
Classics and Feminist Pedagogy

Practical tips for teaching

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On July 29th, 2016 the Women's Classical Committee UK, with the generous support of the Council of University Classics Departments Education Committee, hosted as one of its first events a 'Classics and Feminist Pedagogy: Practical Tips for Teaching' workshop at the University of Birmingham. The day was set up primarily as a resource and workshop day for current PhD students and Early Career academics, who may be new both to teaching and specifically to teaching in a politically-aware, feminist way. The speakers ranged from PhD students to established professors which led to a wide range of views and experiences. More established academics were particularly invited to share experiences and opinions which they had developed over the course of their careers, so that the audience could benefit from those experiences. The event was organised, on behalf of the WCC, by Rebecca Fallas, Kate Cook, and Ellie Mackin all Early Career academics, with the support of the steering committee, and facilitated by volunteers from the University of Birmingham, Oonagh Pennington-Wilson and Victoria Schuppert. To make the event financially accessible to the widest range of people the event was free for existing WCC members and £5.00 for non-members (which is also the cost of student and unwaged membership). We had 36 participants registered for the day, from a range of universities across the UK.

The day began with a paper from Liz Gloyn (Royal Holloway, University of London), who spoke on 'What is Feminist Pedagogy and What Does it Mean For Classics and Ancient History'; this paper served to set the tone of the day and open the discussion of what feminist pedagogy actually entails. Dr Gloyn covered a range of theories of feminist pedagogy, and discussed them with reference to how well they had worked for her own practice, and within the discipline of Classics. Rather than recommending a purely student-centred approach, Liz discussed the benefits of a 'subject-centred' model – designed to empower students, but also to suit the needs of Classics, as a discipline with a complex history, and of the students and lecturers within the Classics community. LG showed too that feminist pedagogy can be a part of every aspect of teaching – including development of syllabi, assessments, and language teaching as well as history or literature. However, particularly valuable to many of the ECRs in the room

was the emphasis on the value of recognising one's own limits – whether these are about the level of influence a lecturer may have on an established course, related to the workload of the lecturer, or how far the comfort zones of both teachers and students can be reasonably pushed.

After the initial opening session, the day consisted of a range of panels, breakout discussions, and spotlight talks which covered all aspects of teaching - from preparation of materials, to in-class exercises, to wider philosophies. The event was focused on the practical side of such questions, and as a result a set of practical suggestions arose from all of these sessions, which can be found in the 'Tips' document, which is also published in CUCD Bulletin for 2017. This report has been designed to be read alongside these tips.

Teaching materials

Discussions on the production of teaching materials were the central topic of the second large panel of the day: "Incorporating Female Voices in the Syllabus – Scholarship". Each speaker spoke about a different type of material with which our students are likely to engage. On the traditional side, Rosie Wyles (Kent) discussed the challenges of providing a feminist course bibliography which gives sufficient attention to women scholars, and shed light on some of the sexist biases which she had uncovered with her classes in the ways in which academic works are reviewed. Holly Ranger (Birmingham) talked about "footnote activism" and conscious citation practices. She also noted the importance of highlighting translations by women, and ways of helping students engage more critically with the act of reading a translation, and provided suggestions for ways in which women's voices and responses to the Classics could be found in non-typical materials such as performances or reviews. Claire Millington (KCL) introduced the topic of Wikipedia editing and how we can redress the imbalance of representation for women classicists on Wikipedia (also noting that there is a significant gender imbalance in editors), as a way of making sure that even our students' informal resources are not providing a biased view.

Over the course of the wider discussion, in-class materials such as PowerPoints were also brought up as an area for care over inclusivity. There was also some wide-ranging discussion of the use of 'trigger' or 'content warnings' on course materials – with Liz Gloyn arguing persuasively for the value of a warning which does not preload an emotional response.

Preparation for teaching

The question of how to prepare a feminist classroom and teaching style was a frequent topic throughout the day's discussion. Liz Gloyn's opening paper demonstrated some of the wide range of approaches that may fall under the umbrella of 'feminist pedagogy', and emphasised the importance of finding an individual approach which works both for the teacher and the students.

