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# **Sensing Feminism**

Lynne F Baxter, Carole Elliott, Deborah N Brewis, Jhilmil Breckenridge and the other participants of the 'What is Feminism?' Group A workshop at *Feminism, Activism, Writing!*

## **abstract**

We offer a method for enabling inclusive participation in group discussion: the five senses exercise used by clean language practitioners. The method helped a diverse set of participants with intersectional subject positions articulate their perspectives on feminism in a non-hierarchical way. We describe the basis for the method, the intentions of the session convenor and results from the session. Participants reflect on the method and the responses it evoked. The method is a way of honouring individual perspectives and experiences whilst building connections between people. We think the method is useful for facilitating diverse groups in contexts such as workshops, teaching and meetings at work where the convenor wants to build inclusion and fresh perspectives.

**Keywords:** Feminism, Clean Language, Sensory Methods, Inclusion, Metaphor

## **Introduction**

The purpose of this short paper is to discuss an exercise we found useful in communicating our perspectives on feminism. The exercise uses the senses to explore concepts in a metaphorical way. The paper begins by describing the reasons behind choosing the method and then describes how the method unfolds and its theoretical underpinnings. Workshop participants offer their evocations from the exercise in visuals and prose and the results of the

exercise are recounted in the central portion of this paper. We propose the method as a way of facilitating the construction of an inclusive, thought provoking, communicative group, and offer it for others to consider in their own work in teaching and workshop convening.

### **Convening a workshop session – Lynne**

Before the workshop began, the organizers were clear in communicating the tone they intended it to have. They wanted the workshop to be open and inclusive and promote dialogue to help build a constructive network for feminist action. The organizers contacted people to convene sessions, including me. They suggested some questions for each session and gave us freedom to structure it as we wanted ‘but not too much’. I looked at the timetable and found my name against one of the first breakout sessions after the introduction. There would be around 20 people in the room each with their own intersectional subjectivities and experiences of feminism. At that stage people might not know each other or feel confident about speaking. I had been reading Walker (2014) and thought one of her exercises might be useful to open the discussion in a different way. Instead of asking people directly about what feminism meant to them, I decided to ask in turn how the different senses related to feminism for each person. The method evoked a wide range of contributions and let us gain different insights into something we all care about deeply. Many participants appreciated the method and discussed it more fully afterwards. Other session convenors used it in their sessions. What was it about the method that resonated? The next part of the paper discusses the basis for the method I used, the 5 senses exercise (Walker, 2014: 63).

The method is based on the work of Caitlin Walker who works on projects with groups of people in different organizations such as universities, businesses and schools. One of her tasks at the beginning of a project is to learn people’s different perspectives on it. In addition,

she wants the members of the group to realise other members indeed have different perspectives about the project. She accomplishes these objectives through the 5 senses exercise (Walker, 2014: 63). It begins by Walker asking people to 'see an elephant'. After some time, she then invites everyone to talk about their elephant. For example, people comment on the size of their elephant, where it was located, what type, what colour and so on. She then asks the group to 'hear music', 'taste a lemon', 'feel velvet' and 'smell smoke', and each time they explore the responses fully before moving on (Walker, 2014: 63). The exercise yields many different perspectives and a variety of connections people make on relatively simple topics. Walker (2014) discussed how it helped people communicate their views more clearly and promoted greater understanding amongst the groups. I thought the method interesting and explored how I might use it at the workshop, mindful of the context and the purpose of the session I was convening.

I decided to tailor the exercise to better fit the workshop aims and session topic. I thought it important to foreground feminism. So, instead of using elephants, music, lemons, velvet and smoke, I asked, 'what does feminism smell like?' and gave some time for people to think and write about what they felt. Then I invited people to discuss what they had thought. We then repeated the process substituting different senses in relation to feminism. Some people were happy to speak, others needed gentle invitations. But overall contributions flowed well, and people seemed to enjoy the process. One person in the group of around twenty seemed annoyed about something, but I learned later it was about one of my personal responses to the exercise that I had shared with the group, rather than the method. My intention was to help people who did not necessarily know each other talk about feminism in an inclusive way. I think overall the exercise succeeded and was pleased when others adopted it or modified their own version for use during their sessions. The 5 senses exercise and Walker's work (2014)

are based on a wider approach known as ‘Clean Language’ that might be of further interest.

The next part of my section summarizes the work.

