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*Research*

# Feminist Pedagogy in the Neoliberal University: The Limits of Precarious Labour

**by Jacqueline Potvin and Kimberly Dority**

**Abstract:** In recent years, feminist pedagogy has been advanced as a strategy for disrupting the neoliberal corporatization of the university classroom. In this paper, we recognize and trouble this disruptive potential, examining how the working conditions faced by adjunct instructors affect our ability to put our commitments to feminist pedagogy into practice. Based on our own experiences as sessional instructors, we argue that conditions such as heavy workloads, alongside limited access to institutional resources and community, contribute to faculty burnout and hinder our ability to build and maintain feminist student-instructor relationships. Drawing on existing scholarship on feminist pedagogy, and emerging work exploring the challenges of teaching within the neoliberal university, we argue for the need to extend and complicate dominant understandings of feminist pedagogy as a series of values and practices that individual instructors can implement, and to recognize how its enactment is limited by the adjunctification of higher education. This paper pertains to instructors, particularly those in feminist departments, seeking to apply feminist pedagogy across the university.

**Keywords:** adjunctification, care, feminism, neoliberalism, relationality

**Résumé:** Au cours des dernières années, la pédagogie féministe a été mise de l'avant comme stratégie pour entraver la privatisation néo-libérale de la salle de classe de l'université. Dans cet article, nous reconnaissons et nous bouleversons ce potentiel perturbateur, en examinant la façon dont les conditions de travail des professeurs auxiliaires ont une incidence sur notre capacité à mettre en pratique nos engagements par rapport à la pédagogie féministe. En fonction de nos propres expériences à titre de chargés de cours à temps partiel, nous estimons que des conditions, comme de lourdes charges de travail, jumelées à un accès limité à des ressources pédagogiques et au milieu institutionnel, contribuent à l'épuisement professionnel du corps professoral et entravent notre capacité à forger et à entretenir des relations féministes entre les étudiants et leurs professeurs. En nous appuyant sur les connaissances existantes en matière de pédagogie féministe ainsi que sur de nouveaux ouvrages qui explorent les défis posés par l'enseignement dans une université néo-libérale, nous soutenons le besoin d'accroître et de complexifier les interprétations dominantes de la pédagogie féministe sous forme de série de valeurs et de pratiques que les professeurs peuvent mettre en œuvre et de reconnaître les limitations de son adoption en raison de la structuration de nature agrégée et auxiliaire de l'enseignement supérieur. Cet article concerne les professeurs, surtout dans les départements universitaires féministes, qui aspirent à mettre en œuvre la pédagogie féministe dans l'ensemble de l'université.

**Mots-clés:** féminisme; néolibéralisme; professorat par association; relationnalité; soutien

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## Introduction

When Women's Studies programs first began to be established in the 1960s, they were understood as both a reaction to, and a disruption of, the traditional university's devaluation of women as both subjects and creators of academic knowledge (Currier 2021; Robbins et al. 2008). Feminist pedagogy has been situated as a means through which to challenge the power relations inherent to the university system, modelling and enacting teaching practices that empower students as agentic subjects, rather than asking students to adopt and acquiesce to dominant ways of being and knowing in the classroom (Bondy et al 2015; Crabtree et al. 2009). More recently, feminist pedagogy has been presented as a means of challenging a neoliberal university system that, having adopted the market logic of capitalism, treats students as consumers and instructors as service providers (Feigenbaum 2007). It has also been acknowledged that feminist pedagogy's disruptive potential continues to be limited by the institutional structure of the university itself (Busse et al. 2021). Our own experiences as contract faculty have highlighted to us that feminist pedagogy, even in explicitly feminist departments, continues to be treated as an individualized practice that instructors can enact, but which is not institutionally supported. While feminist departments can be viewed as participating in conditions hostile to feminist pedagogy, these are the outcome not of individual pratices on the part of leadership or departments, but of systemic issues including the growing reliance on precarious workers. Despite the appearance that feminist practices have been adopted by the university, these have been subsumed into the institution's overarching neoliberal logic, and have not led to changes in its underlying structures. As contract faculty, our working conditions have rarely encouraged, or even allowed for the enactment of feminist pedagoy, despite our commitment to it. This article is a pedagogical reflection, contextualized in academic scholarship, on how the increasingly precarious working conditions in which university instructors teach limits and undermines the disruptive potential of feminist pedagogy as a tool of teaching for social justice. Although these reflections pertain to our experiences within and outside of women's studies and feminist departments and are relevant to instructors applying feminist pedagogy across the university, we feel they are particularly salient for those working in women's and gender studies departments that actively promote feminist pedagogy.

