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Please cite this publication as follows:

Wright, T. (2014) Whatever happened to the F word in higher education? Journal of Gender Studies. ISSN 0958-9236.

Link to official URL (if available):

<http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/09589236.2014.931801>

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RESEARCH ARTICLE

Whatever happened to the F word in higher education?

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Abstract:

As a women's studies academic who has taught health and social care students for four years in the UK, it strikes me that much of what and how I teach is incompatible with my own pedagogic position. At a time of government cuts and economic austerity there are ever shrinking opportunities to work in women's studies environments within the higher education academy, and I often find there is a mismatch between what I am offering as an academic and what an employer is looking for. Occupying the most junior teaching post on a fixed-term contract, and coming from the discipline of women's studies - constructed often as irrelevant and/or too political and controversial, rather than a necessary philosophical foundation to critical thinking - I have diminutive curriculum influence and find myself more often than not delivering hegemonic groups of theories and practice. Drawing largely on level 5 health and social care interprofessional learning module course materials, this paper will analyse the discourses inscribed within them, and consequently expose the very essence of the learning and teaching that takes place within the classroom. This paper will also act as a catalyst to explore whether it is possible to find, or construct, a feminist space in my learning and teaching practice.

Keywords: feminism, higher education, post-feminism, feminist academics

Whatever happened to the F word in higher education?

Becoming an academic today

As an early career academic entering the higher education academy in the UK in the initial months of 2010 deep within the current ‘age of austerity’, the government cuts were becoming visible; there was deepening unease and uncertainty within UK institutions as to how austerity would shape the academy. It had taken a year since the completion of my Ph.D. to secure a position within a university – a process that varies across disciplines, and whilst I was competing against others with similar academic profiles for the post I eventually secured, I believe that the profile I had then would not even secure me an interview now. Entry level academic applicants are now expected to come to a position with a pre-existing publication list, and often with a book contract (Roy 2010). My fixed term entry position as a Teaching Assistant, one of four within the faculty, was funded by a pot of money existent pre economic austerity, but as far back as 2004 (Bryson 2004) and 2007 (Newman 2007) there was recognition of a shift towards the casualisation of the academic workforce in the UK, and that has continued apace, gathering even greater momentum; it is now most uncommon for early career academics to enter the academy on permanent contracts of employment (Roy 2010). As the most junior member of academic staff, responsibilities for module leadership and curriculum development are not an automatic part of the Teaching Assistant role, but some experience and knowledge of such duties is required before they can be undertaken. Gaining such experience pre-appointment is not impossible, but it is unlikely and thus an impossible criterion. In relation to nursing education, Halcomb et al (2010) have identified growing inequalities in employment contract terms and conditions among the academic staff and the casualisation of the nurse educator workforce, calling for more research into the implications of two-tiered workforces. And so it is as a Teaching Assistant, which is some way between being an academic and being a member of staff who supports academic practice, within an

era of austerity and government cuts that I began my experience of working in higher education.

The institution where I work

In the institution where I work their 2012 annual report on equality and diversity states that the university is attended by both female and male students, with a ratio of 69:31 respectively. 14% of the learners identify themselves as from Black or from minority ethnic groups, and 10% identify as disabled. Social, economic, and cultural capital indicators (Skeggs 1997) relating to the student population are not explicitly available, but it is possible to surmise that the majority of learners are local to the university area and that, in general, they are less privileged in terms of their social, cultural, and economic capital than learners from research intensive universities, and certainly in comparison to learners attending prestigious institutions. It is not a pointedly diverse institution in terms of race and ethnicity nor in terms of disability representation but, significantly, women make up two thirds of the student population and women account for 62% of the university's staff, although how this staff statistic translates into management and non-management roles is unclear. But broadly speaking, the staff population reflects the learner population. For an institution that delivers learning predominately to women, delivered to a large extent by women, questions arise about the degree to which learning and teaching and research as well as academic life are women centred.

Literature that has been drawn upon hails more from the USA than the UK because not only are there are strong parallels between the two contexts, but also the issues being explored within this paper are more prolifically published on by US writers.

