

REFLECTIONS FROM THE FIELD: Teaching feminism/ teaching as a feminist in politics departments

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Introduction

The academic discipline of politics¹ in universities has been a male-dominated field until recently, and New Zealand is no exception. While the number of women teaching in the field in New Zealand universities has grown significantly since the mid-1990s, teaching about gender and feminism continues to occupy a marginal position in the discipline. Courses in gender and feminist politics are taught by individual academics, but comprise a small minority of what is offered to politics students, and feminist perspectives are, for the most part, only briefly discussed in other courses (Curtin, 2013).

In this context, feminists teaching in politics departments confront some key questions. Before even stepping into the classroom, we must consider whether the politics of gender should be taught in dedicated courses, or be ‘mainstreamed’ – i.e., integrated across the politics curriculum. As an academic discipline, politics is divided into several sub-sections, including political theory, international relations, comparative politics, media and public policy, and mainstreaming requires that feminism and issues around gender be incorporated into courses in all of these areas. This means, of course, that it must be taught by academics who do not primarily identify themselves as feminists. While mainstreaming addresses a question of how to teach feminism in politics, and who should do it, a further question emerges around what is to be taught. Here we might ask: is there a feminist canon or canons that should be taught to politics students? And further, how, in teaching politics, do we see the relationship between gender and other forms of social identity, such as race, class and sexuality? The theoretical framework of intersectionality accounts for the complex interrelationships between these axes of identity in different real-world contexts, and poses a challenge to feminists to re-examine the way in which we teach gender. Finally, feminism has always challenged the distinction between theory and practice, and a key question for all feminist teachers, but particularly those teaching politics, is: what is the relationship between teaching and activism? Is our teaching itself a form of activism?

All of these questions were discussed in a well-attended plenary session on teaching feminism in politics departments at the 2014 annual conference of the New Zealand Political Studies Association conference, held at the University of Auckland on 3 December, 2014. Chaired by Associate Professor Jennifer Curtin, a roundtable of speakers talked about the challenges involved in teaching feminism and teaching as a feminist (see Table 1). Participants and audience members responded with a keen sense of recognition of the problems and issues that we confront in classes, as well as with the pleasure and enthusiasm we feel for teaching feminism, and teaching as feminists. As the convenors of the roundtable, we report here on some of the responses and reflections of the participants to the issues and challenges involved in teaching feminism to politics students.

TABLE 1: PARTICIPANTS IN ROUNDTABLE DISCUSSION ON DECEMBER 3, 2014

Name	Affiliation
Associate Professor Jennifer Curtin	Politics and International Relations, University of Auckland
Professor Christine Beasley (CB)	Politics and International Studies, University of Adelaide
Dr Valentino Cardo (VC)	Media, Film and Television, University of Auckland
Dr Anita Lacey (AL)	Politics and International Relations, University of Auckland
Associate Professor Laura Shepherd (LS)	International Relations, University of New South Wales
Associate Professor Katherine Smits (KS)	Politics and International Relations, University of Auckland
Associate Professor Yvonne Underhill-Sem (YUS)	Development Studies, University of Auckland

Feminism and the curriculum

We began by asking whether mainstreaming, i.e. integrating feminist perspectives and gender questions across the entire politics curriculum, rather than creating a separate sub-field for gender or feminism, is effective and what its limitations are. In general, the panel members found that a combination of mainstreaming and offering courses dedicated to gender and feminism is necessary. **LS** observed:

Yes, but it depends upon what our learning objectives are. From an international relations perspective, I want students to appreciate the work gender does in organising global politics. How do we get them to understand the assumptions we make about bodies and behaviour, and to think about how those assumptions inform our thinking about key concepts – power, legitimacy, authority? My main objective is for students to examine those assumptions. Mainstreaming feminism helps in that, but a dual approach is necessary. A separate week on feminist theory is essential, as it gives students a framework to use. But then every weekly topic has to include feminist work as well. The worst approach is to ghettoise feminist work, in the last week of the course – the ‘week on gender’. Mainstreaming helps students develop curiosity about how gender works in a range of contexts: in formal politics, in the UN, in peacekeeping, in development. The important thing is that they don’t compartmentalise gender – seeing it as a matter for specialists, relegated to the periphery of disciplinary life. Curriculum design has to represent the diversity of work that uses gender in all senses – a variable, a noun, logic, a verb. We also need to get beyond the idea that feminist = gender = women. The diversity of work on gender can only be represented through mainstreaming.

