

# The Intro Course: A Pedagogical Toolkit

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first-year and introductory classes in gender and social justice.

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**Marie Lovrod** is Coordinator of Women's and Gender Studies and Assistant Professor of English at the University of Saskatchewan. She has facilitated her own and student learning through the Introduction to Women's Studies for two decades. Her research addresses intersecting constructions of childhood, youth, and aging in the context of traumas and resiliencies produced as localized effects of global capitalization. She values communities of practice that respect research, learning, and social environments as inclusive spaces.

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*Vampire Slayer*. She is the author of *Wanting in Arabic* (TSAR 2002, 2nd Edition 2013) and *Lyric Sexology, Vol. 1* (Roof 2014), and is a member of the editorial board for *TSQ: Transgender Studies Quarterly*. She recently taught Introduction to Women's and Gender Studies at the University of Winnipeg.

**Alissa Trotz** is Associate Professor of Women and Gender Studies, and Caribbean Studies, at New College, University of Toronto. She took the lead in the transformation of the flagship introductory Women and Gender Studies course to reflect a transnational focus and has taught it for over a decade. (For the last three years, the course has been team taught by June Larkin and Alissa Trotz.) She is also Associate Faculty at the Dame Nita Barrow Institute of Gender and Development Studies at the Cave Hill Campus (Barbados) of the University of the West Indies. For the past seven years, Alissa has edited a weekly newspaper column, "In the Diaspora," in the *Stabroek News*, a Guyanese independent newspaper, and she is a member of Red Thread Women's Organization in Guyana.

#### Abstract

This article offers ideas and strategies for teaching introductory-level courses in Gender and Women's Studies by providing the responses of eleven experienced educators who were asked two questions: What main theme or idea do you hope students will learn in the introductory class you teach? And what practical strategies do you use in the classroom to achieve that learning objective?

#### Résumé

Cet article propose des idées et des stratégies pour enseigner les cours d'introduction aux Études sur le genre et les femmes en fournissant les réponses d'onze éducatrices chevronnées à qui l'on a posé deux questions : Quel thème ou quelle idée principale espérez-vous que les étudiants apprennent dans la classe d'introduction que vous enseignez? Et quelles stratégies pratiques utilisez-vous en classe pour atteindre cet objectif d'apprentissage?

The two of us, Jocelyn Thorpe and Sonja Boon, once shared an office wall at Memorial University. The wall may have separated our offices, but we frequently met on either side of it to eat lunch, laugh, and talk about teaching, writing, and pretty much everything else. Now, since Jocelyn moved from St. John's to Winnipeg, we work at institutions five thousand kilometres apart and we feel the distance, though we continue to share a passion for teaching and a love of discussing our experiences in the classroom.

This collaborative paper represents an attempt to expand our ongoing conversations about teaching, particularly at the introductory level. To that end, we invited a number of dedicated, experienced, and enthusiastic educators from across the part of Turtle Island now called Canada to join our dialogue by sharing their ideas about and strategies for teaching Introduction to Gender and Women's Studies. We asked eleven educators to contribute: Alissa Trotz (University of Toronto), Rachel Hurst (St. Francis Xavier University), Glenda Tibe Bonifacio (University of Lethbridge), Marg Hobbs (Trent University), Carla Rice (University of Guelph), Helen Hok-Sze Leung (Simon Fraser University), Heather Latimer (University of British Columbia), Marie Lovrod (University of Saskatchewan), Krista Johnston (University of Winnipeg), Lisa Bednar (University of Manitoba), and Trish Salah (Queen's University). Our contributors are diverse in their scholarly interests, geographic location, background, and professional positions. They teach in programs and departments with different foci, student demographics, and histories; they live in large cities and in small communities alike; and they teach by distance and on campus. But they share a commitment to making the first-year Gender and Women's Studies course work.

We asked each contributor to explore two questions: What main theme or idea do you hope students will learn in the introductory class you teach, and what practical strategies do you use in the classroom to achieve that learning objective? Below, we present contributors' responses to the questions we posed. Two of the pieces are co-authored, but otherwise contributors did not write their pieces in conversation with one another. Each piece is unique, reflecting the specific conditions shaping contributors' teaching environments as well as the wide range of concerns addressed in Gender and Women's Studies.

