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Feminist pedagogy in the neoliberal university: on violence, vulnerability and radical care

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ABSTRACT
What tensions do feminist educators face whilst working within the neoliberal university? In this paper, I reflect on the difficulties of practicing feminist pedagogies within a context of *systemic violence*, asking what space there is to create transformative classrooms whilst working within a marketized higher education system which produces widespread mental distress, over-stretched support structures and spiralling workloads. I provide autoethnographic reflections on my experiences of teaching an undergraduate module on gender, sexuality and space, a course that sought to challenge gendered systems of domination, and where students often drew upon personal experiences of violence. I reflect upon how feminist pedagogies can often be troubling and discomforting, and how discomfort is always a risk in a system which treats students as consumers. Ultimately, I explore the limits and vulnerabilities that feminist educators can often encounter when attempting to create liberatory and radically caring classrooms.

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Introduction

How can we successfully put feminist pedagogies into practice whilst working within a deeply neoliberal and marketized higher education system? In this paper, I document my navigations as a feminist and queer educator trying to carve out liberatory learning spaces. The paper is based upon my reflections on several years convening a final-year optional undergraduate module 'Gender, Sexuality and Space', taught as part of a Human Geography degree at a Russell Group University in England. A central part of the assessment for the module was a reflective piece of writing where students drew upon their own personal life experiences in relation to the academic class material. As part of this assignment, several students decided to reflect on their lived experiences of violence: from sexual harassment, domestic abuse, to homophobia and transphobia. Whilst seeing the personal as a valid way of knowing the social world is a common underpinning of feminist pedagogies, little work has explored the risks of doing so, or how

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difficult it is to support this emotionally intensive pedagogical practice while working within a marketized higher education (HE) system. Accordingly, I trace the tensions I have faced whilst trying to practice feminist pedagogies within a wider context of systemic institutional violence, with over-stretched support structures and spiralling staff workloads.

I open with a brief overview of how the autoethnography was conducted, a review of existing scholarship on practicing feminist pedagogy within the neoliberal academy, before moving on to address the following three questions:

(i) How to open up space for students to draw upon personal experiences of violence without inducing further harm?
(ii) How to create a radically caring learning environment where students support each other through discussions of sensitive and often discomforting topics?
(iii) How to navigate feelings of depletion and anxiety as a feminist educator trying to support students through experiences of both personal and structural violence?

I do not provide neat solutions to these questions: rather, they are offered as entry points to help explore some of the terrain that feminist educators must navigate. I examine how idealized visions of the caring feminist educator can be near-impossible to achieve when working in a marketized system reliant on overwork, precarity and intensified performance management. As such, the paper contributes to feminist scholarship that explores the ways in which neoliberalism harms our academic working practices, highlighting the exhaustion and anxiety that can often remain hidden and silent (Gill 2009; Mountz 2016). Yet despite the significant body of feminist scholarship addressing harmful working conditions, relatively little has been written specifically about how neoliberalization impacts feminist pedagogical practice, with teaching still often romantically depicted as a site of resistance against neoliberal logics. Accordingly, this paper contributes to scholarship that is beginning to examine how neoliberalization can make practicing feminist pedagogies not just difficult, but at times, impossible (Busse, Krausch, and Liao 2021; Potvin and Dority 2022; Wånggren, 2018).

In this piece, I reflect upon some of the pedagogical tools used to support students through their reflective writing assignment, including regular formative writing in private online journals, seminars on reflective writing where we discussed anonymized extracts from student journals, a co-produced code of conduct, and the introduction of smaller peer writing support groups. Throughout I quote from the learning diary I kept whilst teaching the module over a period of several years. The module was often challenging and emotionally turbulent, so the diary attempted to reflect and learn from these experiences. Journalling was a way to process difficult moments, entries were often written at times of depletion, anxiety, joy, and as such, the diary consists of fragmented narratives, looping structures and repetition. Writing up extracts from my diary into a journal article was not something I had initially intended, but I decided to write this piece after sharing some of these stories whilst mentoring early-career researchers new to teaching, where we began to discuss some of the risks of trying to practice transformative feminist pedagogies whilst working within a marketized HE system. Thus, as Coia and Taylor (2013, 10) note in their reflections on the importance of autoethnography for feminist pedagogy:

> Insight comes in telling our stories to one another. We do not tell the stories because we have insight: they are not complete in that way, with their lesson neatly attached. Rather it is in the telling and the retelling to each other that meaning is made and insight is gained.