VC also pointed out the advantages of mainstreaming:

I teach in a media department, where women are less marginalised, and there are more courses on feminism and gender, but mainstreaming feminism is equally as difficult. When I first started teaching in a politics department, I was forced to mainstream feminism, because I wasn’t able to teach a course devoted to it. Now when I do that here, I tend to bring together feminism, gender and sexuality. I also think it’s important not to alienate all my male students. At the beginning of each class I say that I assume that everyone is a feminist, because no-one would want their sisters or mothers treated differently to them. Male students do occasionally walk out!

However, the participants agreed that mainstreaming had disadvantages, as it could result in a simplistic and perfunctory engagement with gender issues. **YUS** described this as: ‘...putting in a session on gender as a residual category.’ **LS** continued:

[Mainstreaming] can also lead to normalising, and the ticking of boxes. So that's why we need the dual approach – in our own research, as well as our pedagogy: highlighting feminist concepts and frameworks, and representing the diversity of feminist work.

Both **LS** and **VC** referred to the common practice of being asked to visit colleagues' courses to deliver lectures on feminism and gender issues:

VC: 'Mainstreaming for me also means going in and teaching a class on gender or feminism for colleagues who teach 'gender neutral' courses. They have the 'gender week' and I always teach in those classes.' **LS** said: 'I have a different approach to guest lecturing: when asked to do a guest lecture on gender, I agree, but ask for a reciprocal guest lecture on classical realism, or one of their 'traditional' IR topics. My colleagues get the point: feminism is as much a part of a generalist course as other topics.'

Those who did practise mainstreaming concluded that it should not be seen as an easy solution for politics departments wanting to engage with feminism. **KS** pointed out that:

Politics departments often go for mainstreaming because it sounds easy, you don't have to have separate gender and politics courses. But actually, mainstreaming is really difficult. In political theory, it means establishing from the beginning that gender and social experience are essential to understanding Plato and Aristotle, as well as Mary Wollstonecraft.

In some ways, mainstreaming requires a more radical rethinking of pedagogy in politics, as all teachers in the discipline must examine the role of gender in what they teach, and the ways in which they can actively advance feminist concerns.

A feminist canon

The roundtable then turned to the question of the feminist canon, i.e. the widely accepted list of core texts in the field. Do we teach a feminist canon, and what is it? Does it change the nature of politics as a discipline? The answers here suggest some different approaches in the sub-fields of the discipline. Speaking as an international relations specialist, **LS** responded:

In IR, there is a feminist canon and I teach it, especially at first year, where it's a great opportunity to subvert the discipline! I start with, for example, Cynthia Enloe on militarised masculinity, because it allows for interesting discussions about gender, power and knowledge. I also teach the conventional IR canon, but we can subvert it by reading feminist work alongside it, that speaks to it. We need to choose our textbooks really carefully when we teach. A survey of common IR textbooks on how they represent gender and feminism shows that many reference them only in chapters entitled things like 'new issues in IR'! Feminist insights change the nature of our discipline, for example: Christine Sylvester's formulation of IR as 'relations - international' in IR, means that we can look at other kinds of relations, like gender relations, which allows for nuanced discussions of power that are otherwise precluded from our classrooms. I teach as much feminist work as I can, to give a full picture of international politics.

YUS also referred to the feminist canon she teaches, from a development studies perspective:

The key text I teach is Gayle Rubin's work on sex/gender systems and I use it because I think it does a really good job of disturbing the patriarchy and the Marxist canon and of pushing into anthropology, politics and philosophy, so it is multi-disciplinary. I prefer to take a sex/gender approach rather than a patriarchy-focused one. Beyond that, I work very hard to use the writings of feminists from the developing world. For instance, Fatu Sow, a Senegalese sociologist, and also an economist from Jamaica, Mariama Williams, and this speaks to the DAWN² frameworks that I work within.