## Context: Feminist Teaching as Precarious Work

We taught our first courses as lead instructors in a department of Women's Studies and Feminist Research, where we were also completing our doctorates. As students and instructors within this department, we valued and were committed to feminist pedagogy. This commitment included a desire to disrupt hierarchical notions and practices of power, recognition of ourselves and our students as relational subjects, and enactment of an ethics of care. Yet as our teaching careers progressed, our commitments were challenged by the difficulties of teaching as contract faculty, and the ways in which our working conditions limited our ability to enact feminist pedagogical practices. Our experiences revealed that the precarious working conditions of contract faculty are both an issue of social justice in and of themselves, and a barrier which makes it difficult, if not impossible, to enact feminist and other critical pedagogical practices.

Our concerns are encapsulated by an incident experienced by Jacqueline during her fourth year of contract teaching. At that time, she had taught six courses in four departments, often filling in for tenured faculty on sabbatical and hence rarely teaching the same course twice. She received largely positive teaching evaluations, despite the challenges. She was also preparing for her doctoral defence, and she was exhausted, as well as nervous at not having immediate employment lined up once the degree was completed. A month before the winter semester began, and weeks before defending, Jacqueline was hired to teach a first-year health science course on the social determinants of health, which she would later learn included nearly 500 students, in a department in which she had not previously taught. In a process not unusual for contract faculty, she was given a rough version of a past syllabus, with weeks to finalize a reading list and adjust proposed assessments to the size of the course. All this was done while most administrative faculty and staff were on winter break and while managing communication with students who were already panicking about the first midterm.

One of the first topics covered was the health effects of working conditions, including the rise of precarious employment across various sectors and focusing on service industries, such as fast-food restaurants. Standing in front of whatever proportion of 500 students chose to attend that class, Jacqueline outlined how precarity, lack of interpersonal connection, devaluation of skills and lack of professionalization contribute not only to decreasing job satisfaction but to measurable physical and mental health effects. These working conditions, she explained, lead to heightened stress, greater sickness, premature death, and increased risk of mental health issues such as depression. Although she was not speaking specifically to working conditions in the university, in that moment, Jacqueline experienced a strong affective response, realizing that as contract faculty, she too was subject to ongoing precarity and isolation. What she was describing to students, many of whom were dismissive of and disinterested in this required course, was how the working conditions of *her own* employment were wearing down her body and her mind. She was experiencing burnout and she felt alone and incompetent, and also frustrated. How could a department hire her to teach students about these effects while simultaneously subjecting her to them? This highlighted in a visceral way the inherent irony of being hired to teach social justice by a university that makes such work burdensome, and which exploits those who do it. Not surprisingly, this semester was one during which Jacqueline felt largely incapable of enacting her personal commitments to feminist pedagogy and fostering meaningful relationships with her students.

This paper was born out of the frustration of that teaching experience, including how we had both internalized our perceived inability to enact our pedagogical commitments in moments such as this as a personal failing, rather than as the outcome of our working conditions. Precarious working conditions are themselves an outcome of a deeply problematic trend in which universities increasingly rely on contract faculty, who face long-term precarious working conditions as tenure-track jobs decrease (Foster and Bauer 2018). Like many others, we view feminist pedagogy as having the radical potential to disrupt and challenge the neoliberalization of the contemporary university. Yet we struggle to reconcile this commitment with acknowledgement of how our teaching is limited by the contemporary university system, and in particular, by its increased reliance on contract labour.

In this paper, we outline what feminist pedagogy is, and how it has been situated as a disruption of the neoliberal university, while also highlighting the limitations of this disruptive potential. We then move into a reflexive analysis, based on our own experiences, of how our ability

to enact two central characteristics of feminist pedagogy —disruption of hierarchical power and acknowledgement of students as relational subjects—has been limited by our working conditions as contract teaching faculty. Given the inherent tension between pedagogical practices oriented towards social justice, and the injustice of current hiring practices and working conditions within higher education, how can precarious workers be better supported to enact feminist pedagogy?

## Defining Feminist Pedagogy

Like the term feminism itself, feminist pedagogy is a contested term. As Briskin notes, "[A]ssuming a singular meaning to feminist pedagogy is…problematic. Just as there are multiple feminisms, so there are multiple feminist pedagogies" (2015, 66). For instance, intersectional approaches to feminist pedagogy often incorporate insights from anti-racist, decolonial, and queer theory. In its various iterations, feminist pedagogy does denote a shared perspective towards teaching, as well as a set of core shared principles arising from and aligning with feminist theory. Namely, feminist pedagogy understands teaching as a both a form of, and pathway towards social justice and carries at its core a commitment to disrupting oppressive power relations within and outside the university (Bondy et al 2015; Currier 2021). Feminist pedagogy recognizes issues of sexism and social injustice as relevant to both the subject matter being taught, and the ways in which this subject matter is taught. It frames teaching as a practice that can address these injustices by transforming and empowering students, and by disrupting academic practices that are themselves understood as unjust (Crabtree et al. 2009). One of the ways feminist pedagogy seeks to problematize oppressive academic practices is by challenging the understanding of academic knowledge as neutral. Both students and teachers bring their own lived, experiential knowledge to the classroom (Currier 2021). Not only is this experiential knowledge important for its intersectional value, but it maintains that students and teachers come to the classroom as complex beings, who are living and working in relation to each other, and to the world outside the classroom in ways that require critical ethical accountabilities. In this paper, we will focus on these two components of feminist pedagogy, while recognizing that it is much more heterogeneous in its articulations within and beyond the field of Women's Studies, and extends beyond the two central tenets upon which we have chosen to focus.

