

Feminism: A Fourth to be Reckoned With?

Reviving Community Education Feminist Pedagogies in a Digital Age

Mel Aitken

This article has been adapted from Mel Aitken's 2015 Community Education undergraduate dissertation. She is currently working as a Child and Family worker at Barnardo's Edinburgh Community Support Service.

The notion that feminism is in its 'fourth wave' is undoubtedly controversial and highly disputed amongst feminist circles (Munro, 2014). On one hand there remains a plethora of misinformation on the 'death of feminism' and a widespread common sense understanding of our indisputably 'equal' society (Faludi, 1993); on the other, a still active, strident movement fighting against such common misconceptions in order to achieve true freedom of rights and opportunities, regardless of sex and subsequent socially constructed gender (Redfern and Aune, 2013). In recent years there has been a noticeable resumption of feminist debate, discussion and activism due to the surge of digital spaces. This nurtures a new form of culture and expression in which global voices can be heard and changes made through the power of online platforms. Feminist thinkers are declaring this a new wave of feminist gusto, 'the fourth wave', in which the power of digital media is harnessed to tackle the gross inequalities prevalent in social, economic, and political domains. The enduring relevance of feminism irrefutably persists for, in the apt words of second-wave bumper stickers; 'I'll be a post-feminist in a post-patriarchy' (Kavka, 2002 p29).

The question that arises for community educators is what place does this revived feminist enthusiasm have in the practice setting? Are feminist pedagogies applicable in the informal education sector and what propensity do self-identifying feminist practitioners have in the contemporary context? This article explores the ideas of

feminist identities, fourth wave engagement and the future for feminist pedagogical practice.

This paper will first establish the milieu of the contemporary context through a brief analysis of feminism as a historical movement. It will then analyse critically the idea of feminist pedagogies and explore to what extent these are consistent with a community education approach.

Finally, the conclusion will surmise the space created by feminism and the fourth wave for practitioners and argue for a renewed feminist pedagogical approach in community education.

Making waves: An introduction to feminism

To provide the context of this article, and to adequately critique and explore the fourth wave, it is important to situate the 'herstory' of the women's movement and feminist ideology itself. In the words of Bailey: 'Waves that arise in social and political milieus, like waves that arise in water, become defined only in context, relative to the waves that have come and gone before' (1997, p18).

Feminism was first established as a named ideological concept in the late 19th century and has ever since been constructed, in particular through mass media, as a somewhat 'dirty word' (Beck, 1998, p139).

Its beginning, or first wave, is categorised by the struggle for women's suffrage, where women were, for the first time, mobilised *en masse* in the pursuit of the common goal of attaining the vote. Notable figures such as Millicent Fawcett and Emmeline Pankhurst risked everything and, in the case of Emily Davison, gave their lives, to fight for the liberation and political representation of women (Donovan, 2012). It is worth noting that this was a movement which was seen to represent predominantly privileged white women, and this theme continues to feature in critiques of feminism to this day (Phillips and Cree, 2014). However, homogeneity aside, this was a popularly supported movement where impassioned individuals and groups tirelessly campaigned and ultimately achieved the vote in the UK for property owning women over 28 in 1918 and on the same conditions as men in 1928 (Joseph, 1986).