However, **CB** offered a different perspective, pointing out the ways in which feminism can upset and challenge conventional teaching in politics, even without teaching a feminist canon:

No, I don't teach a feminist canon, because I hardly ever get to teach my dedicated feminist courses! But my interest in feminist concerns definitely changes the nature of the disciplinary teaching that I do. So does feminism reshape my first year political theory course? I focus on gender-related topics. When discussing freedom, I might teach pornography as a debate about free speech. On nation states, I might discuss the

concept of masculinity and its relationship to nationalism. If looking beyond the state, to the community and the public/private divide, I might look at gendered debates about welfare and the work/life balance issue. Every key concept in political theory can be understood through a feminist lens, often to the surprise of students and some colleagues. This brings new concepts and debates and persons into political science, and that's transformative of the discipline.

In my upper-level courses on the politics of sexuality and the politics of film, there are whole areas of thought and social practices that rarely make their way into political science textbooks. Feminism broadens our understanding of the arenas of political practice, and also how we might understand them. It draws our attention to the significance of power relations in public understandings of sexuality, but also in private practices. How is it possible that sexual violence, marriage and contraception, for example, might not be seen as part of politics? In the case of film, why is popular culture not political? Look at the influence of Hollywood, and its effect on young people. Feminist approaches are more inclusive, and show that law and government are not the only sites of social regulation and normalisation.

Students and staff come to the discipline of politics thinking it is about governments, the public sphere, and macro-structures. Feminism injects into the dry desert of traditional political thinking actual and fleshly problems. This is often pejoratively understood as 'adding a dose of sociology!' Politics has kept feminism, gender studies and sexuality studies at bay, much more than have other social sciences, and this is a loss to our discipline. Politics is about the public and the private arenas. It's about the harshness of the world, but it's also about how we respond to it, and might change it. Feminism transforms the assumptions and contexts of the discipline but above all else, it invokes the questioning and critical spirit that is central to politics, the sense of, 'why are things the way they are?', and 'can they be different?'

Clearly, the feminist canon is diverse and fluid, and plays varying roles in participants' day-to-day teaching. Fundamentally, it is a feminist ethic and world view that consistently influence feminist pedagogy in politics.

Intersectionality and politics teaching

In order to avoid teaching about and with generalised assumptions of 'all' women's experiences, desires, or even feminisms, an intersectional approach can be used. Intersectionality offers a framework for considering gender as part of a complex and dynamic series of social divisions, identities, and structures that shape individuals' singular and collective experiences (Lacey in Lacey et al., 2012). Its use helps to ensure that no one worldview is privileged. Intersectionality emerged from black and indigenous feminists' demands for feminisms that recognised their lived experiences and voices, and for feminists and feminism to work with diversity and difference (see, for example, Combahee River Collective, 1977; Davis, 1981; Lorde, 1984; Crenshaw, 1989; Collins 1990). An intersectional approach is not necessarily central to the discipline of politics/political science. Many feminist teachers, however, engage with it as a means of working directly with theories and axes of identity, including gender, and we were interested to hear more about how this worked in practice. **KS** reflected on her use of intersectionality in political theory classes, and the way that it enables students to reflect on their own intersecting axes of identity. She noted that the way and ease with which she deployed intersectionality depended on the course:

Sometimes it's easy. What's crucial is recognising the relationship between ideas and experience, and I introduce this to students early on. I take an experience-based approach, which allows us to look at socially constructed experience, incorporating gender, race, ethnicity, and other axes of identity. We start with the fact of social groups and socially mediated experience, and establish that as fundamental to the whole course. In my graduate identity politics class we start off with students talking about their own social identities and affiliations.

In a course on the foundations of political theory, however, **KS** noted that the application of intersectionality is more difficult:

I try to integrate into the course women's experience and the experience of other social groups from early on, so that we're clear that political theory is not only asking questions about states and individuals. Rather, we think about the questions that emerge from the whole range of social experience and power relations.

YUS described the integral place of 'issues of gender, race and sexual orientation' and disability in a Pacific context:

Intersectionality and intersectional feminism start with bodies and once you can see bodies for how diverse they are – their shape and form, their colour and markings and lack of markings – then you can begin to understand where intersectionality comes in and where feminism derives from. When you start from the body, in terms of my pedagogy, then you start to ask whose body, which ones do we look at, what about the ones that just don't fit, are they silenced, invisible and invisibilised, have they been purposefully put aside. Intersectionality allows for those types of questions.