## Feminist Pedagogy as Disruption to the Neoliberal University

Recent scholarship on feminist pedagogy has highlighted the specific ways feminist pedagogy can disrupt the neoliberal university system that treats students as consumers, and education as a path to becoming productive and rational economic subjects. This scholarship outlines how higher education has been integrated into the logic of neoliberalism, and how this integration is seen as damaging to students and to teaching practices (Rohrer 2018). Neoliberalism, though associated with an emphasis on individual freedom, private property rights, and a retreat of the state, also involves "extending and disseminating market values to all institutions and social action" (Brown 2005, 39-40). As such, Brown argues that neoliberalism "is best understood not simply as economic policy but as a governing rationality that disseminates market values and metrics to every sphere of life and construes human life exclusively as homo economicus" (2015, 176).

Within higher education, neoliberalism is associated with cuts to government funding, and subsequently a need for universities to acquire private funding sources. Since private funders tend to prioritize fields that are understood as providing the greatest perceived market value, increased reliance on private funding "reflects and deepens existing inequalities," often disadvantaging humanities and social sciences (Stein et al. 2019). The neoliberal university also treats students as a consumer market that the university must competitively recruit (Feigenbaum 2007; Rohrer 2018). Such recruitment is often based on a university's ability to market itself as offering students high returns in the form of future employability, even in the face of changing job markets themselves marked by precarity, and by a diminishing return on educational investments (Peterson 2020). In these ways market logics extend to the university administration, with education broadly positioned as a commodity to be branded and purchased. Adopting market logic, including prioritization of "efficiency and profit motives" (Busse et al. 2021, 33) extends to hiring practices, specifically, increased reliance on contract faculty as a cost-saving measure, both because contract workers cost less to hire, but also because they represent flexible costs that can easily be cut if needed, through non-renewal of contracts (Peterson 2020). The increased preference for both private and public funding to be directed at fields understood as having economic value, either in producing

workers or contributing to economic growth, means that fields deemed "distant from the market" may face particular pressure to do more with less, further contributing to reliance on contract faculty.

Neoliberalism and its associated market logics have also impacted the classroom, including teaching practices and the relationship between students and instructors. As Feigenbaum summarizes, "corporatization of the university has led to the construction of students as rational, economic decision makers" whose primary interest is in a form of higher education that increases employability and economic success post-graduation (2007, 337). This has prompted the prioritization of programs that are understood as preparing students for the job market, and career-applied learning across departments and programs (Llewellyn and Llewellyn 2015). In other words, Mitchell argues, "higher education is no longer defined in terms of the knowledge and skills of democratic citizenship, but rather in terms of the attainment of the complex skills necessary for individual success in the global economy" (qtd in Llewellyn and Llewellyn 2015). This configures students as consumers, and higher education as a product. It not only emphasizes student learning, but student satisfaction, encapsulated by practices such as end-of-term evaluations (Busse et al. 2021). As we will show, student evaluations have been used to evaluate teaching effectiveness, ever more simplistically, by reducing it to a form of customer satisfaction surveys (Busse et al. 2021).

The neoliberal university is understood as problematic for a variety of reasons, including, but not limited to, the ways in which it de-emphasizes critical thinking skills and makes it more difficult for instructors to enact feminist and other critical pedagogies (Rohrer 2018). While there has been some movement towards valuing engaged and active learning that does, to some degree, align with the positioning of students as agentic knowledge creators, Llewellyn and Llewellyn argue that within the neoliberal classroom "good judgement and critical thinking are seen as dependent on individual capacity, and as instrumental for personal capital rather than as emerging from community" (2015, 13). That is to say, critical thinking, which is central to feminist pedagogy, is also (re)constructed within market logics and aligned with the neoliberal overvaluation of individualism. Configuring students as rational economic subjects can pose a challenge to instructors who wish to engage in questions of systemic and communal oppression and emancipation, but also for those who want to engage in pedagogical practices that challenge individualistic, career-applied learning. Nevertheless, the construction of the student as neoliberal consumer has also been contested, and feminist pedagogy has itself been positioned as a means of disrupting this configuration and of the neoliberal logic of the university writ large. For instance, Llewellyn and Llewellyn also argue that feminist pedagogy's relational approach challenges the hyper-individualism of neoliberalism, and in doing so subverts the neoliberal ideology of the contemporary university and its effects. Feigenbaum (2007) outlines how her feminist pedagogy has led her to vulnerability in the classroom and the use of "teachable moments" to challenge the career-oriented learning of the neoliberal university. Similarly, Rohrer argues that feminist pedagogy, by "historicizing our locations and relations is antithetical to neoliberalism" (2018, 577). Feminist pedagogy then has been situated by these authors, among others, in opposition to, and as a viable means of disrupting and moving beyond the limitations of the neoliberal classroom.