Situating women's studies

In my current post I am yet to discover the existence of any significant feminist theories, texts, research, or pedagogic practice located within what I teach. This is a far cry from bell hooks' call for education to be a form of social justice, for education to be 'the practice of freedom' (hooks, 1994). Over the last fifty years women's studies has gone through a process of formation: firstly, a flourishing, and more latterly, a crisis with this more recent crisis stage synonymous with notions of society being in a state of post-feminism, and so it is important to offer a brief overview of feminism and women's studies within the academy. Women's studies grew out of the second wave of the women's liberation movement from the 1960s, and for a number of reasons, including equality legislation, demands from students, and feminist academic pressure, the subject took hold within universities during the 1980s. In the UK women's studies had a political foundation and was particularly popular with female students who were mature or from minority ethnic backgrounds (Humm 1986). From the 1980s onwards, and with the impact of third wave feminisms, women's studies began to question a need for a discrete subject base, and many academics felt that infiltration into the more traditional academic subjects was a more desirable outcome in terms of having an impact on, and transforming, the academy (Wallach Scott 2008). During this time of introspection women's studies programmes often morphed into gender studies within universities, and it has been argued that since this point a disconnection has ensued between the practice politics and everyday struggles and resistance of women activists and the issues that feminist academics were theorising (Weigman 2008). Since the late 1990s, women's studies departments in the academy have been closing or subsumed into other departments. Indeed, a search on the Universities and Colleges Admissions Service website (UCAS), the administrative system to support applications to UK higher education institutions, indicates no remaining undergraduate women's studies programmes, with only sparse Masters and PhD courses remaining (Oxford 2008).

Debates around whether universities should have women's or gender studies centre around the merits of 'women' being a subject base. Brown (2008) takes issue with the construction of women's studies as a subject based purely on gender identity because such a premise sets up all other social subjectivities, such as race, class, sexuality, and disability as inferior to gender. For Brown (2008), a subject based on identity is limited because of the never-ending and competing ways of being in, and experiencing, the world. Brown thus believes that women's studies has lost its political force and radical edge, and is trapped in a series of accusations and guilt among women and among feminists around which subjective experiences and ways of being should be of primary concern. Weigman (2008) agrees that women's studies has suffered from de-politicisation, arguing that this has been equitable to failure through the institutionalisation of women's studies; further, proposing that seeking to reimagine women's studies outside of institutional contexts will create a future for it.

With the decline in women's studies programmes teaching critical thinking through discourses concerned with a politics of difference has become an add-on to the social sciences, which effectively dilutes the transformational and edifying qualities for the individual learner, the institution, and society. This is apparent at the university where I began my Ph.D., which was within a prominent Centre for Women's Studies where leading feminist academics were employed. The Centre closed just four years later in 2009, and affiliated learners were from then on - amidst the disregarded, once influential women's studies centre - were overseen by a sociology department. This disorientation of women's studies is not an uncommon occurrence (Downing, 2013).

What is apparent is that women's studies and feminist scholarship not only sits at a crossroads (Wallach Scott 2008), but at a cliff-edge facing possible eradication. And within my own professional pedagogic context, this means finding ways in which to resist counterattacks on my field of inquiry as well as feminism more generally. This pedagogic

study, then, seeks to discover how that might be possible not only in terms of enabling me to teach what I am, and be what I teach, but also to find ways of taking learners on what undertaking too.

The pedagogic study

This paper now turns to look briefly at the methodology used to inform the pedagogic study data discussed later in this paper. Feminist research and action research are similar in their socio-political intent, participatory nature, and in the sense that they both seek to change the status quo in a democratic way towards a democratic end (Winter & Munn 2004). But feminist action research also involves extending the reflective and continuously re-evaluating practice of action research to incorporate the notion of reflexivity advocated in feminist standpoint theory (Harding 1991). Without reflexivity, action research merely imitates a kind of pseudo feminist research that lacks recognition of all relations of power that exist within the research process (Issitt 1999). Brydon-Miller et. al. (2004) point out that action research can fail to identify the interconnected and mutually constitutive privileged positions that educational researchers occupy, pointing out that feminist approaches interrogate and challenge scholar/activists to think through how they oppose social injustices when they might also enjoy positions of privilege and power. Engaging in methodologies that are purposefully egalitarian and socially political in approach - as action research claims to - does not automatically exonerate researchers from accountability, and nor does it automatically ensure politicking is imbued. Incorporating feminist standpoint methodologies force action researchers to be accountable for, and critical about, how and why they act (Harding 1991).