The module is one I no longer teach, and the article emerged after the students had graduated. I was therefore unable to speak with the students about writing this piece, however, many of the topics I reflect upon here were issues that were discussed with the class. The diary includes anonymized notes based on discussions with students, but no student is quoted verbatim, and at times minor details of student anecdotes have been changed to protect anonymity.

Feminist pedagogies within the neoliberal University

I am writing this piece from the context of English HE: a marketized neoliberal system with high tuition fees and student maintenance loans that only partially cover the cost of living. This debt-fuelled system places significant financial burden on students and entrenches systemic barriers to HE: (re)producing stark socio-economic and racial divisions between 'elite' and 'non-elite' institutions (Bhopal and Myers 2023). The neoliberal restructuring of HE has resulted in increased auditing, regulation and standardization, with a growing emphasis on the need for degrees to provide 'value for money' – measured by graduate employment figures. Neoliberal rationality has reduced higher education to a commodity, a transactional exchange where students are positioned as consumers, and academics as service providers. The marketization of HE has resulted in a well-documented student mental health 'crisis', as students come under increasing pressure to excel academically, anxious about spiralling debt and their future employment prospects (Peake and Mullings 2016). Hall (2014) speaks of the commoditized University as an 'anxiety machine': a violent system that produces stress and alienation for both students and staff alike.

There is a body of important scholarship exploring how neoliberalization intensifies the use of managerial performance measures and unmanageable workloads, and how these deteriorating working conditions have had deleterious impacts on the health and well-being of staff (Berg, Huijbens, and Larsen 2016; Mountz 2016). In England and Wales, the marketization of HE led to the removal of student number controls in 2015, resulting in a two-tier system: spiralling workloads for those in elite institutions, whilst other institutions face redundancies due to falling student numbers. Marketization has also resulted in the increasing reliance on casualized labour, with research highlighting how the effects of precarity are particularly pronounced for minoritized academics, thus further entrenching intersectional inequalities (Bonello and Wånggren 2023). The neoliberal academy is a system of violence, underpinned by violent logics and producing violent conditions: of ableism, patriarchy, class divides and white privilege. The neoliberalization of HE upholds structural violence: which, as Hamer and Lang note, stems 'from institutional, often economically driven processes' (2015, 899). What then, are the implications of this for feminist educators working in the neoliberal University? Are feminist pedagogies even possible within these violent conditions?

Feminist pedagogies include a varied range of approaches but are united by a shared concern 'with gender justice and overcoming oppressions' (Shrewsbury 1987, 7). Most attempt to create transformational and emancipatory learning spaces, fostering an ethics of care in the classroom (Light, Nicholas, and Bondy 2015; McCusker 2017). This is achieved by disrupting conventional classroom power-hierarchies by foregrounding lived experience and embodied ways of knowing (Llewellyn and Llewellyn 2015). Classes often ask students to draw upon their personal lives, with students sharing their experiences of gendered violence, intersectional oppressions and privilege. The hope is that knowledge generated in class will be transformative: sowing seeds that will help students challenge systems of injustice and oppression throughout their lives. As Wånggren (2018, 2) notes, 'the feminist classroom becomes a space in which to highlight and question structures of privilege and oppression in academia and beyond'.