While there is potential for feminist pedagogy to challenge the neoliberal university system, it is also important to acknowledge the limitations of this potential. For instance, Feigenbaum, though committed to treating her students as whole and relational beings who cannot be de-contextualized from their lives outside the classroom, recognizes that this approach has often put demands on her to be flexible in ways that add to the emotional labour she does, not only within, but also outside the classroom. More recently, Busse et al. outline how their own efforts to enact feminist pedagogy has been consistently impeded by the structures of the neoliberal university itself. They describe how issues such as the ways classrooms are set up, or the required adoption of master syllabi reinforce hierarchical power relations within classrooms, undermining possibilities for adopting more democratic or empowering pedagogical practices. As such, they argue, "the logic of neoliberalism creates potentially insurmountable obstacles for critical and feminist teaching and that marginalized feminist teachers face particular challenges on neoliberal university campuses" (2021, 30).

Little has been published on the explicit ways in which precarious work undermines the radical potential of feminist pedagogy. This is likely because, as Busse et al. note, the ability to critique the university as an institution is in part made possible by job security (2021). In

this paper, we begin to outline how, our positions as contract faculty in a sector increasingly dominated by precarious working conditions has limited our own ability to enact what we understand as two of the central tenets of feminist pedagogy: disruption of hierarchy and relationality in learning and research. Furthermore, when feminist pedagogy is itself configured as something that aligns with the logic of neoliberalism, it obscures how academic institutions can enable, support, or limit the enactment of feminist pedagogy.

## Contract Faculty as Precarious Workers

The neoliberal restructuring of universities has had a significant impact on the working conditions of faculty. Over the last twenty years, the relative number of permanent positions available has dwindled (Brownlee 2015; Callinicos 2006; Rose 2020). Canadian universities now rely heavily on faculty who hold temporary, contract positions. Canadian academic institutions have framed the pattern of hiring on a course-by-course basis as a cost-saving measure, necessitated by significant cuts to public funding for universities over the past three decades, amplified following the 2008 financial crisis (Brownlee 2015). As Brownlee argues, however, the impact of this crisis on higher education Canada "was primarily political in nature." He explains, "Many institutions used the crisis to justify a series of austerity measures, such as hiring freezes, course/program reductions, layoffs, and service cuts" (Brownlee 2015, 98). These measures resulted in fewer opportunities for contract faculty at the time of their implementation, and continue to place contract faculty in vulnerable positions within the institutions where they teach.

Notably, there tends to be a higher concentration of women and people of colour in contract faculty positions (Brownlee 2015). In a recent study of 2,606 contract faculty working in post-secondary institutions across Canada, Foster and Bauer found women and racialized contract faculty not only "work more hours per course, per week than their white male colleagues," but they are also "over represented in lower income categories" (2018, 5). According to this study, it is also women and racialized individuals who are asked to perform unpaid tasks outside of their contract work, such as administrative duties. Institutional "efforts" toward "diversity, equity and inclusion" also often falls into the hands of these precarious workers as well (Ahmed 2021). According to Rose, contract faculty now "occupy more than half of all teaching positions in postsecondary institutions in Canada, particularly in Ontario and British Columbia" (2020,16). This claim is supported by research by the Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE), which shows that "54 percent of faculty appointments in Canadian universities are short term contract appointments, rather than permanent" (CUPE cited in Rose 2020, 7). These short-term contract appointments are not only low paying, they also come with few benefits or opportunities for professional development. As Rose aptly explains, "non regular faculty constitute a reserve of low-paid and marginalized academic workers, and an increase in the number of doctorates granted each year in Canada guarantees a continuous supply of highly exploitable workers" (2020, 7).

The impermanence of contract faculty positions creates a lack of job security. Foster and Bauer found that job in/security was a key concern for contract faculty, with respondents citing the "lack of protection against dismissal," as well as the "lack of certainty around rehiring and contract renewal" as significant stressors (2018, 23). Under these precarious conditions many contract faculty workers find themselves "permanently on the edge of unemployment, having to make do with causal, temporary, perhaps, part-time work, or combining several jobs" (Callinicos 2006, 24). Indeed, income insecurity leads many contract faculty to work multiple jobs. Foster and Bauer found that as many as 48% of respondents said they work in at least one other job on top of their work as contract faculty. Lack of job security and a living wage also has a negative impact on long-term decision making. Many describe feeling constrained in their ability to make financial or personal commitments, such as buying a home or having a child. For instance, "(45%) of respondents strongly disagreed with the statement that they feel secure enough in their employment to make major financial commitments, such as purchasing a home. Only (17%) answered positively" (Foster and Bauer 2018, 23).

