational courses more sustainable. In the fall of 2024, we taught parallel courses on gender-based violence across three universities and disciplines. We developed a collaborative model of feminist support. We co-designed our syllabi, shared teaching materials, and, as three white cisgender women, worked together to actively centre the experiences of queer and/or racialized folks and to de-colonize our course materials. We met weekly to reflect, troubleshoot, and care for one another. This paper reflects on this process as a form of feminist praxis—one that foregrounds care, reciprocity, and collective reflection as pedagogical tools. Our approach was both effective and affective and our experience contributes to feminist pedagogical scholarship by demonstrating that cross-institutional collaboration can mitigate the isolation of academic labour. This experiment both improved our teaching and helped us maintain wellness and enthusiasm while teaching difficult materials.

Keywords: cooperative teaching; feminist pedagogy; neoliberal academia; faculty burnout

Résumé : Dans un contexte où la violence fondée sur le genre sur les campus universitaires fait l'objet d'une prise de conscience croissante, il est urgent d'enseigner cette problématique. Les cours portant sur la violence fondée sur le genre ont un potentiel transformateur : ils peuvent favoriser une conscience critique, remettre en question les inégalités systémiques et contribuer à un changement social plus vaste. Pourtant, comme nous le rappelle bell hooks (1994), l'enseignement transformateur exige plus qu'une rigueur intellectuelle : il nécessite une présence émotionnelle, de la bienveillance, de la collaboration et de la vulnérabilité. Pour les personnes enseignantes, en particulier les femmes et les membres du corps professoral racisés ou queers, ce travail suppose souvent une importante charge émotionnelle. Cet article porte sur notre expérience de collaboration et de soutien pédagogiques féministes entre établissements comme moyen de résister à l'impératif néolibéral et de rendre plus durables les cours exigeants sur le plan émotionnel et susceptibles d'être transformateurs. À l'automne 2024, nous avons donné des cours parallèles sur la violence fondée sur le genre dans trois universités et trois disciplines. Nous avons élaboré un modèle de soutien féministe collaboratif. Nous avons conçu nos plans de cours conjointement, avons partagé du matériel pédagogique et, en tant que trois femmes blanches cisgenres, avons travaillé ensemble afin de placer activement au centre les expériences des personnes queers ou racisées et de décoloniser le contenu de nos cours. Nous nous sommes réunies chaque semaine pour réfléchir, résoudre les problèmes rencontrés et prendre soin les unes des autres. Cet article porte sur ce processus en tant que forme de praxis féministe, une approche qui place la bienveillance, la réciprocité et la réflexion collective au premier plan comme outils pédagogiques. Notre approche était à la fois efficace et axée sur l'affect, et notre expérience contribue aux travaux universitaires sur la pédagogie féministe en démontrant que la collaboration entre établissements peut atténuer l'isolement associé au travail universitaire. Cette expérience a non seulement amélioré notre

enseignement, mais nous a également aidées à préserver notre bien-être et notre enthousiasme tout en enseignant des contenus difficiles.

Mots clés : enseignement coopératif; pédagogie féministe; milieu universitaire néolibéral; épuisement professionnel du corps professoral

Authors:

Lori Chambers is a Professor of Gender and Women's Studies at Lakehead University, Thunder Bay, where she teaches courses in feminist theory, legal history, and feminism and the law.

Bailey Gerrits was the inaugural Mila Mulroney Research Chair in Women, Policy and Governance Leadership at St. Francis Xavier University in Nova Scotia, before joining the public sector.

Nadia Verrelli is an Associate Professor at Laurentian University, where she teaches courses in the Law and Justice program focusing on constitutional and public law.

“I love that we decided to do these meetings” (week 10).

Amid growing awareness of gender-based violence on university campuses, teaching about this issue is urgent. Courses on gender-based violence hold transformative potential: they can foster critical consciousness, challenge systemic inequalities, and contribute to broader social change. Yet, as bell hooks (1994) reminds us, transformative teaching demands more than intellectual rigor—it requires emotional presence, care, collaboration, and vulnerability. For instructors, especially women, racialized, and/or genderqueer faculty, this work often entails significant emotional labour. Within neoliberal academic institutions that prioritize productivity and demand, but do not adequately support, increasing care for students, this affective labour can lead to burnout (Bodenheimer and Shuster 2019).¹ This paper reflects on our experience of feminist pedagogical collaboration and support across institutions as a means of resisting the neoliberal imperative and making emotionally-challenging and potentially transformational courses more sustainable.

In the fall of 2024, we taught parallel courses on gender-based violence across three universities and disciplines. Acknowledging the emotional toll of this work, we developed a collaborative model of feminist support. We co-designed our syllabi, shared teaching materials, and, as three white cisgender women, worked together to actively centre the experiences of queer and/or racialized folks and to de-colonize our course materials. Once the course had begun, we met weekly to reflect, troubleshoot, and care for one another. This paper reflects on this process as a form of feminist praxis—one that foregrounds care, reciprocity, and collective reflection as pedagogical tools. Drawing on Sara Ahmed's (2017) notion of a “shared feminist project,” we argue that this collaboration not only enhanced our teaching but also created a space of emotional support. Our approach was both effective and affective. Our experience contributes to feminist pedagogical scholarship by demonstrating that cross-institutional collaboration can mitigate the isolation of academic labour, particularly in small institutions or under-resourced departments.

The paper begins by situating our work within the context of gender-based violence on campus, the need for *engaged pedagogy* specifically related to this problem, and the extra emotional challenges inherent in this work. It is also situated in the current academic climate in which faculty are denied support and subjected to expanding expectations. We describe our praxis and collaborative approach and reflect on its impact through insights drawn from our weekly conversations. We conclude that shared work and feminist care can be ways to fight back against neo-liberal aca-

demia, isolation, and overwork. For us, this experiment both improved our teaching and helped us maintain wellness and enthusiasm while teaching difficult materials.