Clean Language is an approach to communication concerned with ‘revealing metaphors and opening minds’ (Sullivan and Rees, 2008: i). It is based on the late David Grove’s ideas, who worked as a practitioner helping people communicate better in a variety of contexts. He did not write many articles and books on his methods, instead people who were engaged with his ideas wrote about them and developed them further (Lawley and Tompkins, 2000; Sullivan and Rees, 2008; Walker, 2014). A key part of his ideas is a defined set of ‘clean questions’ designed to ask a person their perspective so that the questioner builds on the respondent’s language. The questioner does not put words into the respondent’s mouth, so the unique perspective is articulated. Walker (2014) described using the questions in a series of contexts, for example helping children who have learning needs in school, students on a degree course learn their coursework better, and developing a new strategy with companies who were struggling financially. The examples of the technique in use (Lawley and Tompkins, 2000; Sullivan and Rees, 2008; Walker, 2014) demonstrated clean questions useful in obtaining ideas and participation. The approach appealed to me as it seemed to equalize group discussion as the questions were ones that everyone could answer. Through exchanging responses people gained insight about themselves and others. A key aspect of Clean Language was noticing metaphors and using them to communicate perspectives, explored next.

Advocates of Clean Language think metaphors are important in communication because they encapsulate and share meaning (Sullivan and Rees, 2008). A metaphor is a way of ‘connecting with a pattern that has personal significance’ (Lawley and Thompson, 2000: 5).

Everybody has their own metaphoric landscape (Lawley and Thompson, 2000: 17).

Imaginative metaphors can be expressed in a variety of ways including verbally, non-verbally and in material forms such as drawing, writing and sculpting (Lawley and Thompson, 2000: 16). Grove observed during his practice that people discussed events and perspectives in symbolic that included metaphors. The metaphors often drew upon the senses. 'People also see pictures, hear sounds and feel feelings in their imagination when they remember a past event or imagine a future event' (Lawley and Thompson, 2000: 4). Walker (2014), a keen follower of Grove's, developed her 5 senses exercise as a method of voicing people's metaphors. What metaphors did the modified 5 senses exercise evoke in the workshop participants? The next part of the paper recounts some of the responses.

### **A collective writing recounted - Deborah**

The following piece of writing is an interpretation of the responses from one group of participants to the exercise described above. We began with a period of quiet reflection, during which time some people sat to think; some wrote down ideas, and some drew pictures. Lynne invited us to consider each of the senses in turn. I, and others, took notes during the discussion that followed, as each participant called out to contribute the images, words, phrases and emotions that had come to mind for them. Afterwards, we teased out the commonalities and differences in the metaphors that we held about feminism; we discussed our feminisms. Based on my notes and a visualisation contributed to by Annette Risberg using the online tool 'padlet', I have written the text below. This text attempts to convey the essence of what was co-produced through the exercise, faithful to the Clean Language approach. However, it is inevitably transformed to a degree by my own embodied response to the session and the way in which I have written the multiple responses into a single, poetic text. The synthesising of the contributed images into a narrative structure shapes the meaning

of each; the images are positioned and therefore understood *in relation* to one another. This transition from individual to relational perhaps mimics what we collectively attempted to achieve in the room. The text below aspires to represent the collective writing that was produced by the workshop participants; it is a text with many authors:

*Feminism feels like comfort, like soft, strong corduroy. I can run my fingers across its texture to feel the grooves of experience that make it both supple and tough. It is the satisfaction of bursting, of bubble-wrap pop pop. We burst upward, into the air with gravity-defying lightness. And yet, it is courage. It is risk. We find it in the opening of one's eyes: it is found in the moment at which I see the edge...and jump. Some of us are pushed. Feminism feels like heat. A rage born of cause that binds a community. A community that jostles, we are not all smiles, but we embrace.*

*Feminism looks bright, light – feminism is vivid; being visible. Its imagined futures are brightly coloured, colourful with the intersections of experience. That feminist of the future looks like Rosie, reimagined, who is riveting to us now in her multiplicity, as a collective. Feminism looks like women: this is good and this is bad; for feminism to look like women is to liberate and to constrain us.*

*Feminism smells like ozone...its mountain-fresh air is utopia. The roses and lilies drift gently in. Feminism at once feels like sweat, like cup after cup of strong, black coffee. Bitter. Urgent. Feminism is a scented memory of welcome; of homecoming: it is free tea served from paint-peeled hatch windows in old village halls.*

*Feminism tastes like staunch coffee, of stout. It is pungent as blue cheese and pickles, or marmite between two thick slices. One learns to appreciate it; to find it fine. There is a sweetness there – of chocolate, perhaps honey. It coats the palette, soothes. It is quenching like water flooding in after a long thirst.*

*Feminism sounds like chatter, the buzz of voice. It is chanting, enchanting. Mmmmmm. I hear a common language uttered – we need only shorthand to feel ourselves heard. And still it is shouts of opposition – an alarm bell cuts through the consensus; it is the alarm bells that bring us together and which simultaneously threaten to drive us apart. A deafening thunder rises, is sustained by our energy, our resistance. The thunder breeds the desire for silence – we search for a place in which we can hear, we can listen. Be still and transform. Allow ourselves, allow each other, to hear the sweeter music that was always, a possibility, somewhere.*