For this pedagogic study, there were two main methods of data collection. They are based on trying to assess to what extent feminist theories, literature, and research are included within the modules I teach, and also, to establish to what extent feminist issues arise and are

discussed in the classroom. From there, I sought to explore the potential to create further progressive feminist learning spaces.

The first set of data comes from information gathered about the theory and literature included across six modules on which I teach. This information constitutes a crude set of statistics, which nevertheless are revealing in exposing the exclusion of feminist material. I gathered the data by reviewing each module's handbook indicative reading lists as well as the reference lists from lecture presentations in order to compile an initial listing of authors and titles. I then read through the readings' abstracts to gain an understanding of their aims and objectives. Some of the readings I was already familiar with, having read them previously as part of teaching preparation. Beyond this I applied a derivation of the Bechdel testⁱⁱⁱ (Bechdel 2012) to each of the writings in order to establish whether they could be determined individually as feminist or not. Such a test, adapted for academic reading, proposed that:

1. The materials are about women's experiences.
2. That the materials are inclusive of women from different ethnic, racial, class, and disability backgrounds.
3. That the materials seek social justice for women.

I decided to exclude criteria relating to the sex of the author because being a woman scholar does not necessarily make you care about the oppressive experiences of women and the disenfranchisement of particular social groups (hooks 2010).

The second data set draws on abstracts from my own reflective journal in which, over the three years, I have written 'critical' autobiographical accounts of my teaching experiences. I took to recording significant events in the form of fortnightly reflections. The data from the journal reflect on teaching two of the six modules analysed in the first data set. The sets of learners from each classroom situation, however, are different, and so no one student was present in both classrooms. The inclusion of the two distinct classroom

interactions and the professional conversation are designed to convey some of the scope and extent of experiences.

As a literary genre autobiography has been important in feminism because it has allowed women to write their own story, often constructing themselves in opposition to the ways in which dominate patriarchal society constructs them. This approach has proved particularly useful for women 'of colour', especially in the USA where the slave narrative has been an exercise of freedom and justice (Easton 1996). Autobiography is the personal and political embodied, but when used as a research method, the researcher needs to be aware of the relationships of power reflected within it and recognise that it purports an individual and thus subjective experience. Whilst such experiences are useful as an alternative to claiming objective truths—as traditional research methods do— those subjective experiences must remain vigilant in being connected to wider socio-political concerns (Griffiths 1994).

As a form of research method the anecdotes in my journal offer insight into classroom situations with and between learners, and also experiences, both personal and institutional, of a post-feminist 'backlash' (hooks 2010). The journal was compiled primarily as a means of being able to evidence continued professional development but, over time, it became a resource for interrogating accumulating experiences of anti-feminist feeling within teaching environments (Ahmed 2010; hooks 2010; Lee 2005) with the intention of sharing my perspective on a higher education contexts through the publication of this paper. Such an account aims to illustrate the experiences of a feminist academic working within an often resistant and hostile environment and yet, from that position, seek ways in which to practice and teach the critical thinking that is the very foundations of women's studies and feminist thought, and which has the potential to enable the freedom think and produce new knowledge that is meaningful for both learners and educators alike (hooks 1994).