The values of feminist pedagogy are therefore often at odds with the marketized and instrumental approach to education so prominent under neoliberalization (Feigenbaum 2007). Feminist pedagogies resist neoliberal logics of self-sufficiency and competition, and instead highlight the importance of collective struggle, radical care and justice. Feminist pedagogies carve out space for education to be otherwise, a site of radical un/learning, a way of knowing ourselves in new ways. Thus as bell hooks (1989, 51) proposes, the feminist classroom:

> should be a place where there is a sense of struggle … where we work together as teachers and students to overcome the estrangement and alienation that have become so much the norm in the contemporary university.

Feminist pedagogies can generate moments of critical consciousness and collective solidarity. The feminist classroom becomes a site of radical care, shared vulnerability and connection, a place from which to disrupt and expose the violent conditions of the neoliberalized higher education system.

However, neoliberalization can restrict the possibilities for practicing transformative feminist pedagogies. Research has begun to explore how neoliberalism produces inhospitable and hostile conditions for practicing feminist pedagogy, examining how feminist pedagogies have been impeded by the structural conditions of the neoliberal academy. Busse, Krausch, and Liao (2021, 31), for example, have highlighted how 'neoliberalism constrains even that which has been romanticised as a sanctuary inside the university: what and how we teach in our classes themselves'. Within the English HE sector, teaching practice is now increasingly regulated and monitored, guided by a customer service approach, with teaching quality measured by student evaluations. This 'student as consumer' system can pose particular difficulties for feminist educators, for as Wånggren (2018, 1) notes, feminist teaching often offers 'uncomfortable or troublesome questions and knowledges', and often asks students to confront their own positions of privilege.

Moreover, as Wånggren goes on to highlight, the pressure to receive positive student feedback is particularly significant for the increasing number of staff on precarious contracts, whose contract renewal is often dependent on receiving consistently high student evaluations, especially those minoritized staff subject to racial, gendered and queerphobic bias in student evaluations of teaching (Heffernan 2022). As such, working within a neoliberalized and audited system can lead to self-regulation and highly sanitized teaching practices: of giving students what they want, 'playing it safe' and steering clear of topics and teaching practices that may unsettle dominant worldviews. Thus, it is not just the content we teach that is unsettling: feminist pedagogical practice often disrupts taken-for-granted hierarchies between teacher/student, but these egalitarian teaching practices are not always welcomed by students in a marketized higher education system (we are paying our fees, we are here to learn from *you*). Feminist pedagogies can often be troubling and discomforting, and discomfort is always a risk in a system which treats students as consumers. Thus, as Murray and Kalayji (2018, 15) argue 'as feminist teachers we find ourselves situated within conditions which seem to be anathema to our political project'.

As I subsequently detail, this idealized vision of what the feminist classroom should be can often place unsurmountable demands on feminist educators: our drive to create classrooms that are liberatory, transformative and radically caring can be starkly at odds with the commercialized HE sector's focus on skills for employability and grade classifications. What space is there in this system to practice feminist values of care, solidarity and justice in our teaching? In the sections that follow I reflect upon the im/possibilities of being a feminist educator within this wider context of systemic violence.

Navigating student disclosures of violence

An underpinning aim of 'Gender, Sexuality and Space' was to help students think critically about the politics of knowledge: asking what knowledge is for, who produces it, and how certain ways of knowing are devalued in academia. Students were asked to produce a reflective assignment that links their own personal experiences to some of the academic material discussed in class. In this assignment they were encouraged to experiment with writing style and creative formats in order to better capture the emotional and the corporal: merging written words with sketches, collages and poems. During class we explored examples of how feminist and queer movements use self-reflection as a political tool, drawing upon a rich archive of autobiography, consciousness-raising, poetry and zine-culture. Using personal reflection and creative formats in feminist and queer courses is by now somewhat standardized practice, founded upon the feminist adage that 'the personal is political' (McGuinness 2009; Kent 2020). However, whilst much of this literature demonstrates the strengths and possibilities of this pedagogical approach, relatively little has been written about the challenges, limits and risks of using this reflective format.