Even so, common themes emerge across each response that demonstrate a shared dedication to anti-oppressive pedagogy, critical skills-building, and student engagement with the world around them. In what follows, each contribution stands on its own so that readers may benefit from the insights of individual educators, but we have ordered the pieces to allow for a flow across the texts. The first four essays sketch out overarching lenses through which contributors view the introductory course: from encouraging students to understand connections between the words they read and the lives they lead to demonstrating the potential of an in-between perspective, and from inviting students to comprehend the implication of the past in the present and the global in the local to encouraging them to cultivate practices of unlearning and critical hope. The remaining five pieces explicate specific classroom situations and challenges that nevertheless remain more broadly relevant. Together, they address varying approaches to the introductory course at different institutions, the role of dialogue in both distance and on-campus courses, and how to maintain student engagement with feminism, while remaining aware of feminism's implication in unjust relationships of power. Contributors' insights, in the pages that follow, reveal a thoughtful, critical, and impassioned engagement with the possibilities of feminist pedagogy at the first-year level. "We"—Sonja and Jocelyn—return in the conclusion to highlight further common themes in the pieces and to describe how the ideas raised by the contributors might be useful for all of us who teach the introductory GWS course.

### **The Worlds in our Texts**

*D. Alissa Trotz*

*Women and Gender Studies, University of Toronto*

In the first chapter of Jamaica Kincaid's (1998) *A Small Place*, the narrator, reflecting on the transnational asymmetries that structure the tourist industry, wryly notes, "There is a world of something in this, but I can't go into it right now" (14). As a co-instructor (with June Larkin) of the introductory Women and Gender Studies course at the University of Toronto, I find the classroom to be precisely that space that must open itself up to what lies beneath the surface of our lives, to the uneven worlds that Kincaid fleetingly references,

initiating a community of learners with the critical capacities to connect not just to the materials that we share, but to the worlds and histories in the texts and the communities they reference.

Each year, I am excited anew by the promise of students engaging collectively with the idea that where we stand is neither static nor self-contained, that connections matter to how we organize our complexly gendered lives and to who we understand ourselves to be. In the first-year classroom, we explore the invisible proximities that structure our everyday experiences: from family life to the kinship work of nationhood, from work to leisure, from commodity culture to representation, from politics to militarization. We approach tourism as an embodied travel practice with material and ideological dimensions and reflect on how we create ideas about places and people before we have even travelled: upon what and whom does our pleasure depend? What does it mean that, in escaping winter on a flight bound for the Caribbean warmth, the passenger sitting next to us is a temporary farmworker returning home at the end of a seven-day workweek season at a farm in Southern Ontario that has kept us fed? We approach the subject of the labour market with a classroom census through which students discover that most of them work in the service sector, deepening their discussion of the shift from manufacturing to service industries and providing a visual map of gendered differences at work. We think aloud about whose sweat is sewn into the label of the clothes we wore to lecture and about how such conversations populate the classroom with other lives, and other stories, that we are also a part of. We ask ourselves what Idle No More might teach us about the limits of feminist demands for inclusion into a settler-colonial nation-state and how such social movements push us to understand politics as “[a] contest about what matters and ought to be subject to (public) consideration and debate” (Iton 2010, 9).

Nurturing critical literacies that render these connections visible is not a comfortable task, but it can be deeply rewarding and inspirational, enriched by the varied backgrounds that students bring to bear on our engagement with the material. Moving from being a tourist or spectator to an active learner requires inculcating habits of feminist curiosity (Enloe 2004), of listening, and of humility. How might we be marked

by these journeys, transforming and finding ourselves, each other, and our related worlds in the process?

### Inter-

Rachel Alpha Johnston Hurst  
Women's and Gender Studies, St. Francis Xavier  
University

1. between, among (*intercontinental*). 2. mutually, reciprocally (*interbreed*).
- (*Oxford Dictionary of Current English*, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed., s.v. “inter-”)

While I do not define it as the central theme of my course, the prefix *inter-* is implicitly vital to the way I teach the introductory GWS course. Describing not only the approach taken in relation to course content (inter-sectional, inter-disciplinary), *inter-* also gestures toward my affective and social experiences of the field of Gender and Women's Studies (inter-subjective, inter-lope, inter-pret, inter-rupt, inter-vene). One of the most challenging ideas that the class introduces to students is that of being in-between: neither wholly inside nor outside one signifier (a discipline, an identity marker, an occupation), but instead becoming situated within the space *between* a constellation of positions. If we apply this formulation to the concept of inter-disciplinarity, this space in-between is the point from which a researcher approaches a problem (for example, disparate power relations), resulting in a more complex process, but also a transformation of the disciplines. Being *inter-* is challenging. It is an ontology that embraces contingency and unknowing, requires a subject to give up the fantasy of mastery, and demands listening. The second meaning of *inter-* planted within the introductory course—mutuality, reciprocity—is, in my experience, even more challenging for students than the first. To practice mutuality is to imagine a different world, one without the hierarchies that structure it now and, in the inter-im, to suggest to students that it is possible to work in coalition or solidarity with others whose ultimate objectives may be quite different from one's own.