The second wave, many argue, was born out of Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique* where she identifies 'the problem that has no name' (1963, p5), that problem being an ingrained patriarchal society of male supremacy. This second wave sought to challenge the implicit structures present within society that serve to oppress, control and discriminate against those deemed inferior who, according to the feminist movement was, were and still are, women. Principally this involved challenging the traditional confines of women in the domestic sphere, and the invisibility of women in public domains such as business and politics (Oakley, 2005). This was a war on multiple fronts: from workers' rights such as equal pay, to reproductive rights, to acknowledging the prevalence of violence against women (Cochrane, 2013). At this point women were still largely seen as the property of men and the second wave was invaluable in tackling this perception. A new language was born from the 'personal is political' to 'rape culture', 'patriarchy' and 'sexual harassment' (Cochrane, 2013, p10). There was an explosion of feminist literature with new writers' voices and experiences of what it means to be a woman being heard. Through this, the construction of feminism evolved with the emergence of much needed diversity amongst the traditionally white, middle-class feminist demographic (Phillips and Cree, 2014). Identity politics came into play, segregating the movement into conflicting camps of feminist ideals resulting in highly publicised cases of in-fighting (Thompson, 1983). Feminists were demonised in the media as troublemakers, man-haters and social outcasts who were against motherhood, without humour and, to top it all off, hairy (Beck, 1998). This served to redefine feminism as an ugly, feared word that threatened the status quo and carried a wealth of negative connotations. By the mid 1980s campaigners were 'ultimately exhausted in fending off anti-feminism's punishing blows' (Faludi, 1993, p498) and the force of the second wave had dwindled.

The 1990s saw a revival of feminism, with a renewed focus on the ways that the media in particular had moved from the oppression of women in the home to the highly sexualised obsession with women outwith it (Cochrane, 2013). In the words of Walby: 'women are no longer restricted to the domestic hearth, but have the whole society in which to roam and be exploited' (1990 p201). New authors appeared,

documenting the shifting trends of patriarchal dominance such as pornography, the beauty industry and the changing landscape of idealised femininity (Faludi, 1993). This third wave can be categorised as a movement that sought to create community by connecting the fractured feminist segments, through issues of classism, racism, able-bodyism, heterosexism and ageism, to a common goal of equality (Cochrane, 2013). It was also an inhospitable time however, with the growth in normalised female objectification under the guise of post-feminist equality (Levy, 2005). Feminism was reduced to a short-term, tokenistic concept associated with ‘girl power’ which demoted the movement to a ‘marketing slogan, a branding device, denuding it of any politics’ (Cochrane, 2013, p12). Once again the wave appeared to be submerged.

A fourth to be reckoned with?

The fourth wave has emerged in a pivotal but particularly bleak period for women. Campbell argues that, with the death of social democracy, women’s welfare ally, we are in the midst of a ‘neoliberal neo-patriarchy’ (2014, p18). The economic crash of 2008 served to hinder feminist efforts further by plunging the country into austerity measures that undoubtedly dealt women in the UK the sharpest blow (Fawcett, 2012, Perrons, 2017). Described as a ‘triple jeopardy’, women face more redundancies, pay and pension cuts, a calamitous reduction in services and benefits, and the unquestioned expectation that they are to fill the (low-paid and unpaid) caring positions in communities (2012, p5). This has been hailed by feminist thinkers as a distinctly ideological strategy by the Conservative government. In retreating to an archaic ‘male breadwinner and female (unpaid) homemaker’ model, the state’s role shrinks and charges women (predominantly) with the restrictive burden of caring responsibilities (Redfern and Aune, 2013, pxx). Moreover, in the UK the social landscape continues to reflect a culture which, with the widespread acceptance of porn and ‘erotic fiction’ such as ‘50 Shades of Grey’, validates and romanticises unhealthy, domineering and non-consensual relationships. Women who are seen as sexually assertive are publicly denounced by socially accepted ‘slut-shaming’ and those in power symptomatically excuse rape and sexual assault in a culture of perverse victim-blaming (Redfern and Aune, 2013 pxxii). Meanwhile, in politics,

women remain significantly under-represented. A recent study by Inter-Parliamentary Union ranked the UK 48th globally in terms of governmental gender parity with a mere 25.4% of representative roles occupied by women (IPU, 2016). The irony of a female Prime Minister supporting measures such as further welfare cuts and shortening the timescale for legal abortions, which further disadvantage women, is painfully felt (PublicWhip.org.uk, 2017).