One of the key initial dilemmas faced was around giving students a free choice of topic on what to write about in their reflective assignment. I was concerned whether I could provide sufficient support for students who chose to reflect upon traumatic experiences, particularly at a time of escalating staff workloads. What if the assignment ended up creating harm for both students and staff? So, whilst the reflective assessment was not specifically asking students to disclose incidents of trauma or violence, it was to violence that many students decided to turn. Making space for discussions of violence in the feminist classroom creates ethical challenges around how to allow students to draw upon their lived experiences without inducing further harm (McLean 2023). Working within a regulated, marketized and audited HE system means educators are often taught to consider legal ramifications of their teaching, to not practice anything too 'risky' for fear of complaints, and to quickly sign-post students to external support services if we deem their case 'too complex'. Yet this standardized guidance rarely works when faced with the messy realities of being a feminist educator. Firstly, the neoliberal academy is already resulting in increased mental distress for students and University support services are struggling with increasing demand and lengthy waiting lists (Thorley 2017). Secondly, such a standardized approach is at odds with a feminist pedagogical practice that openly speaks of everyday violence and oppression, and the political importance of fostering *collective* rather than individualized solutions to violence and injustice (hooks 1989).

To support students with this new form of assessment, they were asked to write regular formative pieces of reflective writing in their private journals on the virtual learning environment. These entries could only be viewed by the module convenor, but some extracts were shared anonymously to help us collectively learn. To protect confidentiality if sharing something sensitive, students could mark entire entries, or parts of entries, as private if they did not want their writing sharing with the class. Selected anonymized writing extracts were circulated prior to the seminars, and all students came with general feedback for group discussion. In the first year, the module ran the majority of students tended to reflect on certain topics such as experiences of gendered socialization in the family home, gender/sexuality in sports, walking the city at night. If a student reflected on something more sensitive (such as sexual harassment or violence) they tended to mark it as private in their online journal, yet this was not always the case:

> A student has written quite vividly about past experiences of witnessing domestic violence, she has not marked this entry as private … contacted her to see how she wanted to proceed. In the end we decided not to share it with the class, as even though it would be anonymous the seminar size is so small that we felt people may try and second guess who wrote it.

Throughout the module the student stayed in regular contact, deciding to write about these experiences for her final piece of coursework.

> The experience of writing had initially been difficult but eventually cathartic, even powerful she says, to see how these personal experiences can be understood through feminist literature, a way to feel less alone. But as we speak, and as she talks about feeling less alone, I'm met with a sinking feeling, I know another student in class had submitted a very similar piece about her own experiences of domestic abuse but I cannot tell her this. The module ended with the two students never knowing about each other. I think how different their experiences might have been if they were not writing about their experiences alone. Had my desire to contain anything 'too sensitive' shut down this potential connection? How many more people in class might have written about their experiences of violence if they knew others were too?

At the end of the module I spoke individually with those who had shared some of these stories of violence, asking if I could share these anonymously in the class seminars next year. All agreed and felt that reading other similar stories would have helped them feel less isolated when writing about their own experiences. So, for the second year the module ran, extracts concerning experiences of violence were shared (with a content warning) as part of our seminar writing sessions. Sharing these extracts in class became somewhat of a pivotal moment in the module: 'I didn't realise we could be *that* personal':

> X comes to my office today, she was so very quiet in class last week sitting in silence through a seminar on domesticity, as the rest of the class shared stories of happy families and girly pink bedrooms. She spoke about the writing extracts on home space that had been shared, which included stories of insecurity, violence and control. It 'felt like a weight had lifted'.

The seemingly cheerful class discussion had been a profoundly alienating space for this student, her experience of domestic space was starkly different to her classmates. Yet seeing words about domestic violence written anonymously helped her feel, if only momentarily, less alone. The student opened up about how her domestic life led to struggles with class attendance and attainment, misrecognized as a lack of confidence or effort:

> She assures me she's fully committed, but worried her anxiety will make it hard to speak up in class. "Speak up, be more confident", drilled into her from other tutors. I remind her no one needs to speak in my classes, she can write in her private journal if she wants to still contribute, there's a hybrid option so people can stay home, they can type anonymously, or simply just listen.
>
> A colleague speaks in a staff meeting on grading student participation: "We're too soft, they need to learn to speak up, prepare them for the *real world*"
>
> The real world? What do ***you*** know about the real world.