Readers may note that the choice of *inter-* as a theme enables me to have it many ways by refusing to reside within one concept or idea. Indeed, as a former student and now professor of Gender and Women's Studies, this is precisely what drew me to



this field in the first place. I want students to leave the class with an appreciation for paradox, contradiction, and disagreement, having felt and/or intellectually encountered the spaces in between as well as the possibilities for mutuality. I use a number of activities to support this learning objective. For example, I facilitate an in-class “inter-view” activity (interview being a word whose origins come from the notion of “regarding one another”), where students imagine two authors interviewing each other or students imagine interviewing an author about the day’s topic (migrant labour, for instance, or sexual violence on university campuses). I have found Margaret Hobbs and Carla Rice’s (2013) *Gender and Women’s Studies in Canada: Critical Terrain* to be an excellent textbook for this activity because it includes the insights of multi- and inter-disciplinary scholars as well as non-governmental organizations, popular feminist writers, and activists. After students have presented some material from their imagined interviews, we engage in a larger class discussion about what kinds of theories or activism might emerge if we further imagined the authors working in coalition with each other. How would their perspectives be transformed? What disagreements would emerge? This activity guides students toward a deeper understanding of disciplinary and interdisciplinary approaches, as well as of the concept of intersectionality, when they notice, for example, that some questions may be unanswerable by one author. My goal for this discussion is for students to work together to understand tensions and gaps (in scholarship, in organizations) as productive rather than as simply oversights or as inherently negative.

### **Global-Local Paradigm**

*Glenda Tibe Bonifacio*

*Women and Gender Studies, University of Lethbridge*

Teaching Women and Gender Studies 1000 at the University of Lethbridge, in the heart of the Bible belt in Southern Alberta, is a challenging task for a non-white immigrant faculty member like me. How can I relate to a predominantly white, conservative population and help them to make sense of the course? I know well that many students take the course to comply with program requirements, yet this might be the course that motivates them to go on in Gender and Women’s Studies

as a field of critical inquiry. Through nine years of teaching at Lethbridge, I have developed a global-local paradigm using intersectional feminist perspectives and scholarship from Western and non-Western scholars. I want to show students that the women’s and/or feminist movement is not an enterprise solely of the West. A global-local perspective seems an appropriate approach for me, given that I represent the “global” under “local” eyes. The key issue is the locationality and intersectionality of human lives around the world so that students at Lethbridge are able to establish, from a gendered perspective, shared experiences and challenges with people from across the globe. The interconnectivity of socioeconomic factors, including the environment, across cultural and geographic scales demonstrates the idea of global feminist accountability. Feminism is not simply a concept rammed through the course and graded accordingly; rather it is understood in the context of the everyday lived realities of women around the world. Only when students recognize a shared responsibility for the past (e.g., colonization) and the present (e.g., globalization) can we aspire to a socially just feminist future.

To engage students in a collective journey of learning, I integrate open-class sessions with diverse activities. Small group workshops flow from assigned readings after which the discussion is shared with a wider audience. For example, in Spring 2015, I divided students into small groups to develop a “gender profile” of selected geographical regions: Africa, the Caribbean, East Asia, Eastern Europe, the Middle East, North America, the Pacific Islands, South America, South Asia, Southeast Asia, and Western Europe. Students disseminated their research publicly—beyond the constraints of the classroom—in a wide array of mediums, including, but not limited to, posters, brochures, and digital links.

Sharing is a feminist praxis of collaborative learning that encourages students to speak out in smaller groups of three or four in class. In envisioning a world of harmony and cooperation, group projects are conducted under a system of peer evaluation. From a Western practice of individuality, collective projects are often experienced by students as a daunting task yet, in this course, students are tasked with resolving issues together, preparing them for the need for cooperation in today’s world. The opportunity to showcase group work

in a public forum provides a unique form of recognition of students' performance, but it also showcases Gender and Women's Studies as well. Students in the introductory course are, at times, combined with students in my upper-level course to work on similar themes, but with different outcomes. In discussing contemporary issues, I design an open-class session where non-enrolled students and the general public are invited to engage with the class. This community-university nexus enables students to appreciate and recognize the diversity and complexity of issues and approaches in resolving them. Hence, concepts become situated and contextualized, in large part, based on their contemporaneity and significance in people's lives. In this way, students at the introductory level get a sense of their own contribution to creating a better world for themselves and the next generation.

The global-local approach works well for me as a non-white instructor. I am able to connect with a predominantly white student population and community in Lethbridge. When reflexively positioned in a broader context that aims to appreciate the role that each individual plays in making change, the borders that seemingly divide us based on race, class, sexuality, and other markers of difference disappear, albeit momentarily. And, more importantly, when one of these students says at the end of the course that she or he has registered for another Women and Gender Studies course, or declared a major or minor, the future looks that much brighter.