Globally, things look darker still. The recent election of Donald Trump, a powerful and unashamed misogynist (Swaine, 2016), arguably poses one of the most serious threats to women's choice and freedom to date. The US 2016 election saw Hillary Clinton, his Democrat opponent, vilified in the media on sexist and unmistakably gendered terms (Wilz, 2016). The resonating message throughout the election campaign was that qualifications and experience are unimportant in comparison to wealth, power and toxic masculinity. With the terrifying reality of this appointment still unclear, women in the US and globally face even greater uncertainty (Boland, 2017).

Thankfully, such blatant injustices, both locally and globally, have stimulated renewed vigour in challenging misogynistic and sexist practices (Redfern and Aune, 2013). Despite relatively limited literature on the fourth wave, there is a general consensus on the eruption of feminism since 2008, made possible by online activists and the endorsement of key celebrity figures (Valenti, 2014).

Digital media has blazed a trail for a new means of organising campaigns and mass mobilisation against issues of inequality (Eudey, 2012). In an age where a large proportion of the global populace use social media and access online networks, the power of the internet to unite and inform is indisputable, as society becomes 'digital by default' (Fotopoulou, 2014, p3). In this sense, there is a relative 'parity of participation', whereby many women can engage with digital media as consumers and contribute their own material as producers (Lara, 2004, p80). Particular attention is paid to the younger generation of feminists who are discovering feminism and sourcing knowledge which fosters the development of their political identities

(Vromen et al, 2014, Guillard, 2016). For this reason, the fourth wave is understood by some as a 'New Feminist Movement', comprising a younger generation of newly self-identifying feminists (Redfern and Aune, 2013, pxi). Specifically, young women under 30 are pinpointed as the 'power users of social media' and their number is ever expanding (Munro, 2014).

The internet provides a forum for women's voices to challenge previously accepted norms and sexist opinions. Digital media is exalted for its unique capacity to foster global communities of feminists who use social networks to debate, discuss, information share and call for action (Munro, 2014). The public nature of the web is utilised to organise and mobilise campaigns, reaching large audiences that increase the visibility and momentum of issue-based movements and 'turn up the volume from whisper to voice' (Knappe and Lang, 2014, p362). These communities are viewed by some theorists as a form of 'connective action', uniting feminists and developing collective identities across virtual time and space on issues that resonate with their experience, and trigger greater political engagement (Vromen et al, 2014 p82).

Second wave ideas of consciousness-raising are emulated in online forums, where women connect and share their experience of misogyny, sexism and abuse which, with its pain, anger and sheer power of numbers can spark wider action (Bates, 2014). Furthermore, as befits the feminist mantra that the 'personal is political', these experiences are often posted from personal social media profiles or blogs. Equally, the 'political is made personal' as feminists share campaigns, sign petitions and mobilise on public issues via personal computer networks (Eudey, 2012). Another advantage is that virtual political discussion and action is perceived as an inclusive space where women face fewer barriers than in physical domains. Cochrane (2013) argues that increased participation occurs due to the 'safety' of platforms which remove the threat of direct confrontation or violence. Arguably, the unique anonymity of digital spaces can protect personal identities and make invisible characteristics of gender, age, ethnicity and disability. In this sense it 'flattens traditional hierarchies' so that voices, previously deemed insignificant in public life, can be directly heard by the most powerful who were hitherto sacrosanct (Cochrane, 2013). Injustices and hypocrisies

are thereby made public, and common sense is reframed and challenged in new and creative ways.

The internet is therefore a medium for establishing reactive online movements to express discontent and anger at the glaring inequalities still prevalent for women (Valenti, 2014). Movements such as The Everyday Sexism Project (Bates, 2014), No More Page Three (Cochrane, 2013) and One Billion Rising (Enslar, 2013) are defined by technology and serve to nurture a global support network, or ‘digital sisterhood’, where women can turn for support and solace (Fotopoulou, 2014, p9). In this sense, the fourth wave deconstructs individualist discourses and, in true feminist spirit, makes the personal political. For example, the New Delhi gang rape ignited a rage that swept across the world and the subsequent protests throughout Asia were dubbed by some as a ‘feminist spring’ (Redfern and Aune, 2013, pxxix).