The main ethical concern posed by such a study is that it essentially draws on one participant's observations as well as a rather the small set of statistical data, which excludes other voices that might otherwise better inform the research. Not involving other participant learners or colleagues - and thereby avoiding the need for a lengthier ethical approval process beyond what had already been engaged in - means there is negation of potentially important experiences and perspectives. This is a major concern for a piece of work that claims to be feminist. While the knowledge generated offers some important insights, it is, ultimately limited by its size, and thus lacks the credibility of a broader analysis that would have provided larger statistical and qualitative significance. As such, this study can only offer a starting point from which much more research can and should be developed.

Pedagogic study findings and analysis

The results from the first data set and the collation of modules readings are shown in Table 1.

The table of results in Table 1 are fairly self-explanatory in yielding very low results for module readings meeting the first criterion of the adapted Bechdel test. Only 7, (6.36%) of the 110 readings considered contained data, information about or discussion of women's experiences. The table also shows (column 5) that of those 7 readings, only 4—a meagre 3.63% —of the 110 materials considered met all of the criteria and could be considered feminist in discussing a diversity of women's experiences and that seek social justice for those women. The 4 readings talk specifically about changing professional practice within health and social care as a way of eliciting social justice. I re-visited the 4 readings that passed all of the criteria of the adapted Bechdel test and read through them. Disappointingly, I discovered that whilst they refer to women's experiences as diverse, and oppressions as often being multiple and interlinked, they did not contain data that referred directly to the words of women themselves, and in that sense significant female voices were. Also

noteworthy was the fact that 3 of the 7 readings which contained some element of women's experiences did not meet criterion 2 of the adapted Bechdel test; 'that materials are inclusive of women from different ethnic, racial, class, and disability backgrounds'. Thus 43% of the 7 readings failed to speak of the experiences of Black, minority ethnic, working class, disabled, or otherwise marginalised women. The table also indicates that one particular module (module 4) yielded the largest proportion of readings that passed the adapted Bechdel test. This is attributed to the fact that module 4 explores issues relating to diversity, equality, and discrimination within health and social care settings. However, only 6 (15.39%) of the total readings for module 4 contain references to women, with a mere 4 readings (3.63%) referring to the experiences of a diverse group of marginalised women.

This analysis illustrates that women and the consideration of gender issues, and certainly feminist perspectives, are largely absent from the modules on which I teach. I anticipate that this pattern is observable across the faculty within which I sit. Hooks' (2010) work has considered the way in which feminist academics and the content of feminist learning is locked in isolated centres or institutes for women's or gender studies, which no longer have the impact and/or influence on the wider academy that they did in previous decades.

To contextualise the environment in which I teach it is important to note that in the last four years I have worked with over one hundred and twenty students, of which only five were male. Of the seven different modules I have taught on, all but one Module Leader has been a woman, and these facts are probably the 'norm' within health educational settings (Daly et. al. 2010). So it is surprising and somewhat frustrating that with so many women engaged in this teaching they do not more directly identify as a feminist, as advocates of feminism, or as activists and seekers of social justice. This study has already pointed out that being a woman does not automatically make you a feminist, but there is no evidence to

suggest that the women educators I have encountered do not embrace or practice feminism in their lives, including their working lives, it just it does not appear to be explicit in their teaching practice. This is significant because implicitness is not useful for galvanising individuals, for establishing collectives or a critical mass of teacher agitators who can advocate for social change. Such galvanising can also provide for collective engagement around issues of social justice across the educator/learner divide and accumulatively for more socially, politically, and culturally aware health and social care workers.

As poignantly disappointing as the first data set results were, I want to consider the second data set of journal anecdotes and identify the degree to which learners might be disengaged or engaged with feminism and feminist issuesⁱⁱⁱ. Whilst the interpretation of the interactions described in the journal data may appear obvious, it is the palpable and apparentness of them that expresses the very tangibility of an institutionalised post-feminist backlash. The following reflective journal entry reflects upon a session I taught for the first time; it explains a pivotal point in my understanding of a significant number of learners' thinking. To set the scene, students were discussing practice experiences as part of an activity linked to summative assessment that focuses on identifying discriminatory cultures and practice:

On several occasions students told me explicitly that they simply did not believe that discrimination occurred on any level. From merely listening to discussions I worked out that approximately one third of the students concurred that social equality was a given, and although expressed in a number of different ways, also agreed that agitation for social justice had 'gone too far'. I was/am shocked by the students' directness, and at times somewhat angry at their stance on the matter. These students are enrolled on professional health and social care programmes, and I expected them to be more empathetic. These are meant to be people who are capable of being non-judgemental, and who I thought cared about people and society. When I did challenge their beliefs most students were unconvinced and many indicated that they would "lie" when writing their essays and claim to decry social and political disenfranchisement, whilst really perceiving it as a myth. I am sad and very frustrated. That classroom felt like a very dangerous place to be. I am worried about the absent Black student, and on a personal level, I imagine the discrimination my dual heritage daughter faces. I feel now that although I tried

to persuade them otherwise, what I said was not good enough and I worry what consequences that failure will have. I worry about my capacity as an educator to promote and effect change.

Reflecting my concerns, as Fruedi (2006) has shown, resistance to the realities of social inequalities led to an inability of learners to think critically about the social and political world they and others experience. In terms of assessment it often led to learners lacking empathy and an absence of pathos in their writing, which for health and social care students is dangerous and disconcerting.

It is important to think about the ways in which safe critical conversations could take place as a starting point from which awareness around social injustices can develop into forms of social action within the personal and professional lives of health and social care workers.

Another interesting post in the journal recounts a typical outcome from meetings I have with contemporaries when there is discussion of my field of study. For some time now I have been seeking out members of staff for potential collaboration on research, publications and research funding bids, and have had a number of one-to-one meetings with individuals.

This reflection is representative of recordings following such meetings:

I said my area of research was women's studies - immediate disengagement, moves back in her chair, crosses her legs, and looks around to see who might be listening. I continued on that I was interested in post-colonial feminist theories and the experiences of migrant women, and that I was looking to connect with other scholars using feminist theories in their work. 'I am not a feminist' was the response, 'although I use what may be considered feminist theories in some of my work, I do not use them because they were feminist' she confirms. She then goes on to suggest I seek out scholars from other universities and suggested some names. I feel like an alien, outsider, and totally out of place in this, my work environment. I cannot quite understand her categorical denial of feminist intent. It was like she does not want to be associated in any way. I feel that by saying the "F" word I was uttering a dirty word. I guess it was better than some of the abuse, curled lips, horrified looks, sheer confoundedness, and often outright dismissal I get from some (not all) of the male scholars I dare – and yes it seems very much like I have to steel myself – to talk to. Do I re-present who and what I am to fit in? That feels quite wrong, but the alternative is to resist, and that will be challenging at the least, and potentially painful and perilous.

In the current academic climate, finding a secure position as a women's studies scholar is unlikely, and being a feminist academic working in another subject sphere will likely have some, if not many, negative impacts on one's sense of well-being. As a teacher I feel that my well-being is necessary to ensure the well-being of the learners I engage with. This means I need to find a space from where I can be what I teach, and teach what I am, including locating my research within my teaching and purposefully seeking out associations across disciplines and with like-minded colleagues. Finding those connections can open up critical spaces, which may be difficult, challenging, and uncomfortable at times, but nevertheless are necessary for mutual well-being (hooks 2010).

The next entry from my journal offers a point of optimism that was absent from the first classroom interaction because there is more of an exchange of different albeit disparate views. It forms part of a discussion I had with students as an aside from the taught material I was delivering and relates to the personal understandings of women health care students. It is an expression of how some everyday experiences impact negatively on their learning.