### **Teaching Through Hope and Struggle**

*Marg Hobbs*

*Gender and Women's Studies, Trent University*

*Carla Rice*

*College of Social and Applied Human Sciences, University of Guelph*

Two well-known quotations come to mind as we contemplate our teaching goals and practices in Gender and Women's Studies:

Another world is not only possible, she is on her way. Maybe many of us won't be here to greet her, but on a quiet day, if I listen very carefully, I can hear her breathing (Roy 2003, 175).

The first problem for all of us, men and women, is not to learn, but to unlearn (Steinem 1970, 192).

Arundhati Roy orients us to the possibilities for transformative social change by igniting our imaginations and fixing our gaze on alternative visions for a just future. Through Gloria Steinem we are reminded that the road ahead requires struggle to challenge taken-for-granted beliefs in a continual process of unlearning as well as learning.

We approach the introductory course with an eye to the breadth and depth of a field undergoing critical self-reflection and revision amidst challenges shaped by multiple forces, not least of which is a neoliberal political climate marked by pessimism, uncertainty, and austerity agendas. What is the place of Gender and Women's Studies in a mechanistic and utilitarian education system narrowly conceived through discourses of scarcity and marketplace values?

In the classroom, we aim to affect, engage, and move students into critical awareness of and responsiveness to local and global systems of inequality and the diverse ways in which they are experienced. The initial task for us, as instructors, is to confront and unsettle common stereotypes and assumptions about feminism and Gender and Women's Studies. Further, we explore historical and contemporary constructions of difference and unpack normative understandings of terms, such as "sex," "gender," "race," "class," and "disability." As we examine colonialism, globalization, racism, ableism, sexism, and transphobia, we critique practices of othering, examine relations of power in institutions and everyday life, and highlight multiple pathways and forms of resistance and solidarity. We use this approach to make space for new versions and visions of social realities.

On "transformative pedagogy," bell hooks (2003) writes: "My hope emerges from those places of struggle where I witness individuals positively transforming their lives and the world around them. Educating is always a vocation rooted in hopefulness" (xiv). Counter to the atomistic individualism of the prevailing socioeconomic system, hooks imagines learning as engaging individuals in communities, which she calls "keepers of hope" (105). We work to build community within the classroom, while also fostering interaction and dialogue with members of diverse academic, activist, and artistic communities. The introductory course has

always been, for us, a collaborative initiative, featuring many guests, and now culminates in an energetic in-class “Feminist Cabaret,” which celebrates inspiring local people involved in projects of social and cultural change. Contributors have included members of the Rock Camp for Girls, The Raging Grannies, and The ReBELLES as well as Anishinaabe Elder and Professor Emeritus Shirley Williams, spoken word artist Ziysah Markson, and Métis filmmaker Cara Mumford, among others. Students love the Cabaret for a variety of reasons, including these recorded on last year’s course evaluations: “it was awesome to hear about the unique ways women are speaking out”; “it was fun to see local women taking a stance and promoting feminism”; and “great way to inspire hope and see feminism in action in the local area.” Through such engagements, students gain theoretical insights, practical tools, and concrete examples of how change is possible through hope and struggle.

### Talking About Sex

*Helen Hok-Sze Leung*

*Gender, Sexuality and Women’s Studies, Simon Fraser University*

After our department changed its name from Women’s Studies to Gender, Sexuality and Women’s Studies, we reorganized our first-year introductory courses along three themes: (1) gender issues in Canadian contexts; (2) introduction to Sexuality Studies; and (3) history of international feminist activism. I am responsible for teaching the Sexuality Studies course, “Sex Talk.” The course introduces first-year students to contemporary theories of sexuality with a focus on discourse and media. It uses concrete examples to demonstrate Foucault: how we *talk* about sex matters to our experience and practice of sexuality. We study sexual representations in a range of traditional and new media and examine how changes in media technology, cultural policy, and community standards affect the way we determine what qualifies as pornography, what distinguishes public from private, and what constitutes sexual ethics. Course readings are informed by feminist, queer, and transgender theories, but I encourage students to approach theories as frameworks for understanding rather than examples of a “correct” stance. It is important to me that students

retain a capacity for independent thinking and even an irreverence for theoretical authority!

I assiduously avoid either-or debates and focus our study on discursive processes. For example, when I teach the section on pornography, I steer students away from dwelling on irreconcilable feminist debates. Instead, they develop skills to analyze the complex array of factors that influence *how* we recognize an image as pornographic in the first place. My primary goal is to develop their ability to examine particular discourses of sexuality. Through case studies, students analyze how filmmakers create images of sex on screen, how politicians manage a public sex scandal, and how journalists report on sexual trauma. Having acquired a capacity for critical analysis, they can make up their own minds about the ideological impact and material consequences of these discourses.