A unique strength of the current online movement is its commitment to genuinely embrace and advocate inter-sectional identities, creating a space in which true equality work can thrive (Redfern and Aune, 2013). The internet provides the means for diverse voices, previously excluded from traditionally white middle-class feminist debates, to be amplified due to the scope of an inclusive global platform. This is coupled with a generally more educated and aware feminist community that is intolerant of hate, in whatever ‘ism’ it may present itself (Phillips and Cree, 2014). The fourth wave, with its dedication to inter-sectionality has learned lessons from its historically exclusive past. Most contemporary feminist communities now engage in a process of ‘privilege-checking’ whereby they analyse their own entitlements so as to not speak on behalf of women whose experience is distinct to their own (Munro, 2014, para. 11).

A key virtue of the fourth wave is accessibility. Not only is information readily available but feminist arguments and theories are presented in a manner that is ‘generally more active than academic’ (Cochrane, 2013, p32). It has remedied past criticisms of feminism as a ‘needlessly obscure’ elitist concept in order to ‘get out of its ivory tower and into the minds of women’ (Bryson, 1992, p267). The fourth wave

has brought a cascade of new writers and grass-roots activists who bring feminist ideas to the fore in a language of passion and pragmatism using humour to engage new audiences to a common cause (Cochrane, 2013). To quote a joke recounted by Laura Bates; 'If I had a pound for every time I was told I didn't need feminism, I'd have 85p each time' (Bates, 2015 para 11). The literature, although fairly limited, highlights a number of reasons why the digital sphere is such a popular space for feminist activism.

There is also nevertheless a degree of scepticism about the legitimacy of online campaigning and digital movements. Feminist petitions in particular are often criticised as a lesser form of activism, dubbed 'slacktivism' or 'clicktivism' (Munro, 2014) implying that online activists passively engage with auspicious political causes without actually making a significant difference or enforcing real social change (Eudey, 2012). Cochrane (2013) counters this argument by suggesting that these acquiescent forms of engagement include those who are physically marginalised by 'disability, distance or caring responsibility' whilst also successfully promoting 'physical protests' to a wider public (p23). For example, the Women's March on Washington on the 21st January, protesting the Trump inauguration, began as an online campaign and resulted in over 5 million women and allies marching globally (Women's March on Washington, 2017).

The darker side of feminist activism is the reality of the unregulated and at times dangerous nature of the virtual sphere. In a similar vein to the feminist 'backlash' that Faludi (1993) describes, the internet has become a malicious and at times treacherous space for feminist activism. Digitally active feminists face a barrage of online abuse including explicit and reprehensible comments perpetrated by anonymous 'trolls' (Cochrane, 2013). This is a hostile environment wherein many are silenced because of fear, and where expressing an opinion almost becomes an invitation for abuse. Social media platforms are described by Phillips and Cree as a 'battleground' (2014, p939) where pro-women events or achievements reported in the media attract a backlash of venomous comments. However, as Cochrane (2013 p27) states 'the comments on any article about feminism justify feminism'.

The fourth wave, with all its possibilities is not therefore without its limitations. Despite the internet's capacity to be a place of collective action, consciousness raising, expression and support, it can also be a site for a replication of patriarchal and male supremacist views which seek to further silence and oppress women (Campbell, 2014). What is created, however, is a distinct role for community educators to utilise this medium and 'capitalise on and problematise the internet as a site for activism and communication' (Eudey, 2012, p248). I will now discuss a feminist pedagogical intervention as a possible method to marry the ideas of feminism, the fourth wave and community education.