This embodiment approach is one means of conveying and examining difference and diversity. Another related approach is through ideas of power, as **AL** outlined:

Intersectionality informs my teaching, research and activism from the outset. It's essential for me to see and practise feminism through an intersectional lens, recognising that many oppressions and bigotries intersect and relate to each other. This makes us better able to combat dominant practices of oppressive power. So it's only by showing students how gender intersects with class, race, ethnicity, sexuality that we can teach them to recognise power at play. I situate myself in the classroom intersectionally and ask students to do likewise.

AL went on to explain some practical ways in which intersectionality enables her to convey power in operation to politics students:

So in my first year large global politics course I have students locate themselves as subjects of global politics and as participants in global politics, by asking them questions about their own migration stories, their family stories, their identities, etc., and then we keep referring to these points throughout the semester. This is easier to do in later courses, and it helps students to see that they themselves are gendered, raced, classed, etc., as participants in the processes of global politics. Intersectionality is essential to us as feminists to identify privilege, and work with this in the classroom.

Intersectionality complicates our feminist teaching. However it is essential both to conveying the complexity of what feminism means and entails, and to speaking to the diverse experiences of students in our classrooms and beyond.

Activism and teaching

The explicitly political nature of intersectional feminism led us to ask whether feminist teaching is activist. **CB** posed the question: 'If teaching is activist, what is it activist *against*, and what is it activist *for*?' She explained that her activist teaching is driven by widespread changes within universities themselves in how they see their role and purpose. Universities have shifted:

... away from a knowledge-based conception, which aimed to make a contribution to the broader social good, and towards a neoliberal conception. The knowledge-based university put academics at its centre for the most part. In the neoliberal university, the relationship between individuals and the market is core. Larger conceptions of the social are sidelined, and academics are seen as corporate worker-bees. The neoliberal profit-based university sees education in more limited terms, and this certainly is a problem for feminist academics.

CB went on to say that as a teaching activist who'd experienced a broader and more socially responsible conception of the University, she had responded to this with practical strategies that offer hope for change:

So, is it all ruination in this environment and wringing of hands? No, and this is where activist teaching comes in. Academic teachers can and do find ways to undertake resistant and reconstitutive practices – that is, practices that refuse neoliberal modes and provide spaces for students to experience an alternate political imaginary. If the key discourses of the neoliberal university are the prioritising of the market and competitive individualism, then these are the discourses that, as an activist teacher, I think it's especially important to resist and reconstitute. Even if collective action as academics is increasingly difficult, it is still possible to prioritise

collaborative modes of engagement that enable the recovery of pleasurable autonomy. And I mention the word pleasure for a reason, as it is important to get some of the joy back into our work and for students too, to recover the joy of gaining knowledge. I describe and model modes of collaborative pleasure to students I supervise, in my supervisory activist teaching. For example, I undertake each week to work with several colleagues in the same room so that, even if we are not working on the same subjects, we are taking back research for ourselves, rather than as a mandatory managerial requirement. This collaborative pleasure model makes writing ours and breaks away from the must, the 'should', the punitive, of managerialism. In Cyndi Lauper's words, girls just wanna have fun! What we are doing is providing access to an alternative political imaginary, sometimes to students who have never experienced anything other than neoliberal competitive individualism. Activist teaching is importantly about saying that things can be different, showing it and enabling people to experience it.

YUS followed this impassioned appeal for activist teaching to call for change by also situating feminist activism in an institutional context, as well as a Pacific one:

I see myself as an activist just in my being in the academic institution and all sorts of other people being in the institution, who you might not expect to be there, so it is about understanding how we are making different kinds of subjects. I think part of my role is to make it clear to students what activism is. The only other thing I would say is that with feminism in the Pacific, real care has to be taken around conservative Pacific women, who do have a sense that they want to do something feminist but are very reluctant to take on the label. So in teaching, I think we need to provide them with a way of thinking and acting that is still critical from a feminist perspective, without taking on the label of 'feminist'.