One of the challenges of a media-focused class is how rapidly students’ familiarity with popular culture shifts. Academic case studies are inevitably outdated and so it is crucial to update them and continually reexamine the contemporary relevance of their arguments. Is the interpretation of *Sex and the City* still relevant to *Girls*? Do arguments about the Clinton sex scandal apply to the Anthony Weiner case? I also try to stay attentive to the incredibly diverse (and always changing) student demographics at Simon Fraser University. While it is not possible to cover a global range of media examples, it is important to invite students to test arguments against examples that are most familiar to them and to leave room for modifications when appropriate.

I find introductory courses to be both the most difficult and the most rewarding to teach. We all complain about students taking these courses only for requirements, students who do not care about feminist issues, and students who think they will get an easy credit. It is often these very same students, however, who, at the end of the semester, tell me how grateful they are to have been transformed by feminist, queer, and trans critiques as they go on to pursue careers in marketing, education, criminology, journalism, and so on. Introductory courses provide us with a tremendous opportunity to reach a broad range of students and for Gender, Sexuality and Women’s Studies to have the most direct and lasting effect beyond the university.

## **The Politics of Representation: Reading, Writing, Affect**

*Heather Latimer*

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The main thing I want students to take away from an introductory Gender and Women's Studies course is an understanding of the gendered politics of representation: how gendered, sexualized, and racialized cultural representations facilitate their sense of connection to and alienation from each other. I want them to learn to question whose stories are being told to them, by whom, and for whom. Here I follow Gayatri Spivak (1990) in defining representation as both "proxy and portrait" (108) or as both a process of speaking for and of portraying, and as a place where identities are learned and constructed. Put otherwise, representations are in need of "persistent critique" to guard against "constructing the Other simply as an object of knowledge" (63); they not only shape how individuals are portrayed and perceived, but also hierarchical relations of thinking, knowing, feeling, and being. As Henry Giroux (2000) argues, cultural representations are "where we imagine our relationship to the world," in that culture "produces the narratives, metaphors, and images for constructing and exercising a powerful pedagogical force over how people think of themselves and their relationship to others" (133). I want to help students see cultural representations as sexed, classed, gendered, and racialized and as inherently pedagogical.

One of the approaches I take to get students to think about representations as pedagogical is to ask them to write about what they see, hear, and read both inside and outside of the classroom. Blogging is an activity that allows students to gain a better understanding of how representational politics are structured and function. There are several things that blogging accomplishes. First, blogging allows students to work through ideas on their own time, which means they can revise their thoughts, step back to reflect, and practice various styles of writing. Second, the process of reflecting allows them to see all manner of representations and texts, not just essays or articles, as socially-situated attempts to communicate. This prompts them to reflect

on their own writing in a similar manner: as an attempt to communicate with their classmates and to reach out publicly. Finally, blogging brings a diversity of voices, authors, and representations into the first-year course. In a recent class, especially rich given that 30 percent of the students were international, students created an archive of representations, authors, and voices from various locations and identities. Blogging allowed them to step outside the genres of traditional academic scholarship and include popular works by activists or activist organizations in their entries. This, in turn, allowed them to seek out alternative voices and realities as places of inspiration for challenging sexist and racist stereotypes, a critical skill for dealing with the emotional weight of confronting socially created inequalities and of realizing that power relations are not only rooted in social institutions, but also in everyday relations and practices. Overall, blogging allowed students to practice using feminist tools, which is what they need to take feminism beyond the classroom. In the end, blogging allowed my students in the introductory course to see their writing as more than simply personal expression, but also as a key aspect of the skills they are developing to produce and shape knowledge.

## **Tensions and Intentions**

*Marie Lovrod*

*Women's and Gender Studies, University of Saskatchewan*

Three out of seven sections of our Introduction to Women's and Gender Studies course serve specific audiences. In one of these classes, international students who are transitioning from language acquisition to academic programs form in-class learning groups with students who enter the university from the Canadian context. In another, Aboriginal students self-select the introductory course as an institution-wide retention program where they take a number of courses as a cohort. In the third, students whose grades fall shy of admissions requirements undertake transitional entry via the introductory course. All specialized introductory classes include sustained, self-selected, intentional learning groups as part of the pedagogical strategy and provide opportunities for students to consider how feminist knowledge building practices serve the needs of each community. Course enrollments are limited to



facilitate ease of communication, relationship building and risk-taking, while content provides substantive representation of participant groups. This way of organizing the introductory course has resulted in measurable improvements in student retention and success at the undergraduate level. It also reveals the currency and adaptability of the introductory course. In what follows, I describe a few strategies for supporting as well as interrogating these models.

