

Applying Analysis: Towards Addressing Violence in Non-Credit Feminist Learning Contexts with Differently Located Women

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Abstract

This paper explores the unconscious role that educators may play in perpetuating subtle violence in feminist non-credit learning spaces with differently located women. Following this analysis I offer issues with which educators can engage in order to analyse and address these ongoing forms of systemic violence in their praxis.

Résumé

Cet article explore le rôle inconscient que les éducateurs et les éducatrices pourraient jouer dans la perpétuation subtile de la violence dans les cours féministes sans unités avec les femmes situées dans des en droits différents. En suivant cette analyse j'offre des questions avec lesquelles les éducateurs et les éducatrices peuvent engager afin de pouvoir analyser et adresser ces formes de violence systémiques courantes dans leurs praxies.

Introduction

Collective learning spaces have been touted by a range of activists and academics as providing emancipatory possibilities for social change (Allen 2000; Freire 1971 & 1994; Giroux 1983 & 1993; Kichelou and McLaren 2000; Mezirow 1990 & 1995; Sarachild 2000). Collective feminist non-credit learning spaces are particularly important for women, as these spaces can counteract the "chilly climate" of systemic oppression they experience in other contexts that may marginalize women from realizing their full potential (Blakemore *et al.* 1997; Chilly Collective 1995; Ng 1993).

I have been working as a facilitator of feminist non-credit learning experiences for women in a variety of settings, such as workplaces, settlement services, and continuing education or grassroots organizations, for a number of years. I support the broad aim of education and organizing efforts for women in order to empower them and the communities they are a part of for social movement building. These learning spaces are powerful as they eliminate some of the power dynamics of dominance and submission that play out in co-ed groups and focus on the experiences of women, building theory and strategies for action around the stories women share about their lived realities.

One principle of non-credit learning spaces is that they are free from standardized curriculum, grades or credits. This is done to alleviate students' anxiety about performing for the teacher in order to gain approval. However, can this ever be entirely achieved? While such learning spaces may appear neutral, or free from power dynamics, they may also unconsciously create contexts where differently located women experience further marginalization. Violence against women can be perpetuated in these spaces

as a result of the many, and often subtle, ways in which repression towards women occurs. This repression may not always be easy to see for those perpetuating it.

Feminists, seeking to address power dynamics that exist in learning and organizing spaces for women, continue to wrestle with issues of participation, voice and inclusion, which have been a source of tension in the women's movement for quite some time (hooks 1984; Rebick 2005). Given the power dynamics between educators and learners, particularly given their different social locations, questions that guide this paper are: In what ways might violence play a role in women's non-credit learning spaces? How can educators navigate the power dynamics of collective feminist non-credit learning spaces in order for differently located women to feel safe enough to learn (differently located is used to describe different experiences of oppression based on markers of identity such as race, ethnicity, class, and sexual orientation, among others)? What is the role of the educator in determining the success of the endeavour to bring these women together?

In this paper, I explore the role of the educator in creating non-credit learning spaces for women that attempt to counter the chilly climate for differently located women. This sheds light on the ways that educators may unconsciously perpetuate oppressive conditions in these spaces. To do this, I draw on Sara Ahmed's (2000) theory of "The Stranger" and Ghassan Hage's (2000) analysis of how exclusion happens within a nation. These theories look at Othering processes within contexts that are trying to represent themselves as inclusive while creating exclusion. I explore these theories to consider how an educator may unwittingly follow similar processes of Othering within a feminist non-credit learning space, and to raise important questions about safety and inclusion in such learning spaces.

Violence in Women's Non-Credit Learning Spaces

Violence can be unpacked in multiple ways. Systemic violence is built into cultural practices, taking the form of racism, classism,

sexism, and homophobia (among others), which are rooted in powerful hegemonic ideas that become the "common sense" (Gramsci 1971) understanding of the way things are. At the interpersonal level, violence plays out as women are subjugated by men and also through women's adversarial relationships with one another. The latter may look like condescension, scorn, or tolerance as opposed to acceptance or celebration of one another. At the personal level, violence expresses itself in terms of women's relationships with themselves, as systemic oppression is internalized and experienced as self-loathing. While there may be commonalities in this experience, the nature and degree of this internalized oppression will vary based on women's intersecting identities.