Although some individuals might be re-hired multiple times to teach the same contract, they never obtain "the assurance that the job is secure or has the same benefits and career development options as permanent colleagues" (Foster and Bauer 2018, 8). Being continuously asked to re-apply for their jobs, sometimes as frequently as every four months, is demoralizing. This is amplified in cases where contingent faculty discover (as we have)

that they no longer have the opportunity to be rehired, and no one even thought to email them.

Access to departmental resources are often limited for contract faculty. Foster and Bauer found that contract faculty often share office space, with only 23% having "dedicated office space for themselves" (2018, 22). Since use of office space may be carefully scheduled, sharing space not only has an impact on one's ability to work and meet with students, but can have a negative impact on one's professional development. Lacking space within a department can contribute to contract faculty's isolation from their colleagues, and their diminished opportunities for networking and collaboration. In the following section, we explore how the working conditions of contract faculty limit our ability to engage in feminist pedagogy. Drawing from and reflecting on our own experiences as contract faculty, we demonstrate how that possibility is curtailed by precarity.

## Valuing Experiential Knowledge and Challenging Professorial Authority

Feminist pedagogy, alongside other emancipatory approaches to teaching, includes an interest in disrupting hierarchy and hence, professorial authority in the classroom. This commitment is inextricably linked to its overarching commitment to dismantling hierarchical relations outside the classroom, and to the emergence of women's studies as a response to how the masculinized and male-dominated academy historically produced knowledge and expertise about women, without valuing women's own experiences or knowledge production (Bondy et al. 2015; Currier 2021). Feminist pedagogy thus values how the social positions occupied by women and other marginalized communities allows them to produce unique situated knowledges, acknowledging that our differential standpoints allow us to see the world from unique vantage points (Crabtree et al. 2009). This perspective challenges the construction of the rational, masculinized academic expert as epistemologically neutral. The valuation of lived experience as a source of knowledge is not the same as populist beliefs that personal opinion trumps rigorous knowledge production and expertise (Rohrer 2018). Rather, lived experience is valued as one form of knowledge, and as a valuable tool for knowledge production. This problematizes the traditional construction of university professors as all-knowing and unbiased experts, particularly when teaching about subjects such as gender injustice, racism, classism etc. that faculty and students may have themselves experienced first-hand.

Because feminist pedagogy values situated knowledges, while also viewing students as complete and complex beings, it challenges the construction of students as sponges who absorb and reiterate knowledge, or as vessels to be filled (Currier 2021). Feminist pedagogy values critical thinking, and often positions the professor as more of an expert guide, rather than a dispenser of objective facts (Briskin 2015). Student knowledge is valued, and students are situated not only as 'active learners' but knowledge producers who contribute to and strengthen the learning of their fellow students and professors (Bondy et al. 2015). In this way, feminist pedagogy has historically been strongly associated with challenging professorial authority.

While challenging authority and valuing the experiential knowledge of students is central to feminist pedagogy, it has raised important and ongoing concerns. Problematizing authority can minimize or devalue the expertise that professors do bring to the classroom, making it difficult to hold students accountable and to be taken seriously when presenting ideas that challenge students' existing understandings of the world and their place in it (Bondy et al. 2015). This is particularly the case for professors who themselves embody marginalized identities, such as professors who are women, who are racialized, or who are visibly gender non-conforming (Busse et al. 2021). Professors from marginalized communities "do not have the same kind of authority, are not seen as experts, and do not walk into the classroom with authority to devolve" (Busse et al. 2021, 32). In our own experience of teaching outside of women's studies and social justice programs, having a doctorate in women's studies is sometimes devalued by students who view our education and teaching styles, not as evidence that we come to the classroom with unique and valid knowledge, but as 'biased.' This reaction reinforces ongoing concerns with how to invite students to challenge professorial authority that we may not hold effectively, not only because of our embodied identities and social positionings, but also because of the ways our field of research and expertise itself is targeted by neoliberal ideologies.

The concerns outlined above are of particular significance to contract faculty. This is largely because of the real and perceived importance of student evaluations in ensuring continued employment, and the assumed correla-

tion between effective teaching and student satisfaction. Student evaluations are a required component of any application for tenure-track positions and are often also requested when applying for contract work. We ourselves have taught in programs that have established cut-off points in student evaluations, which can be used to justify non-renewal of non-tenure-track faculty contracts. The dependence on student evaluations is another component of a neoliberal university system that seeks quantifiable, straightforward, and efficient means of evaluating instructors, and which produces data that is easily, if simplistically, understandable to administrators (Busse et al. 2021). Yet, research has demonstrated that student evaluations are impacted by student bias, and tend to be lower for professors who are women and those who are racialized (Merritt 2008; Mitchell and Martin 2018; Chávez and Mitchell 2020). These concerns are relevant to all faculty occupying marginalized positions, however they are especially important for pre-tenure and contract faculty whose employment is more vulnerable.