Gender-Based Violence and the Academy

We chose to teach about gender-based violence because it is a serious concern to each of us personally, for our students, and in our communities. University-age women and genderqueer individuals in Canada face disproportionately high rates of gender-based violence. In 2019, 11% of women students surveyed by Statistics Canada reported being sexually assaulted in a postsecondary setting within the preceding twelve months (Statistics Canada 2020, 1). Over their time at colleges and universities in Canada, one in five women students report experiencing sexual assault (Burczycka 2019; Shankar and Tavcer 2021). Racialized and marginalized individuals are particularly at risk (Barlow 2020). These figures likely underestimate the full scope of harm: a report on Albertan post-secondary schools identified that 50% of students reported experiencing some form of gender-based violence (Leger 2023). While this is not a new problem, it has recently received more sustained attention, with some universities changing their policies, implementing more robust anti-violence training programs, and creating dedicated positions or offices to handle complaints of gender-based violence (Nelund 2020). It has also led to demands for knowledge about gender-based violence and courses in this subject area. But such courses are demanding to teach. As Brandi Lawless and Yea-Wen Chen note, faculty who teach more challenging courses face an increased workload in the classroom (Lawless 2018; Lawless and Chen 2021). Instructors must deal with resistance to difficult materials and the emotional responses of students. They also have to manage their own—often complicated and intensely personal—relationships with the intellectual material being discussed. Universities do not provide specialized training for such demanding teaching, nor do they recognize the extra emotional load that such work creates. How, then, are we to maximize the transformative potential of education about gender-based violence in the context of a fundamentally uncaring university system?

The Neoliberal Academy and Demands on Instructors

At the same time universities are responding (perhaps ineffectively) to the problem of gender-based violence on campus and students are requesting courses in this area, there is a rise of neoliberalism in academia. With public divestment in postsecondary institutions, universities have come to rely on international students, rising tuition rates, and private donations to make up the shortfall. Recent federal caps on international student permits have triggered widespread concerns about layoffs and budget shortfalls (Baxter 2025). Universities are also relying more on precarious contract faculty and demanding more from faculty: larger class sizes, increased teaching loads, and greater expectations for student supervision and research productivity. These structural shifts coincide with rising emotional demands from students, who themselves are navigating precarious job markets, social and environmental crises, high tuition, mental health challenges, and pandemic education (Newcomb 2021). As institutions adopt a student-as-client model, faculty are increasingly expected to provide emotionally burdensome customer support alongside academic instruction. As Jayne Goode et al. (2020) argue, this requires faculty to provide “increasing and intensive social and emotional support for students.” (52). Instructors are under constant pressure to meet both the increasing emotional needs of students and the business needs of their institutions (Hester and Denker 2023).

The burden of emotional labour is not evenly distributed; women, racialized, and/or genderqueer faculty are disproportionately called upon to work as care workers (Berheide et al. 2022). M. P. Filby (1992) asserts that “emotional labour is a predictably gendered phenomenon” (24) yet these faculty also genuinely care for their students and want to assist them, “even if it might not be within our capacity in the moment that they demand this labor from us” (Hester and Denker 2023, 129). But these increased demands on faculty are rarely translated into reduced expectations in other aspects of the job, and faculty burnout is an increasing problem (Pope-Ruark 2022; Watts and Robertson 2011). Care work in teaching has been directly linked to burnout (Teven 2007), and “care labor is also often the cause and moment of clear role conflict for academics. We are pulled to keep up with our service commitments, teaching, and save those early morning hours for keeping our research line alive, but when that knock on the door comes, we choose every time what aspect of our jobs is given priority” (Hester and Denker 2023, 130). While Cana-

dian universities have begun to address student mental health through voluntary guidelines and wellness institutions (Mental Health Commission of Canada 2021), similar resources have not been developed for faculty and support for faculty well-being remains limited.

Emotional support is more in demand, and more needed, in classes with contested or emotionally difficult content, such as courses on gender-based violence. As Scarlett Hester and Katherine Denker (2023) note, “teaching difficult content or challenging students can be seen as personally risky” (130) whether because of the emotional impact of class or due to worry about the repercussions for teaching evaluations (Stern and Denker 2020). But these extra demands and challenges remain invisible. In environments without support for the well-being of instructors, undertaking feminist work brings with it the potential for emotional and professional exhaustion and breakdown. As Lindsay Naylor (2023,1) writes, “the neoliberal academy is a fundamentally un-caring space.”

Feminist scholars have developed strategies of resistance and resilience to counter the extractive demands of neoliberal academia. From bell hooks’s (1994) “engaged pedagogy” to the slow scholarship movement, these approaches offer alternative visions of academic life. Yet, as some have noted, these strategies can themselves be taxing and can disguise power structures (Morley 1998). The commitment to constant critical engagement in the classroom—a hallmark of hooks’s pedagogy—can increase the mental load for faculty. Similarly, while slow scholarship critiques the culture of speed and productivity endemic to the neoliberal university, it requires a deliberate reorientation toward care, collegiality, and relationality over metrics of efficiency (Berg & Seeber 2016; Mountz et al. 2015). Moreover, as Naylor (2023) argues, many of the most meaningful forms of resistance—such as peer mentoring, networks of support, and care-full leadership—remain invisible within institutional metrics of performance. These practices are undervalued precisely because they do not produce quantifiable outputs. Yet, they are essential interruptions to the individualized, competitive ethos of the neoliberal academy. As Ester Conesa Carpintero (2017) writes, “to place care in the centre of life, and to create the availability for time to care and care for time constitute some of the feminist politics of resistance and responsibility useful for scholars facing this time of crisis” (54). In short, care is political. And caring classrooms must provide care for the instructor and allow instructors to take care of their own emotional needs. As Audre Lorde (1988) argued in *A Burst of Light*, “caring for myself is not self-indulgence, it is self-preservation, and it is an act of political warfare” (131).