AL offered an example from her teaching of some of these nuanced practices of activism-oriented teaching:

Teaching is normative and social justice-oriented activism informs my teaching. At the heart of this is a desire to employ a feminist pedagogy to ensure that students see themselves as active in the classroom, rather than passive recipients of my knowledge. This is not always an easy process because I think that in this moment of neoliberal higher education students often actually want to be a passive recipient of my knowledge. I often joke that if students could take my brain out, put it on a desk and plug something into it, they would be happy. But my role is to challenge this mode of learning and to instruct students so that they can begin to see themselves as makers of social change and that the learning process is simply one part of that. For me, feminist pedagogies work alongside other important traditions like postcolonial pedagogies, informing my intersectional approach. I am therefore explicit from the very first day in my first year course and subsequent courses about myself as a pacifist, as a feminist, and as an activist scholar.

This approach brings challenges and sometimes dramatic encounters in our classrooms. **AL** went on to describe one of these:

In a first year course, for example, I looked at the history of feminist international relations scholarship, which, I argued, has come from a place of normative commitment to change and trying to place gender at the heart of power and global politics. I used the example of rape in wartime and Bosnia in particular to discuss the social construction of gender and the power, practice and effect of constructions of gender. I was challenged during the lecture by an older male student who quite bravely stood up amongst three hundred students and questioned my reading of gender when men are the stronger sex. He had already missed part of the purpose of the course: the differences between sex and gender. He went on to say that men had the right to rape women during wartime because they face imminent death. A ruckus amongst students ensued. I carefully went through some issues he had overlooked and pointed out that all people have the right to bodily autonomy, and that in the classroom there was no place for bigotry or hatred. It was interesting to see the fallout from this conversation: some students believed I should have come down harder, but others believed that I had crossed some invisible boundary in the university classroom where we do not let students know that their belief system might be problematic in some way. I thought this is a good example of employing a social justice-oriented feminist practice of teaching in a way that I hope had results for some of the students in the classroom that day.

The Teaching Feminism/Teaching as a Feminist plenary session was conceived as a means to explore the ways that the participants engage as feminists teaching politics. Importantly, it was also conceived as a vehicle to promote feminist teaching in our diverse academic discipline. The motivations and practices that are captured above tell us of feminism's inherent pluralism,

as well as the range of our pedagogical approaches. The plenary session demonstrated that, as feminist activist scholars, we employ the most appropriate means possible of bringing a feminist lens of equality and diversity to our teaching. Our strategies are multiple: we range from teaching canonical texts in non-feminist specific courses, to weaving feminist examples throughout our teaching, to teaching specific feminist politics courses, and to engaging explicitly as feminists with students and colleagues. All of these challenge the relegation of feminist politics/political science/international relations to the disciplinary margins. The conversations that we had reflect many others taking place amongst feminist academics both within and beyond the discipline of politics. These have centred on the nature of feminist teaching itself (see for example the journal *Feminist Teacher*) to more specific practices and contexts. A full account of the contributions to these discussions is beyond the scope of this article. However, the following offer practical and thought-provoking strategies for feminist teachers: the issue of gender mainstreaming is discussed by Erin C. Cassese, Angela L. Bos and Lauren E. Duncan in their study of integrating gender in the political science curriculum in the US in 2012 (Cassese, Bos & Duncan, 2012). A pluralist approach to the study of politics and postmodern feminism is outlined by Debra DeLaet in the context of teaching international relations (DeLaet, 2012). Nancy Naples explores methods for teaching intersectionality intersectionally in politics classrooms (Naples, 2009). Alison Mountz *et al.* (members of the Great Lakes Feminist Geography Collective) offer strategies to feminist scholars for developing and employing a collective feminist ethics of care in the context of the neoliberal university (Mountz *et al.*, 2015). And finally, Anna Feigenbaum provides strategies for engaging with feminist pedagogy in the neoliberal university (Feigenbaum, 2007). The plenary session itself and its record could be viewed as one (small) part of this ongoing conversation.

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Endnotes

- 1 Politics here refers to the academic department or discipline – sometimes called political science or political studies.
- 2 Development Alternatives with Women for a New Era.

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