At my institution, barriers to cross-cultural learning are (re)negotiated through a “bridging” model that informs the introductory class for international and local students. Because our English-language training program operates on an independent timetable in a building adjacent to campus, it is necessary to synchronize course schedules to pair an advanced language-training course with Introduction to Women’s and Gender Studies. International students work with an English language instructor on note-taking and library research skills, vocabulary development, and assignment drafts. This preparation enables them to use their life experiences as a resource in small group discussions with others who self-select for cross-cultural learning around specific topics germane to the introductory class. Students who opt into the bridging program demonstrate that controversial content, a rigorous discussion-based classroom, and willingness to “play” with curriculum can yield positive outcomes. Language proficiency soars among such international students, while the boundaries between “enclaves” soften among both groups. Students from Canada and elsewhere unpack learning protocols from several national contexts, de-familiarizing normative discourses that shape the worldviews they exchange in class.

In addition to international programming, Women’s and Gender Studies at the University of Saskatchewan has been invited to contribute introductory classes to the university’s Aboriginal Student Achievement and University Transition programs. Each carries the traces of institutional assumptions as well as “common-sense” expectations among participants with which students are encouraged to engage critically. One assumption is the idea that adjustment to academic life can be facilitated by creating cohorts of similar students and another assumption is that “gender studies” is readily accessible to diverse

groups of learners. Inevitably, this approach to cohort development raises controversies and challenges. Class members simultaneously appreciate and question the spotlighting of under-represented student groups (McLoughlin 2005). Developing a critical vocabulary with which to name the knowledge politics involved in each intentional learning community becomes one way to keep the classroom lively.

One activity that students have endorsed involves a self/classroom community evaluation included on the midterm exam. The take-home exam, designed to promote integration of new vocabulary through a series of brief arguments that draw on class materials, invites students to include a question for peers arising from the course. During grading, these questions are compiled for a subsequent class, in which students form face-to-face lines or circles and exchange responses in timed intervals of a couple of minutes each, before moving to a new partner and question. Typical questions include, but are not limited to: How has your thinking changed since starting this class? How are you applying what you have learned in everyday life? If we all understand the harmful effects of gender stereotyping, why do we continue to follow gender norms? How has this class helped you to express yourself and/or contribute to controversial discussions?

During this exercise, students engage with each of their classmates directly; the instructor keeps time and poses student questions without comment. Participants build belonging through this lively, plural conversation and experience a greater sense of shared authority in the classroom. During debriefing, when students share ideas developed through the exercise, critical issues surface that influence ongoing discussions. Students in the Aboriginal Student Achievement program, for example, clarified how competing norms shape their interactions with peers and course materials. Reflecting on initial quiet in the classroom, course members identified contributing factors that include both deep listening and anticipated judgments from peers: “not traditional enough”; “too traditional”; “too contemporary/assimilated”; “too Christian”; “not queer-positive enough”; and so on. While peer reception is a common concern in all classes, this cohort pinpointed diverse perspectives arising from intergenerational engagements with and resistances to colonizing influences. Comfort with productive in-class tensions

increased as a result. Across the various sections we teach, it is evident that students value the opportunity to have frank discussions on topics arising from the class that they themselves choose to reflect on. In the process, we discover together how learning flourishes in contexts that strive, however imperfectly, to build mindful, non-coercive solidarities.

### **Keeping the Conversation Going**

*Krista Johnston*

*Women's and Gender Studies, University of Winnipeg*

*Lisa Bednar*

*Women's and Gender Studies, University of Manitoba*

In our conversation about teaching Introduction to Women's and Gender Studies, Lisa and I talked about the importance of conversation and dialogue to working through the course materials and fostering the development of critical analysis. Whether in class or online, nurturing collaboration among participants provides the opportunity to practice feminist principles of self-reflection and cooperation as well as the skills to work with and through difference.

#### *Lisa's Reflections*

In the online course I have taught for several years, there are three one-week discussions wherein groups of twelve to fifteen students discuss topics in message boards. The first discussion often involves questions about what I mean by "meaningful participation." In my handout, I ask students to go beyond "I agree"; they must aim for rich discussion though regular and frequent posting throughout the week. Some topics generate more discussion than others and students' comments give me ideas about future topics. For example, students define *equality* and *liberation* in their own words early in the course, which enables me to gauge their awareness of the complexities of these terms. During the week, they learn from, challenge, and validate each other's ideas.

