

## Teaching and Learning Together in Higher Education

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# Who Are the Teachers and Who Are the Students? Feminism and Freire in Scotland

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## **WHO ARE THE TEACHERS AND WHO ARE THE STUDENTS? FEMINISM AND FREIRE IN SCOTLAND**

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### **Contextual Curriculum through Collaboration: Eurig**

Queen Margaret University (QMU) is a small, modern university whose roots lie in the feminist movement of the nineteenth century and its campaign for education for working class women. For many of us who lecture at QMU, this legacy is important and, combined with the insights of radical adult education, especially since Paulo Freire, inspires our attempts to develop education that is engaged with struggles for social justice.

The university takes its ‘widening access’ responsibilities seriously through a variety of outreach and collaboration programs. The social science programs particularly attract so called ‘non-traditional’ students: 54% of students in the 2013-14 intake for psychology and sociology are from families for whom this is the first generation to attend university, including over 30% mature students and 12% of students from the 20% most deprived areas. But widening access and social responsibility means more than attracting ‘non-traditional’ students; it requires questioning the curriculum, the pedagogy and the role of a university in relation to other sources of knowledge. In particular, progressive social movements are significant producers and interrogators of knowledge relevant to social change.

One result of a collaboration between QMU and the feminist organization Scottish Women’s Aid (SWA) has been a module offered to sociology and psychology students in their honors year, and also to professionals and activists working to challenge gender-based violence in various social contexts. Through its development, curriculum and pedagogy, *Gender Justice, Masculinities and Violence* seeks to challenge traditional university assumptions about the production and consumption of knowledge, and to contribute in its small way to political change through resourcing counter hegemonic voices in Scottish society (and beyond). Students are drawn from Psychology and Sociology degree programs, professionals and feminist activists, and the teaching staff from QMU and SWA are all activists and public intellectuals. Recently, the three originators of the course have been joined by Julie, a postgraduate research student in sociology, who tells her story here.

### **Critical Consciousness through Collaboration: Julie**

Stepping through the doors of this modern Scottish university the bright sunlight and proliferation of glass was such a contrast to the dark windowless office that represented my previous career in IT. It all seemed like a metaphor for the hope of some form of enlightenment I carried with me. Being a Scottish, working class lass leaving a highland school in the 1970’s, barriers to university were talked about in terms of personal affordability but even then I knew the real barrier was the belief that this wasn’t for the ‘likes of us,’ it was for ‘other people,’ and

so I went off to work. But here I was decades later discarding the comfortable trappings of a 'good job' in favor of full-time study and a life of student loans.

Studying Sociology in particular allowed for a real sense of personal development through my academic work. 4<sup>th</sup> year is Honors year at Scottish Universities and for me it was like a coming of age. I felt we were suddenly treated differently, given more choices and increased responsibility. The teaching had started to become more collaborative in the previous year but this was where my previous life, values and beliefs started to dovetail with my academic learning and I could start to recognize and name them and how they connected to wider issues of social justice.

Having developed my interest in gender based violence over the previous few years I designed my dissertation to examine aspects of domestic violence, under the supervision of Eurig. He also ran an elective module *Gender Justice, Masculinities & Violence* which introduced me to a completely different way of teaching and learning. Underpinned by feminist theory this module brought together undergraduate students in the same classroom to learn alongside professionals in the field. Taught also by academics and practitioners, it was a true meeting of theory and practice. It became clear that the teaching team were not only sharing knowledge, they were activists who lived by what they believed and were also attempting to affect social change through their work.

Looking at the realities of life through subjects rarely discussed in a classroom setting: gender, violence against women, domestic abuse, rape, pornography, sexism, misogyny, FGM, was a bit of a shock for some students. We were invited to draw upon our own experiences of living in a gendered world. Having lived as a woman in this society and worked in a male-dominated industry for many years, it was less of a shock and more a moment of that enlightenment that I had hoped for. It was not my first one but certainly my most profound one. My critical consciousness was well and truly born. I had been reading feminist texts where much is discussed about consciousness raising. On reflection I now realize I was experiencing what the educator Paulo Freire described as conscientization: the development of a critical consciousness through problem posing education, a liberatory form of learning.

This was not to say I had been passive in my own life. I had been that 18-year-old girl, working as the first female on night shift with an all male team in a large technical environment, who had to fight for the removal of the proliferation of porn that had become the norm. I also had to fight for the right to wear trousers, against general company policy for women, as the job involved lots of bending and lifting of large boxes of paper. I did not have a name for any of that other than fairness. Feminism seemed a highly political movement at that time, beyond my grasp or 'not for the likes of us' maybe? Ironic, I know!

One year after graduating I find myself involved again in this module as part of the teaching team, delivering a short talk on theory and my planned research on women, alcohol and domestic violence. This has been made possible by going on to do a PhD where I continue to work with Eurig as my supervisor. Standing in front of this year's class was daunting as I struggled to see myself as the 'teacher' and not the student. I still hadn't recognized the magic ingredient.

It has been working together with Eurig on deconstructing the *Gender Justice, Masculinities & Violence* module to present it as a model for other opportunities for collaborative education that has brought me real insight as to why it was so powerful. In the process of creating some posters together, one line captured it for me. “Who are the teachers and who are the students?” What really matters is that through participatory dialogue we are all teachers and learners, we all learn from each other. Feminist pedagogy honors the idea that students are partners in the process of knowledge production.

As I embark on teaching as part of my PhD program I take these ideas forward in to my teaching practice. As I continue on my PhD research journey I embrace participatory research methods grounded in the same principles.

So, who are the teachers and who are the students?

Further information on the course is available from Orr, Scandrett and Whiting, 2013, ‘An educational approach to gender justice,’ *Concept*, 4, 1  
<http://concept.lib.ed.ac.uk/index.php/Concept/article/view/221>