Engaged Pedagogy and a Feminist Ethics of Care

In our own teaching we aspire to the *engaged pedagogy* described by bell hooks. Following on the work of both John Dewey (1916) and Paolo Freire (1970), hooks critiqued the “banking” system of education in which students are viewed as vessels to be passively filled with knowledge. This process is never neutral and top-down education risks training, perhaps is even intended to train, learners into obedience rather than freedom. hooks asserted it is the responsibility of the teacher “to transform the curriculum so that it does not reflect biases or reinforced systems of domination” (1994, 21). Not only does this involve rethinking and de-colonizing the materials we teach and the ways by which we assess student learning, but *engaged pedagogy* also demands that we interact differently with students themselves. We must make space for diverse voices in the classroom, welcome students as humans in all their complexity, encourage them to bring their own experiences into the classroom, and be fully human ourselves in our interactions. This requires enhanced effort from instructors and, she acknowledged, would not be an easy or feel-good process.

To theorize the care required for *engaged pedagogy* more fully, we draw on Berenice Fisher and Joan Tronto’s (1990) articulation of an “ethics of care,” which has been widely taken up and expanded by feminist scholars. They define care as “everything that we do to maintain, continue, and repair our ‘world’ so that we can live in it as well as possible,” encompassing our bodies, selves, and environments in a “complex, life-sustaining web” (40). This ethics of care emphasizes attentiveness, responsiveness, and mutual responsibility—not only recognizing the needs of others but also being willing to receive care in return. Some early theorizations of care framed it as a uniquely feminine or maternal capacity, but these essentialist assumptions have been rightly critiqued. As Donna Engelmann (2009) argues, a feminist ethics of care need not rely on “feminine virtues” or universal claims about women’s moral reasoning. Neo-

liberal institutions, as noted above, implicitly adopt this view by requiring care work specifically of women-identified, genderqueer, and/or racialized faculty. Instead, care should be understood as a set of practices that require training, professionalism, and institutional recognition. We reject the notion that care flows naturally from women or is simply a product of socialization. Good feminist caregiving is not instinctual—it is skilled, intentional, and political. Yet, in academia, faculty are rarely trained in how to care, nor are they rewarded for the care they provide.

But how can this ethic of care be operationalized in teaching, especially within the uncaring structures of the neoliberal university, and particularly while teaching emotionally difficult and contested materials? We turned to collective action. Sara Ahmed (2014), writing as *feministkilljoys*, reminds us that collective acts of self-care rooted in anti-racist, queer, and feminist communities “can be...act[s] of political warfare....We reassemble ourselves through the ordinary, everyday and often painstaking work of looking after ourselves; looking after each other.” In this context, this project began as a way to reduce our workloads by working together to create course content that reflected our combined knowledge and was guided by anti-racist and anti-colonial approaches to gender-based violence. But its most important outcome was mutual support which counter-acted the lack of institutional respect and concern for both *engaged pedagogy* and the well-being of instructors who undertake emotionally difficult teaching. As Hester and Denker assert, feminist academics “are left struggling with how to balance mentoring our students and caring for them when there does not seem space or time to care for ourselves. We push forward as an act of love and resistance against a system that consistently demands more and reminds us that we are not doing enough” (2023, 123). We consider this project a form of feminist-based, care-full collaborative teaching.

Feminist Collaborative Teaching and the Courses We Taught

Isolation in teaching is entrenched in traditional interpretations of academic freedom which frame the classroom as a sovereign space in which individual instructors are protected from external interference (Engelmann 2009). While this autonomy is a hard-won right, it can also block pedagogical practices from collective reflection and improvement. In this individualized environment, there are structural and practical barriers to collaborative teaching in all its forms. Shared teaching may involve co-leading a single class or coordinating across sections with shared materials and goals; instructors may rotate presence in the classroom, observe one another and provide feedback, co-create course content, and/or share the process of assignment design and marking (Helms et al. 2005; Letterman and Dugan 2004). Collaboration requires significant coordination, upfront planning, and mutual trust, all of which are often in short supply within neoliberal institutions that prioritize efficiency and individual productivity and put faculty members implicitly in competition with one another (Morelock et al. 2017). Despite these barriers, working together on teaching offers substantial benefits. It can enhance professional development, foster peer-to-peer learning, and—when equitably structured—distribute teaching labour and provide mutual support (Laufgraben and Tomkins 2004; Morelock et al. 2017; Mountz et al. 2015). It can also improve student experience (Wadkins et al. 2006). All of these forms of cooperation challenge the dominant conception of teaching as an isolating, individualistic endeavor, but they all also require that faculty members be in place together or at least teach on the same schedule to share zoom space. We did not have such conditions of work.

Because of these circumstances, our model might not be recognized as team teaching as it is traditionally defined as “all arrangements that include two or more faculty in some level of collaboration in the planning and delivery of a course” (Davis 1995, 8). While we worked on a common course outline, we did not share teaching duties. Yet we were desperate for community as we set out to teach difficult courses on gender-based violence. Ironically, collaborative approaches to teaching (and other academic work) may be most needed for marginalized faculty in small, politically-engaged, and under-funded departments, descriptions that apply to all of our individual work situations. Unable to co-create learning materials in our small departments in which we were all the only individuals teaching courses on gender-based violence, we turned to colleagues and friends outside our own institutions for sharing and support. While most literature on shared teaching focuses on collaborations within a single institution, sometimes with an emphasis on interdisciplinarity (McDaniels and Colarulli 1997), our experiment expands this idea across institutions.

There were two central components to our collaborative teaching: we shared the work of developing all course materials and we met each week to debrief after our respective classes. We are all white cisgender women and we all taught courses on gender-based violence at Canadian universities with the following modules: violence based in gender identity; sexual assault; intimate partner violence; and missing and murdered Indigenous women and girls (MMIWG). Two of the participants also taught a unit on sex work and sex trafficking. Two of the classes were offered at the third-year level and the third was a graduate course. We co-developed a core outline with a common set of readings, including required as well as many additional recommended readings for future student reference, which each of us adapted based on the specific needs of our students. We all did some lecturing at the beginning of each unit and all lecture materials, slides, and extra videos etc. that could be shared with students were placed in a Google drive. We all made changes to the master documents at various times. We met each week throughout the term. The intention of these meetings was to review how students responded to materials, with a focus on improving the course for the future. But in practice the meetings became a place for mutual support as we struggled with student resistance to materials, the demands of our institutions, and the loneliness that can afflict feminist academics committed to *engaged pedagogy* in environments which do not provide practical or emotional support for such work.