Feminist pedagogy in practice

Community Education as a practice is legitimised by values of equality, empowerment and social action and, as a result, fits seamlessly with a feminist understanding (Tett, 2010). The natural nexus between feminism and educational practice has been theorised for decades, with feminist practitioners advocating empowerment and consciousness-raising for women in traditional and non-traditional learning environments (Thompson, 1983). This distinct practice is described as a 'feminist pedagogy' and has been understood as a somewhat 'subversive activity' opposing long established educational methods with counter-hegemonic aims (Bezucha, 1985 p82). Its antecedents can be traced to Women's Studies courses in American colleges and universities in the 70s and 80s, and was a response to the ways in which male-dominated educational institutions were structurally designed to neglect and subjugate women's voices (Barr, 1999). The site of feminist pedagogies in elitist academia proves to be its greatest hindrance (Fisher, 1981), reinforcing for some the dominant notion that feminism is a closed book to those who, due to class, ethnicity or disability, may not access such privileged circles (Bryson, 1992). However, I would argue that there is still a place for feminist pedagogies and the ideology by which they are constructed. The gap between the academic 'ivory tower' feminists and grass-roots feminist activists could be narrowed by the role of the committed community educator dedicated to meaningful education in informal settings. But what scope is there for practitioners to employ such techniques?

Feminist pedagogies could be said to embrace many of the values and theories on which community education is based, including ‘participatory learning, validation of personal experience, encouragement of social understanding and activism and development of critical thinking’ (Hoffman and Stake, 1998, p80). These themes potentially reflect an extension of Freirian practice, with an acute understanding of the dynamics of power and oppression and of the emancipatory methods necessary to circumvent social injustice (Weiler, 1995). Drawing on the work of Paulo Freire, feminist pedagogies validate individuals’ experience, and view the learning space as a platform for mutual dialogue, rejecting authoritarian processes of ‘depositing’ expert knowledge (Freire, 1972a p53). Feminist pedagogies can actually enrich the work of Freire in their specific focus on gender and the ‘genderedness’ of traditional educational contexts (Shrewsbury, 1987 p7), thereby marrying the complementary theories of ‘gender’ and ‘liberation’ in an encompassing, inclusive framework that strives to restructure education as a space for all, regardless of gender (Maher, 1987).

Befitting the Greek understanding of pedagogy, feminist pedagogical practice is centred on techniques that exemplify the acquisition of knowledge. According to Culley and Portuges, (1985), the six factors that make feminist pedagogy distinct are: practitioners self-identify as feminist; knowledge obtained is critically reframed; the topic of gender is under constant consideration; dichotomies of the public and private are evaluated and challenged; personal experience is legitimised as a source of knowledge, and the non-neutral position of the practitioner is embraced as all participants bring their own ‘texts’ to discussions. As the dialogue is grounded in a collective process of story-telling and critical consciousness raising, it explores both the commonalities and differences of experience in the room, including that of the practitioner (Fisher, 1981). Feminist pedagogies therefore acknowledge the diversity of the human experience; whilst characteristics of class, gender, ethnicity and disability may serve to shape individuals’ meaning and understanding of the world, it does not necessarily reflect a universal experience (Weiler, 1995). In the words of Thompson, ‘It would be unusual to imagine being simply the sum total of one’s class or sex or ‘race’ or gender. Neither do shared conditions automatically create common understandings or identical psychologies’ (2000, p91). Oppression is therefore

understood as a complicated dynamic with a unique history, not merely a common entity based on material worth, so the 'site of struggle' is deepened to reflect the specificity of people's lived realities (Weiler, 1995). This is not to argue that feminist pedagogies provide a flawless educational methodology. I will now address the question of why feminist pedagogies are not more commonly used in the field, and the potential tensions that arise from adopting such a stance.

There are a number of theorists who critique both the capacity of feminist pedagogies to transform, and the legitimacy of experience as knowledge (Hoffman and Stake, 1998). Resistance to the concept of experiential learning is unsurprising in mainstream education, given the domination of the traditional power dynamic of the 'bank-clerk' teacher disseminating facts to the passive student or 'empty vessel' (Freire, 1972a p57). However, in community education the validity of this narrow construction is challenged by the tradition of 'really useful knowledge' which is structured around the view that knowledge is not the sole property of the intellectual 'expert', but is also rooted in the social and cultural realities of people's lives (Martin, 2000).