Having participated in many feminist non-credit learning environments, my aim is to share the general problematic of these spaces and open a dialogue for educators to consider how this relates to their own work. Based on scenarios I have witnessed and experienced, I offer a possible everyday scene:

A White/Anglo, able bodied, heterosexual educator greets women of many different marginalized identities as the women enter the workshop space. She makes a point of being very friendly and welcoming to everyone, although it is clear that some women know her, and each other, and others do not. She begins the workshop with an icebreaker so that participants can mingle and begin to feel more at ease. Then she introduces herself and asks for participants to do the same. Everyone around the circle shares her name and where she is from. Everyone seems cordial, yet formal; it feels a bit as though the participants are saying only what they think they need to say for the activity and nothing more. She asks questions of participants, to draw them out to say more about themselves, or to relate what women are saying to what others have already shared. She responds with curiosity, especially to stories that are unfamiliar to her. Participants reciprocate with long moments of silence and lack of eye contact in the group.

What is going on here? What, if anything, should be done? In this scenario, there are many possible interpretations of what is happening and ways to respond.

Perhaps participants are just warming up to each other and, in time, will feel more open through facilitating greater participation. Perhaps the educator might need to change how she is framing her questions. These responses are both action oriented.

While these are viable options, I would like to suggest that responses to group dynamics within learning spaces need not always be led by action. These moments may be fertile for thinking through, or focusing on analysing a given situation first. As much as feminist non-credit learning spaces aim to be non-hierarchical and address violence at all levels, these learning spaces, and those who participate in them, are not immune to perpetuating violence and subordination.

One avenue for exploration in the scenario posed is the power dynamics present in the space. In their role, educators have more power than participants in the learning space. If you bring personal social location into the equation, this power may be compounded. Given that tensions between differently located women within feminist learning and organizing spaces is prevalent (hooks 1994; Uttal 1990), it is important to explore how these spaces may perpetuate the marginalization of differently located women.

Specifically, it is fruitful to contemplate the educator's role in constructing differently located women as the Other while facilitating the sharing of experience across differences. In the next section, I focus on the educator's role and explore through theory how, inadvertently, in their presence and (in)action, educators may act in ways that perpetuate violence in women's non-credit learning spaces.

The Making of The Stranger

Within the group dynamics in the scenario described, it is likely that the educator was treating participants differentially, in ways that corresponded to differences within their identities. To understand the phenomenon of how difference is conjured and how this enables the creation of an "us" and "them," I look at Sara Ahmed's theory of The Stranger. This idea of The Stranger is useful in illuminating

how differences are produced and used to exclude in spaces such as the feminist non-formal learning spaces in question. In her theory, Ahmed focuses on race as a means by which difference is manifest; however, differences based on ethnicity, sexual orientation, religious beliefs, age, or other visible markers can also be examined using her lens, as all of these identities have the potential to provoke alienation from others, and from oneself.

Ahmed explains the need of privileged individuals to have contact with those who are unknown, different, or considered to be The Stranger, in order to reaffirm their identities (Ahmed 2000, 39). The naming of The Stranger does the work of forming a "we," as one who belongs or is known in contrast to The Stranger (2000, 55). When dominant groups claim the title "we," this therefore requires a "them" (72-73). This process entails the demarcation and enforcement of boundaries (21), which are manifest as cultural and physical characteristics that, if unfamiliar, constitute and create The Stranger (55). This theory, when applied to the learning space in the proposed scenario, leads to the questions: Did the educator's curiosity of particular women's stories that seemed unfamiliar to her mark certain participants' bodies as outsiders to be recognized as Strangers?

Individuals of marginalized identities being misunderstood and misconstrued when seen through a hegemonic lens are a well documented phenomenon in feminist theory and practice. Trihn T. Minh-ha, in her 1989 book *Woman, Native, Other*, tells of her triple bind trying to navigate her subjectivities of woman, woman of colour and writer/anthropologist, "where social alienation is thwarted differently according to each specific context" (1989, 6). Writer and academic Himani Bannerji speaks of "constantly being constructed as the Other" (1991, 68). Maria Lugones, a popular educator and philosopher, also writes of how White/Anglo women hear her as an "alien voice" (Greene and Kahn 1985, 25). These three examples are part of a vast body of work theorizing how Othering processes impact on women of colour.

The theory of The Stranger suggests mechanics through which social alienation is unconsciously carried out, as the dynamics of identity formation call on and use difference between women in non-credit learning spaces. In the scenario posed, in order to maintain her identity, the educator marks herself as not a participant, and specifically not as a marginalized participant. By doing this, she may unconsciously deploy difference, which in effect will "construct not describe the other" (Ahmed 2000, 57).