Methodology

Each of us approached the term expecting that teaching about gender-based violence would be difficult (Isenbarger and Zembylas 2006) but also rewarding. We knew that we would face challenges as students confronted difficult concepts, dealt with their emotional responses to the materials, and required emotional care. But we hoped that the experience would be transformative for some of them who would either contextualize and better understand events in their own lives, or develop a deeper understanding of, and empathy for, victims/survivors of violence. We also knew that the materials would be personal and difficult for us as instructors. Our meetings were intended as an antidote to isolation.

We recorded our meetings, intending to document the ways in which review of multiple sections of a course could be useful for future course design and save us all time. Our research methodology is grounded in the tradition of collective feminist inquiry, drawing on the practice of collective critical autoethnography. Tony Adams and Jimmie Manning (2015) define autoethnography as a “research method that uses, and even foregrounds, a researcher’s personal experience (‘auto’) in an attempt to represent (‘graphy’) cultural experiences (‘ethno’)” (351). Following on the work of Andrew Herrmann (2021), we also conceptualize autoethnography as an act of love that is self-reflexive and transparent. Collective critical autoethnography allows a multivocal approach. As Jennifer Dyer and colleagues (2022) write, collective autoethnography can be a “feminist practice for disrupting, exposing, and critically analyzing social and structural power, making room for the unspoken, unseen, invisible aspects of labour and taking action towards a more just society” (97). Perhaps, in this context, it is not surprising that what emerged was not simply better course outlines, but a record of mutual support and wide-ranging discussions of the challenges of teaching and learning in a neoliberal world. Borrowing from rhetorical theory, particularly Aja Martinez (2025), we assert that our voices, and those of others, can contribute to a counterstory of academia, one in which sharing, cooperation, care, and reciprocity are centred for students and faculty alike. We are all storytellers and, using our counterstory as both a methodology and a tool, we can speak against a vision of academia which silences gender-based violence and harms both students and instructors (Martinez 2025).

For our analysis, we used nearly eighteen hours of audio data from these weekly discussions. Lori did an initial phenomenological thematic analysis using Paul Colaizzi’s (1978) seven-step method which involves extracting significant phrases, formulating meaning, and clustering themes. The preliminary themes were then reviewed collaboratively by Nadia and Bailey to ensure accuracy and credibility. Through this iterative process, the initial themes were affirmed and we deepened our collective understanding of the pedagogical and political dimensions of our collaborative teaching experience. We did not seek ethics approval for this study, nor did we collect data from students, and we do not discuss students themselves. We reflect only on our curriculum development and the ways in which we created a space in which to care for one another.

Findings

Our review identified two themes. First, collaborative teaching, even, and perhaps particularly, across institutions, is effective, rewarding, and pragmatic. It should be encouraged. We all saved a lot of time and effort by sharing our resources. We were able to reflect on course materials and assignments across multiple classroom experiences, a process that allowed us to revise the course to better serve future students. Second, it was also an affective practice which was extremely helpful for us all. Given the emotionally difficult materials we were teaching, weekly check-in meetings enabled us to approach the course with a feminist ethics of care. This improved our ability to respond to student disclosures, distress, and anger. Equally importantly, we were able to provide each other with care and support. To borrow from Sara Ahmed, this approach was an experiment in pragmatic sharing of workload, a survival strategy, and collective self-care (Ahmed 2014).

Collaboration as Effective Practice

Sharing the work of course preparation is pragmatic. We saved an enormous amount of time and effort by sharing our resources, even if we include the one- to two-hour weekly meetings. Before we began teaching in September of 2024 at our respective institutions, we began at ground zero with long discussions of the objectives of teaching a course on gender-based violence. While two of the instructors had taught a similar course previously, we did not simply adopt an old course outline but added two new modules for students: violence based on gender identity and violence in the context of sex work and sex trafficking. This required us not only to develop extensive reading lists, but also to prepare new lectures. All documents were loaded into a Google drive, which allowed us to revise them simultaneously. We had a number of discussions before the beginning of the term about readings, assignments, and the order in which to present our topics. As we prepared slides and collected videos and clips to accompany lectures, we posted everything to this drive so that what one produced, all had access to use. This time-saving approach is an important form of resistance in the context of overwork that is endemic in the social sciences and humanities, particularly in small, under-resourced institutions such as the ones in which all of the involved professors work.

Sharing the burden of course preparation allowed us to focus more on harder questions about delivery and best practices and to adapt the material to emerging themes in gender-based violence. Most particularly, we spent a lot of time talking about how to ensure that we, as white cisgender women, could present the materials on gender-based violence in a way that would be inclusive, anti-colonial, and anti-racist. All too often, feminist solutions to gender-based violence, particularly carceral solutions, have been narrowly conceived, and “sameness at the level of intervention can function to marginalize and further subordinate individuals who are not ‘the same’ as the imagined survivor of domestic violence” (Crenshaw 2010, 180). How would we ensure that we brought “attention to the multiple ways that patterns of power can converge...argue...against the elision of difference where it makes a difference, and against fetishizing difference where it does not”? (Crenshaw 2010, 165). We put a great deal of effort into providing readings and materials that reflect this commitment and to working and re-working all lectures in an attempt to ensure inclusivity.

The first week of the course was spent providing context for students about law and responses to violence, including strong critiques of carceral white feminism. We talked about systems of law in place before the arrival of common law, the origins of common law, and the problem of law as one of the master’s tools (Audre Lorde). We asked students how they define the problem of gender-based violence and provided a refresher about intersectionality (Crenshaw) (week 1). For a variety of reasons, including having our outlines correspond with planned events on our respective campuses, two of the instructors began the course with violence based in gender identity and the third with missing and murdered Indigenous women and girls. We all expressed concern that some students might respond negatively to expanding definitions of gender-based violence beyond the violence against women framework; this fear was not entirely misplaced. We were also very conscious of our responsibility to teach against colonialism and concerned about how the order of presentation of materials might be perceived. In particular, we viewed MMIWG as the most pressing issue of the term in the Canadian context. Would having it last on the list (for two of the instructors)

make it seem like an add-on when the intent was to show that “it all [colonial, misogynist law] leads to this” (week 1). The differences in how we delivered the materials offered us an opportunity to compare responses.