It strikes me, as I read this synthesised text, the metaphors used by participants ranged across more and less culturally-embedded experiences and imagery. For example, the ‘old village halls’ and ‘blue cheese and pickles’ directly evoke a national context (in these cases, British), whilst ‘thunder’, ‘chatter’ and the feeling of jumping over an edge appeal more universally to the human experience. In the context of exploring ‘feminism’ as concept and movement, the text reminds us to reflect on the specificity of our experiences, differing histories of oppression, and varying contemporary concerns. Whilst the metaphor-based method helped to create a space in which we, the participants, could both appreciate diversity and connect to one another across differences; privilege and marginalisation likely still played a part in the dynamics of the group. The Clean Language approach may have additional value to scholars and teachers who seek to engage with the ways in which for example race, disability, age,



sexual identity, class, and global location, simultaneously inform our experiences; through seeking to elicit a range of metaphors and using these as a springboard to discuss and/or problematise the privileges of, and intersections in, our shifting social positionings (see Anthias 2002; Holvino 2012).

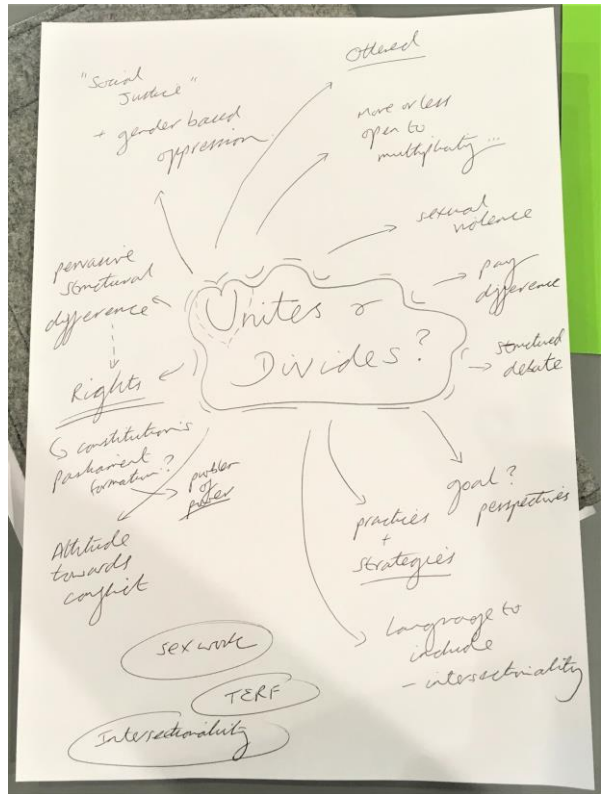
### **Reflections – Jhilmil**

At the end of the activity, we brainstormed together as a group. As the handwritten notes show, on green and white paper, consciously or unconsciously choosing colours for progress, we were trying to take some of the collective ideas and energy towards a plan for the future – a ‘feministo’, as opposed to a manifesto, deliberating thinking of ways to rethink masculinity, leverage some of the privilege a lot of us have, and see how we could move towards a more credible voice, while keeping the very real threats and dangers of being co-opted into the very ‘system’ we were trying to change.

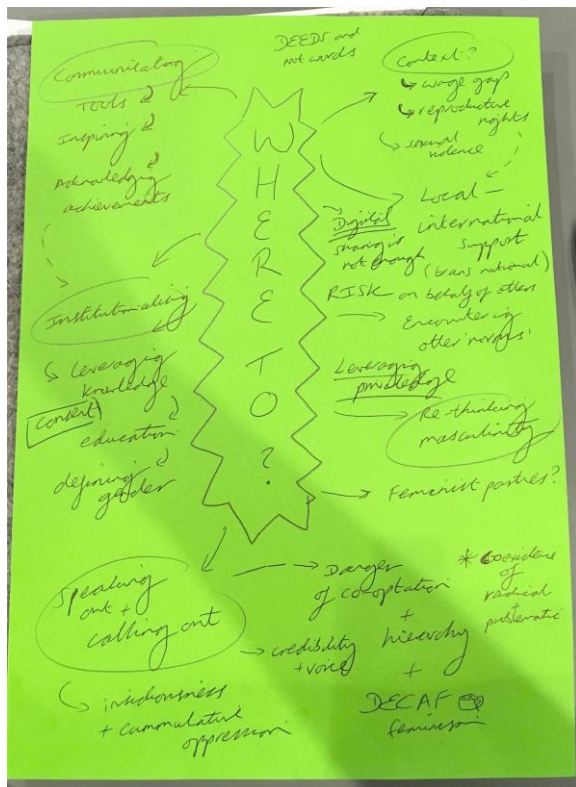
We thought it important to have deeds, not words and discussed ways, possible toolkits, to collate achievements and share progress with the group. We also discussed ways to garner national and international support, including the trans femme sector, which is increasingly coming out of the margins and can be an important ally and a powerful sisterhood. We also discussed the importance of the right language and language to include intersectionality, being hyper sensitive to stay away from ‘othering’ and create more inclusion, even within this space.