The Educator as the "Manager of Space"

Ghassan Hage provides interesting points in his 2000 book, *White Nation: Fantasies of White Supremacy in a Multi-Cultural Society*. In this work, Hage sheds light on the process of engaging in nationalist practices where educators are set up to manage more marginalized women, and participants are set up to be passively governed. While Hage focuses on how this process takes place for racialized groups, in this inquiry I consider how other visible markers of difference can be activated in a similar manner. Following the ways in which various theorists have connected the classroom in relation to the nation as a social microcosm where nation building practices are carried out (Apple 1995; Giroux 2009; Marx and Engels 1848; Razack 1998), I draw on Hage for guidance about how educators can watch for the ways space is managed within the learning spaces they occupy.

In his theory of the nation and Otherness, Hage explores how some individuals come to feel empowered to name, control and discriminate against others based on their racial identities. In this process, an individual may define a national space as their "home," and then identify with a feeling of "being at home" in that space. In the scenario I posed, this is akin to a feminist educator setting up the learning space and becoming comfortable there to the point that she identifies with the space, and sees it as hers. For Hage, after establishing a feeling of being "at home," differentiation occurs based on who feels they belong within this home. The feeling of "hominess" is experienced differentially depending on how one identifies,

or is identified by others, which translates into one's sense of belonging within that "homeland." Being treated as different within a learning space affects one's ability to feel ownership or belonging in the learning space.

Hage further explains that there are two levels of belonging: "passive belonging," which is experienced by an individual who expects to benefit from the resources of the home or nation, and a more invested level of belonging called "governmental belonging," which refers to controlling through setting procedure and making and enforcing rules. Governmental belonging is felt by those who believe they have a right to manage their home. Those who feel passive belonging will feel accepted by the nation at an official level while being treated as inferior on a daily basis (Hage 2000, 50). This vested interest, or governmental belonging, causes some subjects to feel that it is their right and responsibility to take care of, control or manage the home and all the objects within it. Connecting this to a learning space for women may explain why an educator feels entitled to dictate how participants must negotiate sharing their experiences in the space. In the case of the nation, the perceived right and responsibility to take care of the home (and all that is within it) gives an individual a sense of entitlement to classify other individuals within their homeland.

This classification of individuals within one's homeland is not about the "inferiorisation or essentialisation of the other, but [about] the construction of the other as object of spatial exclusion" (Hage 2000, 48). The management of space then becomes mapped onto people, or subjects, making nationalists appear to be primarily managers of space. This becomes naturalized, as there is no judgment placed on the worth of the individual of passive belonging; she is simply marked as one who does not belong in that space. While naturalized, this perspective may in fact instigate acts that have racist repercussions.

The educators' role in the process of managing Others may also become naturalized with a sense of responsibility to control the non-credit learning setting that is similar to the feeling of Hage's governmental

belonging. This would also explain the basis upon which some women in the feminist learning spaces feel they belong, or, conversely, feel they are misunderstood, unwelcome or "constantly constructed as the Other." The educator's feeling of governmental belonging may limit some learners, resulting in a sense of passive belonging for these participants.

This is the precise dynamic of Othering and exclusion in feminist education and organizing spaces that so many differently located women have reflected on (Cordova 2000; hooks 1994; Morrison 2000). As in my scenario, when participants are asked to socially locate or share their stories, their identities and experiences may be read in ways where participants who are seen as outside the norm find there is little room within which to negotiate. Educators in non-credit learning spaces may be calling on participants to "perform" their marginalized identities in ways that are tokenizing or marginalizing (Razack 1998, 52).

In the section that follows I explore the questions and reflections that Hage and Ahmed's theories provoke for consciously moving towards less violent and marginalizing spaces in women's non-credit learning.

Applied Awareness: Conscious Approaches to Non-Violence in Women's Non-credit Learning Spaces

As feminist non-credit learning processes often start with attempts to share women's experiences, these spaces can be susceptible to the dynamics of Othering. In order to address the perpetuation of violence within feminist non-credit learning spaces, it is important to start with educators themselves, particularly if they are of a dominant identity and/or experience their identity as neutral. As outlined in the previous discussion, the leadership role of the educator is influential in shaping the space and determines a great deal about the ways in which participants interact among themselves and how participants feel about themselves in the space.

There are no short cuts, simple tactics or methods that guarantee success. What is required is reflexive analysis specific

to each context. In the next section, I suggest various ways in which educators can become more aware about their role as managers of the learning space. In the following sections, I highlight issues educators should be aware of, and point to areas that would benefit from further inquiry in terms of pedagogies within non-formal learning environments.