Fiona McHardy (Roehampton) discussed teaching sensitive topics in the classroom, why this is a feminist issue and how it can be addressed by both junior and more senior members of staff. Preparation both by the teacher and of the class was a key aspect here. Later in the day, the talk by Helen King (Open University) picked up many similar questions of preparation and

examination of workload, by indicating the ways in which self-care as a female academic can be an important part of preparing to teach. The wider discussion echoed many of these questions, and particularly, the ‘feminisation’ of particular tasks in the university and the risk of unbalancing workloads as a result.

While teaching – practical exercises and wider considerations

Several speakers gave suggestions for practical exercises and the use of particular strategies to consider while teaching. All of the spotlight talks given focused on strategies or exercises used by the speakers in their own areas to try and develop a feminist pedagogy. Julia Hamilton (Oxford), covered how to approach ancient stereotypes of women, with particular reference to ancient Egyptian history. Monica Palmero Fernandez (Reading) discussed the issues of incorporating women into spaces where there is very little evidence of female voices, with particular reference to Near Eastern history. Stephe Harrop (Liverpool Hope) discussed the practicalities of staging ancient drama (or drama dealing with the ancient world) in inclusive and intersectional ways, drawing on her experience of directing a student production of Titus Andronicus. Alix Lowe (Birmingham) carried on the earlier conversation of finding women in texts and periods that have no female voices, talking in detail about teaching Gilgamesh. Rosalind Janssen (UCL) discussed using experiential or ‘action’ archaeology and ancient history in the classroom, taking us through a typical class involving the preparation of various methods of contraception from the ancient world, and how this can help us ‘reanimate’ women’s lives. Victoria Leonard (Cardiff) discussed approaching language teaching from a feminist perspective, particularly asking ‘is it okay to always translate the third person singular as he?’ and the implications that translating ‘he’ (with particular reference to constructed exercises, rather than to ancient texts) has for reinforcing implicit bias. In her talk, Helen King introduced the issue of humour as a teaching tool.

A great strength of the discussion-based format of the day was the opportunity for speakers and other participants to share their experiences of teaching feminist classics. Many of the recommendations Helen King shared were based in her own experiences as she looked back over her career. Susan Deacy (Roehampton) reflected on some of the ways in which feminist pedagogy had changed over the course of her career, and many of the spotlight talks emphasised the ways in which personal experience had shaped teaching practice – whether these were experiences of changing institutions and educational systems, or working in male-dominated areas of the field.

Discussion and future events

The day ended with an open round-table focused on ways in which the WCC could take further steps to encourage feminist pedagogy. Some of these steps have already been taken. Following Claire Millington’s work at this event, the WCC’s Wikipedia editing initiative began with an Editathon in January, and now holds monthly online editing sessions. A further Editathon is planned in Manchester on 15th September 2017. Two panels co-organised with the WCC UK on cross-disciplinary feminist pedagogy also formed part of the programme at the International Medieval Congress in Leeds in July.

Other suggested projects included:

- The establishment of an interactive, online bibliography of women's scholarship
- Continuing the online [bibliography of translations and editions by women](#)
- Publication by the WCC of short blog posts that continue the conversation started by the Spotlight talks – to give women an opportunity to discuss and share the feminist pedagogy they employ in their own classrooms, and to promote such posts published elsewhere
- Encouragement of proposals for follow-up events, either on general themes or with more specific focuses (e.g. assessment)
- A 'grassroots' support group, established on Facebook or a similar forum.

It seems clear, both from the overwhelmingly positive feedback on the day, and from the range of suggestions for future activity offered, that there is a great deal of appetite for feminist pedagogy within the Classics. The workshop Twitter hashtag (#WCCPed) was widely used both by those in attendance and non-attendees sharing their own experiences of feminist pedagogy in the classroom. A [storify](#) of the day's tweets shows not only the range of experiences shared but also the level of engagement and interest in the subject from the wider Classics community.

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