Once the term started, we met weekly and discussed how classes had gone in the previous week. This encouraged reflection on pedagogy. Each week we considered, across an audience of three very different groups of students, which materials had been well received, which readings students found difficult or misunderstood, and what modes of engagement worked best. The most common problem we faced was the fact that many of the undergraduate students did not complete their reading. We noted strategies that worked well to encourage deeper reading and engagement, in particular Bailey’s practice of splitting the class into two groups, assigning each a specific reading, and requiring them to explain it to the rest of the class (week 1). She noted that “they read more carefully with having to present” and that “she was really happy with thoughtful discussions” (week 2). Bailey and Nadia also both used exercises in which students worked in small groups identifying themes and problems in real trials (week 5).

We engaged in a lot of discussion about how to encourage better participation/reading. We sought out videos, clips, and other sources that might engage students who were resistant to reading and shared everything in our Google file. We were reminded of the importance of at least some lecturing to provide context for students who don’t read. We also found that it was very useful to do such lectures before discussions to head off misconceptions. We noted that difficult legal readings were beyond the abilities of many of the students in the third-year classes and should be recommended, not required, at this level in the future (week 3). And we all agreed that five full units seemed to be a bit overwhelming. Finally, students seemed to crave more information about sexual assault on campuses and the specifics of the individual institutions themselves (week 12). This information can and will be used to further revise the course in the future; in fact, two of the three instructors are in the process of revising this course collectively again for the fall of 2026 (the third left academia). The extensive feedback we were able to consider would be impossible to collect unless someone taught a course multiple times across varied programs, so it is incredibly valuable in improving the course. It would take a single instructor at least three years to amass this level of feedback/information and it might never be as diverse. This would be, therefore, a useful strategy across different courses and disciplines. We emphasize particularly that our experience illustrates that it is possible, and desirable, to collaborate not only within, but also across, institutions in the construction of course materials.

Collaboration as Affective Strategy and Ethics of Care

Care of Students

Teaching a course on gender-based violence means, by default, that the reading materials, lectures, and discussions are emotionally draining and difficult. As we noted, “the course title is itself a trigger warning” (week 1) and “it is built into the course outline and alternative possibilities for participation” (week 9). We all allowed students to come and go from class if they were in distress and provided means for them to participate privately, in writing on our various course websites, over email or in the office with the instructor. While such adjustments made it possible for students to participate when they were sick or distressed, they did not preclude difficult in-classroom responses and situations. The reading materials themselves for these classes are complaintful; they reflect an on-going critique of patriarchal relations and of the silencing of the suffering caused by gender-based violence. Students often have had few previous opportunities to speak about these issues. As Sara Ahmed notes, “to be heard as complaining is not to be heard” and the feminist classroom may then be a place of profound importance and freedom for students (2021, 1). But this creates challenges for instructors: how can we appropriately respond to disclosures/distress and disagreement/anger. We are not provided with any training for these encounters and our discussions allowed us to reflect upon how best to respond in these nuanced situations.

Dealing with the topics covered in a course on gender-based violence is challenging for students for many reasons. Some have experienced violence themselves, or know others who have experienced such violence, and may disclose their experiences in class. While personal experience can be an important topic for discussion, instructors must ensure that students don’t “trauma dump” on their classmates while remaining sensitive in their response to students

who disclose. Each of us confronted this fact directly in our initial classes, asking students to be careful when sharing personal details/experiences and noting that, while we will always be caring, “we cannot provide crisis support” (week 1). It would not be safe for us to serve as counsellors as we have not been trained for this role. But we do have to recognize student distress and know how to connect them with resources on and off campus. We provided lists of services (specific to each institution) available on campus, in our wider communities, and online, including twenty-four-hour crisis lines and support services. We noted that many students do not seem to be aware of the services and programs that are available on campus (week 1). We had long discussions with our classes about the need for self-care and community care.

We noted that “learning is uncomfortable” (week 1) and that we have to provide a safe space for people to speak freely while also protecting students from harm. We all described positive discussion and engagement for our students and provided careful wording in our course outlines about the need for respect in the classroom. We were particularly concerned about the potential for anti-trans speech and/or racism in the classroom. We worried that anti-trans sentiments might emerge in the context of discussions of violence based in gender identity. We noted that students could be simultaneously outraged by violence against trans and nonbinary folks, yet subtly discriminatory themselves in their language and reliance on experience and feelings rather than facts. Similarly, some students professed anti-racist sentiment but supported carceral solutions to gender-based violence that would harm racialized groups. Careful questioning and re-directing of such sentiments were at times required and our discussions allowed us to consider what did and did not work in such situations (specifics not discussed to respect student privacy).

Further, anger is inevitable in discussions of gender-based violence as students confront the profound injustices embedded in law and society. The rules of engagement in the classroom have to leave a space for anger, but it has to be clear “that you can’t take it out on a specific person” (week 1). We have never received ANY training about how to teach in a trauma-informed and sensitive manner and how to negotiate these challenges. Anger can be incredibly productive and is a valid response to the horrors discussed in class. Yet, students may not come into the classroom with the skills to express their strong emotions or may not be receptive to corraling by the instructor.

Weekly chats helped us to develop concrete strategies and responses and to enact a feminist ethic of care in our classrooms and office hours while maintaining a focus on learning. These included the careful construction of wording in course outlines, gentle re-direction, and questions that could be posed to counter anger that felt too personal. These discussions about dealing with student disclosures, disagreement, and anger should be more widespread on all campuses, but small-group support outside of our institutions was incredibly valuable for each of us in expanding our respective repertoires of classroom tools.