The conversation started when I asked the class if a later start (ten to fifteen minutes) to our sessions was agreeable to them due to the school run I and others have to do. The class comprised all female students except for one male learner, and all came from a similar socio-economic demographic but were of different ages ranging from eighteen to fifty. The group was a mix of mostly white students, with a small minority of Black learners:

A preoccupation with caring responsibilities, such as the well-being of children, child care arrangements, caring for older relatives, disabled relatives, or relatives with mental ill health, was reported as persistently disrupting two thirds of the students learning. Having to be in the classroom at particular times, on particular days, and for particular periods of time presented numerous and constant logistical and emotional issues. But it was not just these realities that made more work and found more challenges for these students; it was also the social and psychological pressure to deny motherhood and caring responsibilities as learners recounted being expected to prioritise the course they were on over and above anything or anyone else. 'Well she shouldn't have kids'

'They know this course is full-time when they join up'

'The course must come first'

'Placement cannot be expected to provide flexible working arrangements, and all students must do shift work and long days'

'If they can't cut it they shouldn't be here'.

These are some of the comments I have randomly heard made by teaching staff and which are replicated by students without caring demands upon them. Listening to the stories and experiences of students with caring responsibilities made those without any angry, and one said, 'this is a waste of time for those of us who want to learn here'. Another, 'why should we accommodate discussions not relevant to us'. And yet another, 'it shouldn't be made easy for them'.

There is hostility and anger in the room and some of that is towards me. Me because I facilitated and continued the discussion, and me because I also have caring responsibilities; but we were hearing some significant voices as women articulated their experiences of the systematic removal of their rights. Discussions like this have to be one way of confronting dominant discourses and discriminatory rhetoric; because only by women speaking and others more advantaged listening can critical thinking and change begin.

Here, an association emerged between women with caring responsibilities and those without caring responsibilities. Such diverging associations, formed through points of commonality, illustrate the way in which connections and disconnections are reliant on different places, different times, and different locations. It is possible, then, to see how gendered social injustice is more or less significant to different women. For learners, both with and without parental responsibilities, increasing their capital assets through gaining a professional qualification was a way of accessing prospective new forms of social and economic power, but the negative impact of parental responsibilities was significant in terms of the ease with which they accumulated that new capital resource (Skeggs 1997). In the sense that what was unifying the women learners was their desire to increase capital resources, the 'F word' has not disappeared from the academy or higher education learning spaces, but it has all too often been an omitted word despite its relevance to learners' lives. Yet, by speaking about women learners' lives and experiences the academy can be a place from which to raise consciousness and can offer both learners and educators the opportunity to think critically about how and

why they inhabit the social world as they do, and therefore, works to free minds to the possibility of contemplating and creating change (hooks 1994).

Whilst the data has been useful in exposing a dearth of feminist literature and resources used within the modules that I teach on, and finding issues within my teaching environment(s) that might have otherwise have been forgotten(or unrecognised as they were not the main teaching event) there are nevertheless limitations to what has been presented. As stated earlier, a research approach that involved more participants would have offered a broader and more comprehensive understanding of social and political identities and relationships. Only providing my own observations gives the impression that my experiences and understandings are universal and equivalent to all women, when they are necessarily relative. The real task of academics should be to find ways in which the disenfranchised can speak and represent their own interests (Brydon-Miller et al. 2004 p.12).

Harding & Norberg (2005) have pointed out however that employing a methodological approach based on stand point theory, which seeks to offer equity for all voices within the research, is impossible to achieve. Confronting social injustices has the potential to be transformative, it could never been entirely successful because, as Brown (2008) points out, the fragmented nature of identity politics makes it impossible to be wholly inclusive. It is that understanding of inevitable failure though that embeds an everlasting critical dimension that is feminist.

This research has involved both making choices informed by a reflective and reflexive process, and taking action that has triggered opportunities for additional research and possibilities for further action and change. As a feminist *and* a feminist academic, I have not failed to see the momentum towards notions of society being in a post-feminist phase in both a personal and professional context. There seems – within the academy - to be a significant backlash *against* feminism, a sense that the struggle for equality is done and that inequalities

no longer exist. This post-feminist backlash has seen feminist academics retreat to work in (small) isolated centres or institutes of gender or women's studies within universities (hooks 2010). Potentially this makes it difficult to engage students with feminism as they view gender inequality as irrelevant because they believe the sexual revolution is over, and persistently perceive experience of disenfranchisement and disadvantage as relating to personal characteristics and not due to social and political structures (Philip 2009). Encountering resistance from students in accepting that socio-political and economic factors have an impact on individuals' life chances has been a feature of my own practice when I have tried to engage students in thinking more critically, not only about their own experiences, but also about the experiences of others.