Check Against "Racing Towards Innocence"

It is important for educators to be reflexive in order to acknowledge and address the privileged aspects of their identity. Sherene Razack and Mary Louis Fellows call turning away from taking responsibility for one's privileged social locations "racing towards innocence." Racing towards innocence is the "process through which a woman comes to believe her own subordination is the most urgent and that she is unimplicated in the subordination of other women" (1998, 335). This process is harmful because educators shirk their own culpability in relation to issues of oppression that present themselves in learning spaces. As Razack and Fellows comment,

When we view ourselves as innocent, we cannot confront the hierarchies that operate among us. Instead each woman claims her own marginality is the worst one; failing to interrogate her complicity in other women's lives, she continues to participate in the practices that oppress other women. (1998)

The act of checking oneself as an educator, or of developing praxis (the engagement of reflection and practice simultaneously), is useful to continually engage. This can be done through self questioning. For example, in this case: In what ways might I be over identifying with the ways in which I experience marginalization? How might I be avoiding thinking about the ways that I am privileged? Developing this type of grounded awareness is one way to be able to check oneself as an educator for the ways in which one may become a manager of the learning space and the participants within it.

Value a Range of Conceptions of Consciousness

While also encouraging the genuine sharing of experiences, educators need to problematize the very nature of consciousness itself. Feminist pedagogies challenge the notion that experience and consciousness are neutral or universal. "Feminist pedagogies, unlike critical pedagogies recognize that for women 'experience' is not a category that can be taken for granted, as their experience has been systemically discounted and dismissed" (Boler 1999, 117).

Historically we can learn from consciousness-raising (CR, a method of feminist non-credit learning), which has been criticized for paying little attention to issues of what differences in identity mean for women's self conception. For example, Norma Alarcon has shown how CR encouraged the reproduction of white middle class values through a conception of consciousness that centered the idea of an autonomous subject, within community, but still autonomous. Alarcon shows this occurred as participants were encouraged to follow the "logic of identification" and claim the "right to pursue (their) own identity, to name (themselves), to pursue self-knowledge" (1990, 356-57) instead of recognizing other ways of knowing that embrace interconnectedness and challenge the individualistic paradigm of self improvement.

From this perspective, educators must question themselves: How might my educational practice be promoting classist, heterosexist, racist or other oppressive values? How might I be privileging experiences that mirror middle class, heterosexual or White/Anglo values? How could I support women in valuing themselves within community, as opposed to encouraging isolating self interest and competitiveness?

Understanding the Interlocking Nature of Identity

I have found that understanding the concept of interlocking identity is important in my role as an educator when working with differently located women engaged in non-credit feminist learning spaces. Razack

and Fellows define interlocking oppression as the ways in which, "systems of oppression come into existence in and through one another so that class exploitation could not be accomplished without gender and racial hierarchies; imperialism could not function without class exploitation, sexism, heterosexism, and so on (Razack 1998, 1). Interlocking oppression accounts for how race, class, gender (as well as other identities) co-constitute one another in ways that cannot be separated in white supremacist capitalist patriarchy (1998, 3).

In practice, an interlocking analysis argues for the importance of understanding and confronting our complicity in one another's oppressions. Educators need to think through and constantly reflect on how systems of oppression (such as racism, classism) mutually reinforce one another. Educators must face the ways they may downplay their participation in this system and "realize we cannot undo our own marginality without simultaneously undoing all the systems of oppression" (Razack and Fellows 1998, 14). This would mean that educators would continually question their practices by bringing this awareness to the techniques they use. In particular, there is a need for educators to create approaches "in which all of us learn to situate ourselves in relation to others who are differently situated" (1998, 15).

Educators can consider questions such as: How do some women have privilege in relation to other women (Dhruvarajan and Vickwers 2002, 6)? How can I be accountable for aspects of my identity where I have power and privilege? To aid this reflexivity, educators may want to turn to theories and resources particularly in the areas of Whiteness studies and pedagogies of privilege that may be useful in this endeavour (Frankenberg 1993; Stevens 2003, 2005; Wilmot 2006).

Avoid Essentializing Participants' Identities

As an educator in the context of feminist non-credit learning, it is essential to think about how Othering may occur, particularly when encouraging the sharing of

experience. This may happen as educators take up experiences that participants share and interpret them in a manner that essentializes the storytellers' identities and reinforces existing stereotypes. Women participants may take part in this dynamic as well. This occurs when a participant tells her story with the expectation it will be heard and taken up as it previously has been in spaces managed by nationalistic practices and those who feel a governmental belonging, making her feel as though her identity was "pre-existing and waiting for [her]" (Fanon 2001, 196).