Care of One Another

Critically, our weekly meetings enabled us to provide support for one another. Teaching about gender-based violence is inherently difficult: “this is a hard course to teach. It is a hard course to manage. This is why I love that we decided to do these meetings” (week 10). We are all passionate about addressing gender-based violence. Each of us has written and researched about the topic and engaged in community-based leadership to try to support survivors and work towards a better world. We shared many hopes for our courses. Student responses can be—and sometimes were—deeply rewarding. As one instructor noted, it was “uplifting” to see such an open response to something that was new to the students: “it was quite beautiful...[a] room full of good humans” (week 3). And we all had students who produced work that was inspiring and thought-provoking (week 7). But classroom dynamics and student responses could also be both challenging and disappointing. For example, in both undergraduate classes, “it was like pulling teeth to get them to think about capitalism as a master’s tool” (week 2). When undergraduates were resistant to reading, we reminded each other that “when they don’t read and it doesn’t work, we don’t have to take responsibility” (week 12). As one of us noted, it is “hard, you feel so optimistic when you start...but it is a little bit heartbreaking” (week 5). Our weekly meetings provided a space to work through these disappointments.

It was also a space in which we could openly discuss the extra work that is created by *engaged pedagogy* and political commitment. For example, we all had disclosures of violence from students. These are both heartbreaking and challenging. There is the problem, often, of how to respond in class: how does one both support the disclosing student appropriately and simultaneously keep the class from becoming a space of quasi-therapy? We used humor to combat our feelings of overwork and joked that we could reduce the problem of disclosures by “being less approachable. Be more of a bitch...Happy they feel open. But I don’t want that burden” (week 2). This was not an endorsement of mean-girl feminism, described by Kim Hong Nguyen (2024) as “white rage...allowing white women to ‘reclaim’ bitchiness as feminist performativity”, but a recognition of the work that kindness in the classroom creates. Frustration and overwork would not justify meanness or any attempt to ignore the disclosures and rage of students. Teaching compassionately, however, increases our workload in ways that are not recognized by any of our universities. Little thought is given by our institutions to the harm done to faculty in classrooms in which they have to deal with sometimes hostile students, widespread student trauma, contested subject matter, and their own complicated relations to difficult materials, in this case violence which instructors have also often experienced directly themselves. The university wants to protect itself, not its instructors. Talking about how we felt each week, we provided care for one another. It would be easier to avoid classes like this one. Yet, all three of us remain determined that we are “not going to not talk about hard topics” (week 5).

Our conversations jumped frequently between the professional and the personal and we provided more general support to one another given that we are all surrounded by anti-feminist sentiment. For example, when one of us heard a lecture by a colleague in which he reinforced many myths and misconceptions about intimate partner violence, she “left feeling sick and angry” and we provided her with a safe space in which to rant and vent (week 6). As Lori noted after the very first week of classes, it was comforting to know that we would have somewhere to discuss any challenges that emerged: “If I fuck up, I have a safe space to process it the next day. To say, hey, what would you have done differently. Because with this course, the materials are brutal and the students will struggle” (week 1). And as Bailey noted, it “makes you feel better. Yesterday I was batting my head against the wall a bit...but I know that I am not alone” (week 5). Teaching these topics is “emotionally draining” (week 12). Our support for one another gave us strength as individuals and as a collective.

Conclusions

Some feminist rethinking of teaching focuses on the collaborative and co-constituted nature of the classroom (Colwill and Boyd 2008). Our experiment taught us that it is beneficial to think about this collaborative responsibility beyond the classroom and beyond a single institution. By supporting one another, we improved our teaching, reduced our workloads, countered academic isolation, and centred our own well-being— creating more sustainable professional practices and reducing our risk of burnout. There were challenges. We each had to adapt the course to our individual institutions’ schedules, and we were not always able to teach the same topic at the same time. Nonetheless, our sharing of resources reduced the labour required to prepare and revise the course, a fact of significant importance and impact in the context of the neoliberal institution and the overwork each of us faces. It also allowed us to share responses and to think about adaptations to the course that might be useful in the future, providing an opportunity to improve the course based on extensive and varied feedback. This would be useful in many contexts beyond the particulars of the class we were teaching.

But the choice to collaborate and to meet weekly to debrief was also an important challenge to the isolation and emotional burden specific to teaching about gender-based violence. Gendered expectations for care in the classroom can be quite high and the demands on instructors in emotionally difficult courses are burdensome. Our weekly debriefing made our teaching more successful (and less harmful to us as instructors) in two specific ways. One, it was a space of professional development where we could improve our caring skills. We learned from one another about classroom best practices and meeting the needs of diverse students. Two, it was also a space in which we could give and receive care. We were able to counter the individualism and isolation of the neoliberal institutions for which we work and to support each other in a myriad of ways across the term.

Traditional mentorship often assumes a hierarchical relationship in which a senior scholar imparts wisdom to a junior colleague. Feminist co-mentorship, by contrast, emphasizes reciprocity, multidirectional learning, and the dismantling of hierarchical norms (Bona et al. 1995; McGuire and Reger 2003). While junior scholars still greatly benefit from the experience of their senior colleagues, co-mentorship also centres the needs of the whole person, not just the professional role (Bona et al. 1995; McGuire and Reger 2003). Moreover, senior scholars can (and in this case did) learn new techniques, theories, and pedagogical approaches from younger scholars. This holistic approach aligns with feminist commitments to relationality, care, and the recognition of emotional labour as work. Mentorship and peer-to-peer exchanges are forms of resistance to the toxicity of academic life (Naylor 2023). They are embedded in broader feminist practices that seek to build and sustain communities of support, such as feminist writing groups and collaborative research collectives. As Alison Mountz and colleagues (2015) argue in their work on slow scholarship, these practices challenge the neoliberal university's emphasis on speed, competition, and individualism. Our experiment follows in this genealogy of feminist academics who have sought to reimagine academic life through practices of care and collaboration. We recommend collaborative teaching across institutions and small group support for others teaching similar materials as an effective and affective way of reducing the burdens and the isolation of teaching. Our innovative teaching across institutions was both a practical strategy for reducing workload and a survival strategy for avoiding burnout in contexts of profound institutional neglect of faculty needs. It is an approach we will undertake again and which we highly recommend to others. Cooperative course construction can save time and improve course materials. And weekly check-ins and support can help us to counter the demands of our neoliberal workplaces, allowing us to better care—not only for our students, but for each other and ourselves. These are acts of “self-preservation” and feminist “political warfare” (Lorde 1988, 131) through “collective self-care” (Ahmed 2014; Ahmed 2023).