One study shows that in an online class where all components were the same except for the disclosed gender of the instructors, students who believed their section was taught by a woman provided lower evaluations than those who believed their section was taught by a man (MacNell et al. 2015). High course evaluations have also been associated with problems in later performance and course advancement (Carrell and West 2010) reinforcing widely held beliefs that course evaluations can be indicative of whether a professor is "likable," and whether their course is perceived as easy, rather than whether or not it is effective. In this context, instructors who employ feminist pedagogy may experience additional challenges, due to the discomfort students may have with course material that challenges not only their existing understanding of the world, but also their place in it. Asking students to analyze and reflect on their own experiences of privilege is known to produce discomfort that, while understood within feminist pedagogy as crucial to student growth and learning, may result in less than flattering evaluations (Busse et al. 2021).

When one is evaluated primarily, if not exclusively, by students, the power dynamic between instructors and students shifts in ways that make it more difficult to invite students to challenge our authority and knowledge. In our experience, the continued reliance on student evaluations can lead to trepidation among contract faculty to challenge students or to push back against problematic views for fear of angering students. For example, one of us once received an evaluation claiming that we did not value student opinions because we "told them when they were wrong." Busse et al. report a similar instance in which they received a comment, taken up as concerning by their administration, that they "silenced" students (2021, 45). Such comments reinforce the understanding that professorial authority, for many of us, is tenuous. This creates a situation where professors who challenge students' existing knowledge or ways of thinking will likely face the consequences of poor student evaluations which may undermine future employability. This is particularly problematic for instructors whose course materials or practices challenge the status quo. Busse et al. (2021) promote a more complex evaluative system that asks students to reflect on their learning throughout the course. While this suggestion offers one strategy for responding to the problems of traditional student evaluations, its potential is limited for contract faculty who must continue to submit formal student evaluations for every job application, and who may lose renewal of their contracts if their evaluations do not meet a perceived minimum standard. When student evaluations are the only means of garnering feedback, and are the primary measure on which our re-employment is based (whether in practice, or in perception), it can also contribute to the construction of contract faculty as disposable. Significantly, when contract faculty are viewed as easily replaceable, the departments benefiting from our labour also have little interest in supporting our professional development as instructors. Poor evaluations are thus less likely to be taken as a guide for how to improve teaching in the future but more as a reason not to re-hire the instructor in question.

## Relationality

Feminist pedagogy is grounded in an understanding of humans as relational beings (Llewellyn and Llewellyn 2015). As relational beings, we come into a world that is ready-made, and through socialization we acquire our ways of perceiving and understanding it. From this perspective, our connections to, and relations with others are understood as central to the co-constitution of the self. This position is fundamental to the disruptive potential of feminist pedagogy, since it undermines the ideal of the detached independent neoliberal subject (Llewellyn and Llewellyn 2015). By enacting relationality in ways that subvert the traditional hierarchical power dynamics within the classroom, feminist pedagogies re-

frame the understanding of students and teachers (Llewellyn and Llewellyn 2015). Everyone is seen as coming to the classroom as complex beings, existing in relation to one another and the world outside the classroom. This framework is central for valuing situated knowledge and challenging professional authority, as described above.

Relationality also informs an ethics of care, which is largely, though not universally, associated with feminist pedagogy. Care is a multifaceted relational practice that occurs at numerous sites, while scaling and grounding a sense of ethical responsibility. An ethics of care is premised on the notion that "the ability to give and receive adequate care is central to human well-being" and that injustice unfolds through "practices, institutions, structures and discourses which inhibit or subvert adequate care or which lead to exploitation, neglect of a lack of recognition in the giving and receiving of care" (Robinson 2013, 137). Pedagogically, an ethics of care acknowledges the importance of student-professor relationships and highlights how student learning and well-being are improved when professors truly care for their students. When professors view their students as embedded and interdependent this produces a sense of accountability to each other (Llewellyn and Llewellyn 2015, 17). Such an ethics of care is observable in Feigenbaum's (2007) guiding of her students through the 'teachable moments' that arise in her classes. Notably, an ethics of care does not mean being soft or coddling; instead, it involves holding students accountable for how they treat each other, and the effect of their own knowledge production on others. An ethics of care thus supports students and their well-being, while also supporting their learning.

We have struggled to reconcile our view of teaching as relational with the long-term precariousness of our working conditions. Even when teaching in departments that value feminist pedagogy, there is inadequate support when it comes to its practical enactment by contract faculty. There is also very little care for contract faculty themselves. The conditions of precarious work, which isolate contract faculty from others and deplete our emotional energy, break down the possibility of cultivating relationality with students and colleagues. Contract faculty are often spatially and socially ostracized within the departments in which they work. Burnout, which exhausts one's ability to empathize genuinely, is also common. Importantly, the undoing of our capacity to foster relationality and to build relationships of care with our students is produced by structures within the institution itself. This raises important questions about how working conditions faced by contingent faculty not only exclude people with disabilities, but can also produce disability by harming physical and mental well-being of workers (Ahmed 2021).