Students enter a course such as this experienced with online forums that too often focus on opinion-as-fact, superficiality, and false equivalencies. To foster critical and reflexive thinking, I encourage students to reflect on the extent to which their post is based on facts/research, opinion/perception, personal experience, or observation. Students generally rise to the occasion,

often reflecting on the source of their information and analyzing how parents, schools, and others have provided teachings that they want to unpack.

By the end of the course, students regularly tell me that the discussions played a key role in their learning over the semester. Two common phrases are variations on: "I never thought about it that way" and "I thought I was the only one who [thought that, did that, had that happen to me]." These comments show me that taking the course encourages them to develop a "feminist curiosity" (Enloe 2004), a phrase that continuously inspires me as an instructor in Gender and Women's Studies.

#### *Krista's Reflections*

Whether teaching online or in-person versions of the Introduction to Gender and Women's Studies, practices of feminist pedagogy that lay the groundwork for respectful and meaningful dialogue are crucial to my praxis. I begin by referring to our class as a collaborative learning community, drawing on principles of active learning to ensure that students understand their responsibility for the work undertaken in our course. Hands-on activities emphasize self-location and reflexivity, while also fostering a sense of collective responsibility to one another and to the work of learning. These early activities and conversations are often challenging and difficult, but they provide an important foundation on which to build our relationships with one another and to engage with course materials.

One of the activities that students often remember and comment on at the end of the course is the "Intersectionality String Game," adapted from CRIAW's *Everyone Belongs* by Joanna Simpson (2009, 31). If the group is large (and it usually is), we begin by organizing ourselves into three or four circles, each with one person holding a ball of yarn. This person begins to introduce themselves to the group and when another group member notices that they have something in common with the speaker, they step forward and take the ball of yarn, leaving the end of the yarn with the first speaker, while, in turn, beginning to introduce themselves to the group. As the activity unfolds, each member of the circle has at least one opportunity to speak, holding on to part of the yarn before passing the ball to the next speaker and creating a unique web of

interconnections. The first time we do this activity it functions as an ice-breaker, but, as the term progresses, we refer back to it to deepen our engagements with concepts, such as self-location, privilege, oppression, and systemic oppression, as we work with both the CRIAW intersectionality wheel diagram (Simpson 2009, 5; Hobbs and Rice 2013, 44) and Sherene Razack's (1998) conceptualization of interlocking oppressions (12–14). Sometimes, we repeat the activity in smaller groups of students as a way of mapping the interlocking oppressions examined in a specific reading or issue discussed in class. In the process, we move from a relatively simplistic understanding of interconnections to deeper analyses of inequality and oppression. This provides a foundation for thinking and working with concepts, such as alliance and solidarity.

In addition to this, we take our learning community online, transforming our discussion board into a course glossary where we work together to clarify understandings of course concepts as they unfold and deepen throughout the term. Glossary entries may include a definition (from a course author or in students' own words) or an example from everyday life and must make direct connections to course readings and materials. The glossary contributions also provide an opportunity to practice important scholarly skills, such as proper citation practices, critical reading, and critical analysis. By the end of the term, the glossary serves not only as a tool for course review and reflection, but also as a digital record of the critical, productive, and sometimes challenging conversations that have unfolded during our time together.

### **Dealing with Difficult Knowledge**

*Trish Salah*

*Gender Studies, Queen's University*

“They cannot represent themselves, they must be represented.” This famous passage from Karl Marx's (1963) *Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte* has been deployed in many contexts: it introduces both Edward Said's (1979) *Orientalism* and Viviane Namaste's (2011) essay “Tragic Misreadings: Queer Theory's Erasure of Transgender Subjectivity” and is a central problematic of Gayatri Spivak's (1988) “Can the Subaltern Speak?” and its sequels. As I write, the phrase resonates with the negation of sex workers' political voice by abolitionist

feminists and federal conservatives during debates over Bill C-36, which will retrench and extend the criminalization of sex work in Canada (van der Meulen et al. 2014).

One of the challenges of introducing students to Women's and Gender Studies is to give an account of feminism as “a movement to end sexism, sexist exploitation, and oppression” (hooks 2000, 1) within an intersectional frame, while simultaneously teaching about feminisms' implication in systems of governance (Halley 2008). Political struggles against male violence and for legal equality have produced a situation in which some of the most privileged “representatives” of feminisms' heterogeneous constituency secure their speakers' privilege by speaking for (in the place of) and over the voices of other others. The question is how to provide positive incentives for student identification with feminist movements and epistemologies, while at the same time critiquing the oppressive praxis of the feminisms which, on the face of things, have been most successful (state feminisms, UN feminisms, and NGO-based feminisms, for example). And while intersectional analysis provides a resource for locating feminisms that participate in oppressive structures within a broader matrix of privilege and oppression, it does not deal with the affective and dis/identificatory stakes of the situation (Muñoz 1999). What's more, when presenting feminist auto- and internal critique, there is always a risk that it may be assimilated to anti-feminist and post-feminist common sense and actually intensify some students' disidentification with feminism. How, then, to teach feminisms as mobilizing both liberatory and subalterning movements?