Endnotes

1. Instructors may take pleasure in providing emotional labour and research has found this to be the case for some. Our point is to highlight that unsupported emotional labour is a problem.

Works Cited

- Adams, Tony E., and Jimmie Manning. 2015. “Autoethnography and Family Research.” *Journal of Family Theory and Review* 7 (4): 350–66. <https://doi.org/10.1111/jftr.12116>.
- Ahmed, Sara. 2014. “Selfcare as Warfare.” *Feministkilljoys*, August 25. feministkilljoys.com/2014/08/25/selfcare-as-warfare/.
- _____. 2017. *Living a Feminist Life*. Duke University Press.
- _____. 2021. *Complaint!* Duke University Press.
- _____. 2023. *The Feminist Killjoy Handbook: The Radical Potential of Getting in the Way*. Seal Press.
- Barlow, Jameta Nicole. 2020. “Black Women, the Forgotten Survivors of Sexual Assault.” *American Psychological Association*, February 1. www.apa.org/topics/sexual-assault-harassment/black-women-sexual-violence.
- Baxter, David. 2025. “International Student Cap Sees Universities Facing ‘Across the Board’ Cuts.” *Global News*, January 18. globalnews.ca/news/10966102/international-student-cap-university-impact/.
- Berg, Maggie & Barbara Seeber. 2016. *The Slow Professor: Challenging the Culture of Speed in the Academy*. University of Toronto Press.
- Berheide, C. W., M. A. Carpenter, and D. A. Cotter. 2022. “Teaching College in the Time of COVID-19: Gender and Race Differences in Faculty Emotional Labor.” *Sex Roles* 86: 441–55. doi.org/10.1007/s11199-021-01271-0.
- Bodenheimer, Grayson, and Stef M. Shuster. 2019. “Emotional Labour, Teaching and Burnout: Investigating Complex Relationships.” *Educational Research* 62(1): 63–76. doi.org/10.1080/00131881.2019.1705868.

- Bona, Mary Jo, Jane Rinehart, and Rose Mary Volbrecht. 1995. "Show Me How to Do Like You: Co-Mentoring as Feminist Pedagogy." *Feminist Teacher* 9(3): 116–24. www.jstor.org/stable/40545722.
- Burczycka, Marta. 2020. "Students' Experiences of Unwanted Sexualized Behaviors and Sexual Assault at Postsecondary Schools in the Canadian Provinces, 2019." *Government of Canada*, September 14. www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/pub/85-002-x/2020001/article/00005-eng.htm.
- Carpintero, Ester Conesa. 2017. "(No) Time for Care and Responsibility: From Neoliberal Practice in Academia to Collective Responsibility in Times of Crisis." In *Teaching Gender*, edited by B. Revelles-Benavente and A. Ramos. Routledge.
- Colaizzi, Paul. 1978. "Psychological Research as the Phenomenologist Views It." In *Existential Phenomenological Alternatives for Psychology*, edited by R. S. Valle and K. Mark. Oxford University Press.
- Colwill, Elizabeth, and Richard Boyd. 2008. "Teaching without a Mask?: Collaborative Teaching as Feminist Practice." *NWSA Journal* 20(2): 216–46.
- Crenshaw, Kimberlé. 1989. "Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Anti-discrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics." *University of Chicago Legal Forum* 1989(1): 139–67. chicagounbound.uchicago.edu/uclf/vol1989/iss1/8/.
- Crenshaw, Kimberlé. 2010. "Close Encounters of Three Kinds: On Teaching Dominance Feminism and Intersectionality." *Tulsa Law Review* 46(1): 151–90.
- Davis, J. R. 1995. *Interdisciplinary Courses and Team Teaching: New Arrangements for Learning*. ACE/Oryx Press.
- Dewey, John. 1916. *Democracy and Education: An Introduction to the Philosophy of Education*. Macmillan.
- Dyer, Jennifer, Sarah Pickett, Jennifer Davis, Kathleen Hackett, Cindy Holmes, Julie James et al. 2022. "Collaborative Autoethnography for Feminist Research." In *Rethinking Feminist Theories for Social Work Practice*, edited by C. Cocker and T. Hafford-Letchfield. doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-94241-0_6.
- Engelmann, Donna. 2009. "Another Look at a Feminist Ethics of Teaching." *Atlantis: Critical Studies in Gender, Culture & Social Justice* 33(2): 62–71.
- Filby, M. P. 1992. "'The Figures, the Personality and the Bums': Service Work and Sexuality." *Work, Employment and Society* 6(1): 23–42. doi.org/10.1177/0950017092006001003.
- Freire, Paulo. 2011. *Pedagogy of the Oppressed. [Anniversary Edition]*. Translated by Myra Bergman Ramos. Continuum.
- Fisher, Berenice, and Joan Tronto. 1990. "Toward a Feminist Theory of Caring." In *Circles of Care: Work and Identity in Women's Lives*, edited by E. Abel and M. Nelson. State University of New York Press.
- Goode, Jayne, Katherine Denker, Daniel Cortese, Lisa Carlson, and Kerri Morris. 2020. "Intrusive Teaching: The Strain of Care Labor, Identity and the Emerging Majority in Higher Education." *Journal of Communication Pedagogy* 3: 49–64. doi.org/10.31446/jcp.2020.06.
- Helms, M. M., J. M. Alvis, and M. Willis. 2005. "Planning and Implementing Shared Teaching: An MBA Team-Teaching Case Study." *Journal of Education for Business* 81(1): 29–34.
- Herrmann, Andrew F. 2021. "Autoethnography as Acts of Love." In *Handbook of Autoethnography*, edited by Tony E. Adams, Stacy Holman Jones, and Carolyn Ellis. doi.org/10.4324/9780429431760-7.
- Hester, Scarlett and Katherine Denker. 2023. "Beyond Burnout: Gaming, Glowing, and Building Feminist Mentor Community." In *Feminist Mentoring in Academia*, edited by Leandra Hernandez, Stevie Munz and Jessica Pauly.
- hooks, bell. 1994. *Teaching to Transgress: Education as the Practice of Freedom*. Routledge.