## Isolation

One way that precarious working conditions of contract faculty are rendered invisible by academic institutions is through isolation. To be isolated is specifically *not* to be in relation to others. Contract faculty often experience isolation within the departments where they work. One of the most common and explicit examples results from not having a dedicated working space within the department. As described above, many contract instructors share an office with other instructors, a situation with which we are familiar. In our experience, sharing office space can make meeting with students difficult, and can add another barrier to developing strong student-teacher relationships. It requires that we schedule our office hours around our office-mates, and accept that this space may be explicitly delegated for meeting with students rather than for academic work. Lacking a room of one's own in which to work is particularly challenging for contract faculty who are struggling financially, and may not have a designated workspace at home, and/or cannot afford to work regularly in coffee shops. Alternatively, one might have access to an office that is explicitly designated for work and *not* for meeting with students. During one contract period, Jacqueline was required to schedule office hours in a departmental conference room. Any time one of her (hundreds of) students wanted to meet outside of regular office hours, Jacqueline had to book a room. This not only added to her administrative burden, and her sense that her work was not supported in this department, but it also meant that connecting with students was extremely difficult since meetings needed to be carefully planned more than a day in advance. Requests from students to meet thus often resulted in a level of frustration and annoyance that made it difficult to view these meetings as meaningful opportunities for connection. Given that availability and willingness to meet with students is one of the criteria addressed in student evaluations, lack of working space not only contributes to isolation from students, but may also have a negative impact on evaluations themselves.

Not having a physical space in a department further isolates contract faculty from their colleagues. According to Foster and Bauer, many contract faculty workers report feeling invisible within their departments. Respondents describe feeling uncomfortable and embarrassed while attending departmental meetings, social events, or even simply if asked, "What do you do for a living?" As one respondent indicates, "[I am] now 7 years in and staff barely know me" (Foster and Bauer 2018, 34).

For many, the department in which they teach is their only real academic community—albeit one in which the majority of contract faculty do not really feel they have a place. As contract faculty, we primarily communicated with the incredibly lovely and helpful admin assistants, and in some departments, never met with full-time faculty. There are other avenues for support, such as friends or online discussion boards, but this is not a replacement for feeling like a valued part of a community. Isolation of contract faculty from full-time faculty may also make it more difficult to build solidarity between the two groups, and hence to collectively advocate for improved working conditions.

## Burnout

Not knowing if you will have a job from term to term, in combination with managing student learning and engagement, being rendered virtually invisible within your department, and adapting and producing new course material, often on short notice—all while desperately trying to maintain writing and research, takes a heavy toll. Precarity has a cumulative effect, resulting in a state where one is mentally, emotionally, and physically exhausted. This sense of depletion can become so profound and all-encompassing that it makes it difficult to accomplish all but the most pressing tasks. This phenomenon, described as burnout, "represents an erosion in values, dignity, spirit and will'' (Maslach and Leiter 1997, 17). Burnout is a multidimensional, depleting experience that is common for those working in caring professions, such as health professionals, counsellors, therapists, teachers, and professors (Maslach and Leiter 1997; Skovholt and Trotter-Mathison 2016). When one experiences burnout, their passion for their work deflates. One loses the energy to engage, gradually becoming cynical, and ineffective at their job (Skovholt and Trotter-Mathison 2016). Although burnout is often understood as an individual problem, which can be addressed through individualized practices of self-care, it is often created by working conditions and expectations that require employees to push beyond their physical and mental capacities (Peterson 2020; Ahmed 2021). Burnout can be worsened by precarious working conditions, with employees unable to ask for improved conditions or to manage these expectations for fear that their job will be lost or non-renewed (Peterson 2020).

Our experiences of burnout as contract faculty have shown us that when you are burnt out you have very little energy to go above and beyond in your teaching, including to engage in the kinds of practices that feminist pedagogy demands. We are dedicated teachers who are passionate about our field. Ultimately, we want to have a positive impact on the world and others through teaching. However, we have both had experiences of burnout as contract faculty that have quelled this passion. While we might have been confident, motivated, and attentive to our students at the beginning of the term, by the end of it we found ourselves exhausted, and just trying to make it through the day. For example, at our best, we respond to student requests with compassion, even if we feel they are being somewhat unreasonable in their requests, or rude in their tone. However, by the end of term, we each witnessed our capacity to engage with our students compassionately, or view them as holistic beings, dwindle. As one's emotional resources are stretched, and one receives more and more emails asking questions that could easily be answered by looking at the syllabus, for example, one might tend towards frustration, rather than an ethics of care. If you are Kim, you do not respond to the email, struggle to fall asleep, let it bother you all the next morning, arrive to class fuming and ready to deliver your responses live. If you are Jacqueline, your responses might be terse and curt because you don't bother to hide your annoyance. While we have both experienced shame at these responses, we feel it's important to keep in mind that "burnout is not a problem of the people themselves but of the social environment in which they work" (Maslach and Leiter 1997, 18). It can stem from many things, including but not limited to, work overload, lack of control, breakdown of community, and unfairness in the system (Skovholt and Trotter-Mathison 2016, 105). Furthermore, faculty members who are women are often expected to engage in more emotional labour and service duties within their departments and in relationships with students (Bauer 2002; El-Alayli et al. 2018). As is often the case with feminized forms of labour, this work is not supported by the university and often does not contribute to faculty's