A further criticism levelled by some theorists is that feminist educators create a somewhat 'fluffy' intellectual space which, in its very security, is more 'therapeutic' than activist (Hoffman and Stake, 1998), creating a discord between theory and practice that impacts on the validity of the work. I would argue, however, that what constitutes 'social change' could incorporate an entire spectrum of behaviours and actions, from personal development through to wider macro changes (Eudey, 2012). It is the role of community educators, guided by feminist pedagogy, to remain critical in order to 'avoid both thoughtless action and actionless thought in work with communities' (Johnston 1992 cited in Shaw 2004, p26).

I have tried to situate education as pivotal in the pursuit of social change, reflecting a consistent community education value base. Influenced by the writings of Freire, a feminist pedagogy is not only relevant in informal education with women, but can transcend genders to a more encompassing understanding of the ways in which

hegemonic notions of gender negatively impacts both sexes (Budgeon, 2014). Education that is conducted using a feminist pedagogy has the potential through, dialogue, collective experience and action to stimulate truly significant work with individuals and groups. Harnessing the power of the internet and the forum of online communities is yet another tool that community educators can utilise to ensure contemporary and innovative practice (Eudey, 2012). The fourth wave of feminism has emerged at a critical time for the women's movement, and provides an important opportunity for community educators to reinvigorate a feminist pedagogy and to re-engage with 'education as the practice of freedom' (Freire, 1972a p 8).

Conclusion

This paper has sought to establish an argument for identifying constructive synergies between community education and feminist pedagogical practice. The contemporary context is proving to be an exhilarating time in feminist history. The power of online platforms has rejuvenated debates on gender inequality, provoked dissonance through the creation of new knowledge, mobilised campaigns, and made feminist voices viral. This calls for a refreshed community education response at a time when, under the constraints of neoliberalism, much feminist practice has been superseded by an individualised discourse (Emejulu and Bronstein, 2011). I would argue that, to achieve this, a feminist pedagogy must once again be applied in informal settings. By extending the work of Freire, for example, we can understand not only the genderedness of experience, but also the pluralism and intersectional identities present within communities. This combination offers unique opportunities for practice that is empowering, non-hierarchical, respectful, grounded in the sharing of experiences, and indicative of a consciousness-raising approach. In the words of Robson and Spence:

Consciousness-raising within feminist community development practice is collective, educational and critical. It involves breaking silences about everyday experiences of oppression, encourages historical and social analysis of the sources of oppression and is linked to political struggles for equality. (2011, 292)

I would further advocate reclamation of the term ‘feminist’ within the field, in order to counterbalance the often-negative connotations, and devolve real meaning by acknowledging feminism’s ‘herstory’ and considerable achievements. In the current climate is it not time to grab feminism by the... practice?

Undoubtedly, the reforming process is not simple, as is reflected by Emejulu, who criticises the tendency in community education theory to presume that the sector is comprised of radically minded homogenous practitioners (2011). Community education, despite its distinct history and value-base, is not always an integrity-infused discourse purveying the common good. In reality, many practice settings are preoccupied by the procurement of funding, and responding to policy priorities. However, I would contend that, with the online surge in gender awareness and feminist activism, there could not be a more apt time to unite on the same ‘wave-length’ in order to rectify these trends, with an agenda focused on social justice: ‘If community development is to survive as a practice relevant to people encountering structural injustice and oppression, it is important that the central tenets of emancipatory approaches, as exemplified by feminist practice, are revisited and reaffirmed.’ (Robson and Spence, 2011, p298).

Feminism is no longer the sole property of female, white, middle-class academics, but a liberating and expansive ideology that can embody all voices in the struggle against sexism and hegemonic gender constructs. Practitioners committed to principles of equality, democracy and justice for all are unquestionably feminists. Accordingly, community educators have a duty to resist agendas that seek to silence women’s voices and through their practice join the flood for change. For in the words of Marge Piercy:

Only water of connection remains,
flowing through us. Strong is what we make
each other. Until we are all strong together,
a strong woman is a woman strongly afraid. (1982, p25)

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