Feminism and feminist pedagogy is about challenging social injustices and raising awareness and, in the context of higher education, it is about collaboration between teachers and learners in a process of engaging in critical thinking about knowledge, about understanding the personal as political, about taking action, and of the classroom as being a locus for change (hooks 2010). The apolitical mentality of many students is problematic on a number of levels. Firstly, students' unwillingness to deconstruct and think critically about the production of knowledge leaves their writing unchallenging and predictable. Secondly, with a significant amount of health and social care students exhibiting apathy towards injustices and inequalities, inculcates a need for action and dialogue.

The impulse behind this paper

Before concluding I want to offer some insights into the first catalyst for the pedagogic study, this paper, and ultimately, the suggested actions in response to the vanishing of feminisms under a wave of austerity.

‘Girls don’t wear trousers’, ‘girls should cover their bodies up’, ‘girls aren’t allowed to wear blue’, ‘girls with short hair are boys’, ‘girls aren’t allowed to play football’, ‘you’re a chatterbox’, ‘I don’t like your knickers, they are too plain’. These are just a few of the everyday sexist abuses mouthed by reception school age boys to girl peers. Daily I see and feel the pain and anger of my four year old daughter as she encounters and tries to resist such relentless subjugation in what could be any progressive and academically excellent primary school. When I think of my experiences in comparison, it becomes apparent that life as a young girl today is still aggressively oppressive. My daughter’s experiences make me think not only about my own, but also those of other women and girls. In gathering some other perspectives, I began to follow the Twitter hashtag #EverydaySexism for several hours a day over the course of a week. In that time I read hundreds of accounts of the experiences of all kinds of women and girls being verbally and physically abused by all kinds of men and boys. From this point on I began thinking about the persistence and consistency of male oppression, abuse, and subjugation, and because of my job, I began to question more specifically why the work of feminist academics and teachers and the role of women’s studies in particular had not had the transformative impact many predicted in previous generations. There was realisation that my pedagogic practice must become more far-reaching and influential than I ever thought necessary in order to reignite learners’ questioning, their freedom to think, and their ability to act towards progressive social change.

Conclusions and moving forward

Lastly, I need to consider what actions I can take during a time of austerity and devalued feminist scholarship ensuring that at least an aspect of my teaching and student learning involves feminist ways of doing and knowing are explored in an iterative process, that acknowledges and advocates for inclusion of parallel ways of knowing and doing in a process

which not only creates the space for that exploration, but also provides for momentum and continuous development (Clegg 1999). Such actions constitute a deed not to be a passive ivory tower academic or a victim of post-feminist sentiment, but instead to confront injustices. One of the ways in which this can be done is to engage in (more) dialogue within the classroom based on learners' lived experiences and use those experiences as points for critical discussions about society and the world we live in. But there also needs to be accountability, and so such discussions should be a space for which the voices and experiences of disenfranchised and marginalised learners can be heard, and from where the more privileged learners engage in actively listening and questioning their position in the classroom, in society, and in the world (hooks 1994). As a facilitator it is my responsibility to enable that process for conversation and dialogue to begin. I am accountable for raising issues of social injustice within the classroom (Brydon-Miller et al. 2004), because enjoying a position of academic privilege and not doing so sets up collusion with dominant and discriminating ways of thinking, seeing, and acting, and stifles rather than frees my own and students', learning.

I am minded however, of the danger of insisting, or of expecting, learners to acknowledge or necessarily internalise what is inevitably and essentially my world view, and I am reminded that my world view does not constitute automatically the grander position (hooks 2010). It is important to recognise that exposing students to other viewpoints and social injustices does not logically conclude with them adopting ultimately the same understandings as myself, and that feminist pedagogy is not about presenting a new universal truth (Jackson 1997). That much of my frustration and discomfort with students failure to occupy a particular position comes not only from an expectation of prior knowledge around transgressive discourses, which they do not necessarily have, but also from a steadfast understanding that the exploration of social injustices will lead cogently to a particular

viewpoint. I am grateful to the two reviewers of this paper for reminding me that such a stance requires both recognising and deconstructing if one is to claim to be engaged in a reflexive feminist pedagogy.