professional advancement. Faculty in women's studies departments often take on even more emotional labour in part because of the pedagogical commitments we have outlined, and because of the topics that tend to be included in our teaching (Bauer 2002). This labour contributes to burn-out among female faculty and women's studies instructors, which in turn makes it more difficult to perform this labour and to be in meaningful relation with our students.

Treating students with care and guiding them through periods of learning relies on emotional resources, including an ability to empathize. However, burnout makes it extremely difficult to enact an ethics of care, and to respond to student distress in a way that supports their continued engagement and learning, rather than alienating them. This issue must be addressed beyond the all-too-common solution of individualized self-care exercised through consumption—a solution that places responsibility on the individual to manage the effects of over-work, including expectations of intensive and unsupported emotional labour.

## Conclusion

We had considered ending this paper with a series of suggestions of how tenure-track and tenured faculty can help support contract faculty, yet we recognize the tension between suggesting how individual departments and faculty members can support precarious instructors and recognizing that solving these problems ultimately requires systemic change. On one hand, we recognize that increasing access to resources, including professionalization, and providing access to more robust forms of evaluation can help address the limitations faced by contract faculty. In our experience, despite poor working conditions and remuneration, contract faculty often continue to take on contract work because they have not been trained to position themselves for, and seek employment outside of academia. We have also been encouraged to continue to take short-term teaching contracts by fellow academics who perpetuate the myth that leaving the university is a form of failure or giving up, and that if one simply continues to work hard enough for long enough, tenure track employment will be secured (Peterson 2020). While we believe strongly that precarious working conditions must be addressed as a systemic issue, we also recognize that in the face of declining permanent positions, graduate programs should devote more resources to preparing graduates for work outside of academia. We have both, at least for the time being, left contract teaching despite our love for it and feel we would have greatly benefitted from such professionalization.

As Busse et al. (2021) acknowledge, despite having incorporated some elements of feminist and critical pedagogies in the form of active and engaged learning, the neoliberal university ultimately does not share the goals of feminist pedagogy and hence is not motivated to create the conditions under which feminist pedagogy can be enacted. It is also likely that, despite ongoing critiques of adjunctification, universities will continue to rely on precariously employed contract labour, particularly in light of the financial consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic and expectations of continued cuts in public spending. Hence, it is tempting to situate the solution in creating a broader community of support for contract faculty within departments that do, at least to some extent, see the value of feminist pedagogical approaches and which can adopt certain practices to make working conditions somewhat more tenable. However, we make these suggestions tentatively, acknowledging that individual departmental practices ultimately do not solve the central problem: the precarity of contract work. To create conditions under which feminist pedagogy can be fully realized as an alternative to neoliberal approaches to teaching, and under which contract faculty are treated fairly, precarity itself must be addressed as a systemic issue.

Changing working conditions on a systemic level requires building solidarity with tenured and tenure-track faculty and administration, as well as challenging neoliberal attitudes towards university funding. Building this solidarity is made difficult by institutional mechanics that often keep contingent and long-term faculty isolated from each other. In addition to the conditions we have discussed, being in separate unions can limit opportunities for collective action. However, even when in the same union, it does not guarantee that this union, or long-term faculty members, will prioritise the specific needs of contract faculty. Our experience with these conditions points to the need for tenure track faculty to also reflect on how they might be benefiting from contingent labour, as well as how they too might benefit from challenging the neoliberal structures that produce the perceived need for adjunct instructors. We say this with recognition that tenure-track faculty hold institutional privileges, while also facing institutional pressures and

often burnout. Building solidarity is also a struggle because of the high turnover of adjunct faculty. We have both left teaching because neither of us saw it as sustainable work, offering us little opportunity for career advancement. Our decision to leave was also shaped by our feeling that we were not able to fulfill our commitment to feminist work. High turnover highlights the challenges of enacting change as the surplus of PhDs willing to take on adjunct work diminishes our power as labourers in relation to the university, and makes it difficult to sustain long-term relationships of solidarity. This points to the need to build solidarity both across the university and outside of it. It may also require changing public attitudes towards universities that challenge funding cuts and policies that treat universities like businesses. Based on this analysis we feel a key action is to explicitly incorporate labour politics into women's studies departments, including honesty with undergraduate and graduate students about the working conditions within these departments.

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