Q Feminism  
 - why?  
 - who?  
 - being...?

why? → Liberty & Equality "threaten"  
 discrimination → a group,  
 defence + ownership → desire anger (lets)  
 Political struggle → extract, sensation of  
 something one is obliged to be  
 parental roles → growing (up) into it 'not yet'  
 exclusionary → feminism → striving to...  
 constant thinking 'feminist'  
 consciousness → privilege → speaking or reality?  
 self-reflection vs silence + fear → negotiated?  
 history / celebration / letting things wrong  
 who is allowed to be one? TERF → SUMP  
 "superiority" → they was



Further photographs of the notes, original materials may be viewed at this padlet, including a series of impromptu feminist placards that were created at the end of the session to call for action : [https://padlet.com/lynne\\_baxter/lpt4dvsczbxh](https://padlet.com/lynne_baxter/lpt4dvsczbxh)



## **Concluding thoughts – Carole**

It is important to note that we finish writing this piece some ten months after the workshop. Since that time, we have separately and collectively engaged in other forms of activism or participated in conferences with more traditional formats and concerns. If many of us committed to attend the workshop because we fear the consequences of a rise in populist politics to feminism, the intensification of moves to quash legislation that previous generations of feminists fought for in a number of jurisdictions has only intensified our fears. Yet we carry the hope that the emergence of different forms of feminism, feminisms that are purposefully intersectional, will continue to encourage resistance and action.

Our individual responses to the questions proposed by Lynne's exercise illustrate how we each sensed feminism differently even though it is core to our values. Were the exercise to be used amongst a more disparate group then the responses would inevitably be different, and potentially challenge our feminist values. But the method helps us to move away from conventional ways of communicating our beliefs, values and relationship to gender inequity.

Lynne adds a reflection: As a convenor I welcomed the many responses the exercise evoked. I felt excited by the workshop yet nervous about my role. I worried that people might get caught in comparing perspectives and experiences instead of sharing them and building connections to create activism. We had to find a way of acknowledging people's deeply felt intersectional positionings while building connections. The method seemed to reduce the impact of hierarchies. On a personal note I had researched and thought through the method carefully beforehand but not, as would also be the case in teaching, rehearsed my own answers to the senses questions or prepared to be directive. When the participants reflected to develop their responses I also considered mine, and was surprised at what emerged,

especially as we progressed through the senses. When we are in facilitating roles there is a tension between controlling and allowing the process to unfold. I did know what I wanted to happen next in the session but being able to join in like a participant helped me not foreclose responses or rush the process. Building connections and energy can be killed by overly controlling mechanistic processes. The workshop organisers reshuffled groups for every session, and it was interesting to see how the exercise morphed accordingly. Like the contributions, each convenor had a different take on the method.

Back to Carole: The Clean Language method creates the potential for a space where nobody holds 'more' knowledge or experience. If facilitated sensitively, it subverts hierarchical power structures, where either knowledge, experience, or assigned gender can be used as a basis to dominate others. For feminism, and feminist activism in particular, conceiving the method as a metaphor can be productive in thinking how we engage with others who do not share our perspectives. The method's call to use our senses to reflect on a concept or idea, evokes emotional responses, which would otherwise be difficult to make explicit, or regarded as irrelevant to an activist context. This can also inform how we engage in other social movements, particularly in situations where individuals do not engage in conscious reflection about their behaviour within collectives (Collins, 1981), which are also shaped by emotions (Jasper, 2014). Developing a better understanding of how individual emotions interconnect and form within spaces of organizing (Callahan, 2013), raises awareness of how these interconnections can have both positive and negative consequences.

In conclusion, our engagement with the Clean Language method helped us to connect in a way that did not let us hide behind the other identities we brought with us into the room. It was simultaneously exposing and liberating to engage in a dialogue that was not, at least in

part, shaped by previous conversations embedded in utterances (Bakhtin, 1986) formed in relation to other power structures. For feminism and feminist activism, we believe the method creates spaces in which we can engage in courageous conversations about new forms of resistance and renewal that draw strength from the diverse experiences of feminists, and from intersectionality.

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