- Isenbarger, L. and M. Zembylas. 2006 “The Emotional Labour of Caring in Teaching.” *Teaching and Teacher Education* 22(1): 120–34. doi.org/10.1016/j.tate.2005.07.002.
- Laufgraben, J. L., and D. Tompkins. 2004. “Pedagogy that Builds Community.” In *Sustaining and Improving Learning Communities*, edited by J. L. Laufgraben and N. S. Shapiro. Jossey-Bass.
- Lawless, Brandi. 2018. “Documenting a Labor of Love: Emotional Labor as Academic Labor.” *Review of Communication* 18(2): 85–97. doi.org/10.1080/15358593.2018.1438644.
- Lawless, Brandi, and Yea-Wen Chen. 2021. “What COVID-19 Taught Us About Pedagogy and Social Justice—Pandemic or Not.” *Journal of Communication Pedagogy* 5: 4–40. doi.org/10.31446/jcp.2021.2.02.
- Leger. 2023. “Sexual and Gender-Based Violence in Alberta Post-Secondary Education.” August 4. open.alberta.ca/dataset/e2d403c7-e13f-4a21-9c38-d21a66784a2a/resource/e7a2fd4b-a167-4643-9518-73e0191160cd/download/ae-sexual-gender-based-violence-ab-ps-education-2023-08.pdf.
- Letterman, M. R. and K. B. Dugan. 2004. “Team Teaching a Cross-Disciplinary Honors Course: Preparation and Development.” *College Teaching* 52(2): 76–79.
- Lorde, Audre. 1988. *A Burst of Light*. Firebrand Books.
- Martinez, Aja. 2025. *Counterstory: The Rhetoric and Writing of Critical Race Theory*. [2nd ed.] National Council of Teachers of English.
- McDaniels, E. A., and G. C. Colarulli. 1997. “Collaborative Teaching in the Face of Productivity Concerns: The Dispersed Team Model.” *Innovative Higher Education* 22(1): 19–36.
- McGuire, Gail M., and Jo Reger. 2003. “Feminist Co-Mentoring: A Model for Academic Professional Development.” *NWSA Journal* 15(1): 54–72. www.jstor.org/stable/4316944.
- Mental Health Commission of Canada. 2021. “The National Standard for Mental Health and Well-Being for Post-Secondary Students: Frequently Asked Questions.” mentalhealthcommission.ca/wpcontent/uploads/2021/09/student_standard_faq_2020_eng_0.pdf.
- Morelock, John R., Marlena McGlothlin Lester, Michelle D. Klopfer, et al. 2017. “Power, Perceptions, and Relationships: A Model of Co-Teaching in Higher Education.” *College Teaching* 65(4): 182–91. doi.org/10.1080/87567555.2017.1336610.
- Morley, Louise. 1998. “All You Need Is Love: Feminist Pedagogy for Empowerment and Emotional Labour in the Academy.” *International Journal of Inclusive Education* 2(1): 15–27. doi.org/10.1080/1360311980020102.
- Mountz, Alison, Anne Bonds, Becky Mansfield, et al. 2015. “For Slow Scholarship: A Feminist Politics of Resistance through Collective Action in the Neoliberal University.” *ACME: An International Journal for Critical Geographies* 14(4): 1235–59. doi.org/10.14288/acme.v14i4.1058.
- Naylor, Lindsay. 2023. “A Feminist Ethic of Care in the Neoliberal University.” *Society + Space*, October 2. www.societyandspace.org/articles/a-feminist-ethic-of-care-in-the-neoliberal-university.
- Nelund, Amanda. 2020. “10 New Policies, Old Problems? Problematizing University Policies.” In *Violence Interrupted: Confronting Sexual Violence on University Campuses*, edited by Diane Crocker, Joanne Minaker and Amanda Nelund. McGill-Queen’s University Press. doi.org/10.1515/9780228002383-013.
- Newcomb, Michelle. 2021. “The Emotional Labour of Academia in a Time of Pandemic: A Feminist Reflection.” *Qualitative Social Work* 20(1-2): 639–44.
- Nguyen, Kim Hong. 2024. *Mean Girl Feminism: How White Feminists Gaslight, Gatekeep, and Girlboss*. University of Illinois Press.

- Pope-Ruark, Rebecca. 2022. *Unraveling Faculty Burnout: Pathways to Reckoning and Renewal*. Johns Hopkins University Press.
- Shankar, Irene, and D. Scharie Tavcer. 2021. “‘Good People with Good Intentions’: Deconstructing A Post-Secondary Institution’s Sexual Violence Policy Construction.” *Canadian Journal of Educational Administration and Policy* 195: 2–16. doi.org/10.7202/1075669ar.
- Statistics Canada. 2020. “One in Ten Women Students Sexually Assaulted in a Postsecondary Setting.” September 14. www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/en/daily-quotidien/200914/dq200914a-eng.pdf?st=TqEshuDQ.
- Stern, Danielle and Katherine Denker. 2020. “Privileged Vulnerability: Embodied Pedagogy as Critical Rhetorical Praxis.” *International Journal of Communication* 14: 799–812. doi.org/1932–8036/20200005.
- Teven, Jason J. 2007. “Teacher Temperament: Correlates with Teacher Caring, Burnout, and Organizational Outcomes.” *Communication Education* 56(3): 382–400. doi.org/10.1080/03634520701361912.
- Wadkins, T., R. L. Miller, and W. Wozniak. 2006. “Team Teaching: Student Satisfaction and Performance.” *Teaching of Psychology* 22(2): 118–20.
- Watts, J., and N. Robertson. 2011. “Burnout in University Teaching Staff: A Systematic Literature Review.” *Educational Research* 53(1): 33–50. doi.org/10.1080/00131881.2011.552235.