In terms of action in the workplace it is also important that I begin to agitate for the inclusion of feminist literature and research to be included in module content, and the adapted Bechdel test is one way of supporting this. Certainly this means choosing to be less concerned with the disquiet of being a feminist ‘killjoy’ because, as Ahmed (2010) suggests, the more feminist agitation the greater the threat of killing someone else’s joy and that this is unlikely to go unchallenged or without resistance. Instead I chose to use being a feminist as a tool to carve out a space from which to challenge the status quo, raise consciousness, and have a transformative effect. Such agitation should not stop at module content and learning resources. It should also extend to avocation for the inclusion of the more flexible ways of learning that are also important to many women learners and women teachers. Avocation through student module evaluations that ask the right questions, by becoming involved in curriculum revalidations, by applying for more freedom to negotiate learning with students, and by researching what effective models of distant, web based, and other alternative modes of learning already exist and can be utilised, are all places to bring possible change through a process of learners, teachers, and facilitators collaborating towards more inclusive practices.

Whilst the simplistic data on the module reading lists speaks for itself insists on the need for action, the journal data only offers my interpretation of events and recounts encounters in the classroom from my point of view. It should also be noted that the selected journal data is a small piece of much larger content, and whilst the incidents chosen are meant to reflect significant interactions reflective of post-feminist sentiments, there is recognition that the data is both subjective and filtered through a singular perspective. Research designed to gather accounts from learners’ perspectives could substantiate or

challenge this very particularity, and if those accounts were followed up beyond the taking of any action in response to them, it could more easily ensure nuanced data that would both better inform learning and teaching and provide for more sustainable action. Such sustainability is critical above all if there is to be continued resistance of tides of austerity and anti-feminist feelings and environments.

A pedagogic approach aimed at transformation that is mindful of the relative social relations of capital is also necessary, so that an understanding of gendered social injustices and of what it means to be a feminist are not homogeneous, and do not negate or forget the interconnectedness of other ways of being and lived experience.

What I have done in this conclusion is make proposals of how my teaching practice can recover who I am, and through such recuperation begin to take learners on voyages that will ignite their critical thinking, liberate their minds, and transform their learning experiences. The word feminism in the higher education this paper has explored is obscured, not disappeared, and certainly not unnecessary. Freire, as quoted in Del Guadalupe Davidson & Yancy (2009), asked ‘how do you practice the reverse of being a necessary opposite’? And perhaps in other places, such as the United States where Women’s and Black Studies have been sustained more broadly, this is a point from which to develop. But in the context of the higher education in the UK, the practice of being the necessary opposite in 2013 seems very much a necessity.

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ⁱ The Bechdel test was invented by cartoonist Alison Bechdel in the 1980s (Bechdel 2012) as a way of establishing whether a film could be determined as feminist (or not). The test involves determining of a film that:

1. It has to have at least two [named] women in it
2. who talk to each other
3. about something besides a man.

ⁱⁱ The Bechdel test has ostensibly been used to critique the under-representation of women in film and the media. Outside of this field it has also been used by Marshall (2014) as a tool for including more women philosophy curricula, but there are not many adaptations beyond directly graphing it on to the literary canon. This is probably because without development and iteration it is too simplistic and negates recognition of interlocking cultural and social subjectivities beyond that of just gender. Edwards (2013) has suggested that adaptation of the Bechdel test is required in order to account for multiple interconnected marginalisations.

ⁱⁱⁱ It should be highlighted that the students undertaking module 4 from the first data set were not students who were present in either of the classroom interactions described in this second data set of journal anecdotes, and the lack of engagement with or guidance towards, alternative and transgressive literature may indicate the reason for unwitting alignment to dominant gendered discourses.