When dealing with the “difficult knowledge” (Britzman 1998) of feminisms' incomplete project and compromised—and compromising—successes, I try to create opportunities for students to experience and examine—which is to say to encounter—their own desires for salvational iterations of feminism (e.g., the consolations and satisfaction of rescue narratives, the affirmations and pleasure of critique). While the wish for feminisms' “better stories” is affectively and politically important, so too is a capacity to engage what they obscure (Georgis 2013). To allow for such difficult (to sustain) engagements, I employ a multi-stage process, inviting repeated encounters with challenging texts. On first reading or viewing, I ask students to parse

such texts' argument in a brief précis; on the second, I ask them to read its rhetoric, ideology, discourse; on the third, I ask them not only to read for the affects it engenders and the desires it mobilizes or frustrates, but also to examine their own responses critically. In tandem with this process of reading self-reflectively their affective and ideologically-lodged responses, we also engage texts which are not easily assimilated to dominant feminist narratives and analytics, but which are neither amenable to anti-feminist or patriarchal logics. In this way, I hope to cultivate with my students a practice of unsettling knowledge and contrapuntal (auto) critique (Kumashiro 2000).

### **Concluding Thoughts on the Introductory Course**

Designing and teaching an introductory GWS course, especially for the first time, can be daunting and time consuming. When we considered putting this article together, we wanted it to be a toolkit: something that teachers of the introductory course could draw on in their own thinking and course planning, something useful that could make a challenging (if also rewarding) task easier. Contributors, through describing both the philosophical and practical tools they use in their teaching, have provided such a toolkit. The article as a whole also offers a window through which to view some of the exciting things taking place in introductory classrooms on Turtle Island. Reading the contributions has given us much to reflect on as we prepare our own courses.

Alissa Trotz's approach brings seemingly disparate worlds together in order to reveal "invisible proximities" that our current global order simultaneously produces and obfuscates, allowing many of us situated in the Global North to ignore our implication in the oppression of other peoples and places. A useful way to examine and challenge these kinds of proximities, as Rachel Hurst argues, is through the spaces between, sites of encounter that are productive of "paradox, contradiction, and disagreement," on the one hand, but that are also ripe with "possibilities for mutuality." Glenda Bonifacio also stresses material existences and lived realities, using her own position as a "non-white immigrant faculty member" in a rural, conservative setting to open spaces for collaborative learning about the intersections between the local and the global and the

ways that contemporary experiences are shaped by unjust pasts and presents.

This world-making process, our contributors observe, involves a journey not only of learning, but also of unlearning or what Marg Hobbs and Carla Rice refer to as "unpacking," "unsettling," and "unknowing." Central to the process of learning and unlearning is an engagement with representation, a key concern for both Helen Hok-Sze Leung and Heather Latimer. Indeed, as Leung argues, "How we *talk* about sex matters to our experience and practice of sexuality," a point echoed by Latimer. "Representations," she observes, "not only shape how individuals are portrayed and perceived, but also hierarchical relations of thinking, knowing, feeling, and being." Learning to analyze such forms of representation is one way that we can encourage students to engage actively in our shared world.

Our task as scholar-teachers in Gender and Women's Studies is not an easy one; we have to consider carefully the histories that our students bring into the classroom and the histories that we also bring. Marie Lovrod discusses the complexities and contestations in the creation of specific cohorts of students. Trish Salah, meanwhile, cautions against reductive or celebratory understandings of feminism and feminist praxis, encouraging us—as teachers and students—to reflect on "difficult knowledge" and "feminism's incomplete project and compromised and compromising successes." "How then," she asks, "to teach feminisms as mobilizing both liberatory and subalterning movements?" Her piece reminds us that the work of teaching, like the work of feminism, is something that requires constant openness and willingness to change.

The need to develop critical thinking skills about the world in which we live and the texts we study in class, as well as an understanding of intersecting identities, interlocking systems of oppression, and the role of the past in the present, are threads that run through each piece. The other common thread is hope. "The academy is not paradise," bell hooks (1994) has observed. "But learning is a place where paradise can be created. The classroom, with all its limitations, remains a location of possibility" (207). As Krista Johnson and Lisa Bednar argue, the Introduction to Gender and Women's Studies course can provide "the opportunity to practice feminist principles of self-reflection and cooperation as well as the skills to work with and through difference."



The introductory classroom is an excellent place to practice and to help make true the words of Arundhati Roy (2003) quoted above: “Another world is not only possible, she is on her way.”

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