The tensions arising from such performances have caused feminists to caution against the improper use of storytelling as a means to share and explore experiences rooted in subjugated histories. Chan Lean Heng has reflected on how feminist learning processes often put women of colour on the spot to "speak from their identity," with the intention that the sharing of these women's stories is enabling the representation of suppressed knowledges. Through exoticizing participants' experiences, the educator may be marking the participant as one who is not "from here" (Heng 1996).

In order to avoid the process of creating The Stranger or Othering, educators must problematize and complexify their outlook. As opposed to essentializing women based on their identities, educators should articulate the ways in which the category of women has so many shapes and forms (Kaplan and Grewal 2002, 68), and that different women are created by different patriarchies (2002, 79). Inviting the genuine sharing of experience may be easier in theory than in practice; identity construction is a constant negotiation and how an individual identifies may shift depending on the context. As an educator, be willing to question yourself: Am I validating certain stories or styles of storytelling over others? Am I calling on participants who embody subjugated histories to speak only from these identities? Am I encouraging women to tell their story in ways that reflect the complexities of their lives? Or am I interpreting and responding to participants' experiences in ways that reinforce stereotypes?

Embrace Dualism of Oppressor and Oppressed within Each Women

Audre Lorde illustrated the dualism of oppressor/oppressed as the "oppressor within us" (1984, 122-23). Sandra Lee Bartky (1990) also points out that consciousness is divided into recognizing oneself as a victim, and simultaneously recognizing the ways in which we are more privileged than others.

In addressing the duality of oppressor and oppressed within each women, I have found it valuable, although challenging, to invite stories not just of how women are oppressed but to also ask for, and equally value, stories about how women experience privilege. Encouraging these other stories to be told and valued has been one way that my practice has tried to establish links between women and to encourage women to ally with one another.

Listening and being sensitive to the existence of internalized oppression and the ways it is expressed by participants in the learning context is another means through which the educator can achieve a reflexive practice. To do otherwise may be to encourage participants of all identities to strive for a governmental belonging and perpetuate problematic dynamics within the space. As an educator, it is important to consider: Am I encouraging women to express the messiness of their experience, or am I expecting a more linear narrative? Do I focus on how unexpected events have been, or could be, met with courage and support? In what ways might I privilege experiences that come from those who feel a sense of entitlement to manage within the group?

Conclusion

Violence occurs subtly, which requires keen analysis to uncover and praxis to negotiate in learning environments. When educators of non-credit processes for women engage in nationalist practices where they manage participants, very little learning can take place due to the subtle violence these practices invoke. If educators perpetually create participants as the Other or The Stranger, and construct themselves as enlightened, insipid systemic violence will occur that impacts the group culture and the

participants' feelings about themselves.

The strength and value of using the theories I have laid out is that these lead to praxis that address violent repression and this is an important focus of engagement for educators. Through activating the analysis in the learning space inferred from theories of The Stranger and the manager of space, and doing the personal reflection required, educators can actively work to ensure that the space and their relationship to the participants does not subjugate Others.

By first reflecting on their identities and assumptions about participants, educators can engage in checking themselves for racing towards innocence and take responsibility for the learning and their actions. Additionally, the educator must be open to the complexity and shifting nature of the intersecting identities of those in the learning process. It is crucial that educators challenge themselves to acknowledge the different realities shared in a way that does not confer hegemonic values. These are just some of the themes or possible areas for reflection, but this paper suggests you use these theories to pose some of your own questions.

Of course, no analogy is sufficient. The analogy of the learning space as the nation does not address the intricacy of the relationship between the educator and the participant in a non-credit learning space; in many cases, there is "free space" (Gramsci 1971) available for the participant to disrupt this hegemonic power dynamic. These spaces may not be as tangible in more macro contexts such as the nation state. Resistance for a participant would be possible through complete refusal to participate, or through subverting the process of sharing experiences. In the learning space, participants can also resist by remaining in the space, while disengaging or reframing the discourse of the learning space for themselves. However, it is difficult to get out of the frame imposed by the dominant paradigm of the educator. While participants may resist having their differences deployed in such a manner, educators may continually (re)confer their own identities, making participants' resistance have little external

impact. In these dynamics, the responsibility clearly falls to educators to employ their reflexivity to address the way they are using their power. However, these theories and the free space for participant self determination do point to the importance of praxis and reflexivity on the part of the participant and the educators alike. Of course, reflexivity is ongoing and is never complete. The pursuit of questions and self reflexivity is part of these learning environments.

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