At first this student found the coursework difficult to write, the process of centring her own experience was something that felt not just unfamiliar but uncomfortable given she was breaking a lifetime of being told her voice did not matter, insidious trauma creating internalized feelings of unworthiness. This experience echoes the work of Burke et al. (2023) who highlight that many student survivors of gender-based violence experience institutional misrecognition leading to feelings of shame, disconnection, isolation and low self-worth, shaping access to, and participation, in HE. Yet such experiences are often misrecognized in a HE system underpinned by neoliberal values of self-responsibility, resilience and self-transformation. Thus, as Burke (2017, 430–433) has astutely argued, 'individualizing discourses … locate the problem of pedagogical participation in the individual participant', framed as a 'lack of aspiration, confidence, adaptability or resilience'. Like Burke, my autoethnographic reflections highlighted experiences of violence and trauma shaping student lives in ways that required careful and attentive shifts in pedagogical practice: making space for connection, for understanding, and for silence.

Most students continued to keep their journal writing about experiences of violence private, yet an increasing number wanted their extracts to be shared anonymously. Over the years, the writing extracts become an amalgamation of current and past student voices, helping preserve anonymity and avoid speculation about who had written what. Ultimately, this highlighted how my initial attempts to create a safe(r) learning environment may have inadvertently created further harm, reproducing patriarchal framings that equate gendered and sexual violence with shame and stigma, allowing the misconception that violence is something that should be kept private, as something extraordinary rather than everyday. By trying to protect student anonymity and safety I had failed to see that many students wanted the module to become a space where stigma and silence could be shattered, with this collective sharing integral to transformative feminist pedagogy.

Making space for collective care

The increased number of students disclosing experiences of violence led me to think more deeply about how a feminist ethics of care could be better built into the module. As Tronto (1993) argues, care is not simply an act of caring for or about an other, but an ethic shaping our everyday practice, emphasizing openness and relationality. Numerous scholars have begun to explore how feminist care ethics might shape our pedagogical practice, proposing ways in which to build a more 'care-full' pedagogical approach. This rich body of feminist literature highlights the importance of making space for collaboration, kindness and care within the spaces in which we work and learn (Hawkins 2019; Magnet, Mason, and Trevenen 2014; Motta and Bennett 2018).

Initially, my strategy for dealing with potentially traumatizing topics was to offer more individual drop-ins. Yet this approach took a considerable amount of time and emotional labour. Moreover, whilst this was manageable when module numbers were small, over the years the class-size grew. My first step was to ask if there could be a cap placed on student numbers for the safety of all in class, but in a marketized system where student module choice is paramount, I was told this would not be possible, and instead the suggestion was that I could perhaps make the content and assessment 'less risky' either by making writing about some topics 'off-limit' or removing the reflective writing assignment entirely. Neither of these were compromises I (or the students) wanted to make, so I began to think about how we could start to build collective networks of care within the class that could potentially shift the caring dynamics to something more collaborative. How could we better create a caring learning environment where students can support each other through these discussions of sensitive and potentially traumatizing topics?

Making space for collective care in the classroom is not an easy task. Asking students to value the importance of collective care is often difficult, especially as students are part of a neoliberalized competitive higher education system where they are taught to see themselves as autonomous, entrepreneurial subjects, and where peers are positioned as 'competitors' for the top grades. Whilst 'Gender, Sexuality and Space' has always had a code of conduct (focussing on issues of confidentiality and respectful non-discriminatory dialogue) there was no explicit discussion around shared responsibility for creating a caring classroom. Consequently, in the second year, I replaced the code of conduct with a co-produced set of guidelines that students discuss and amend at the start of every year. This living document created a space for students to actively reflect on the importance of creating a caring environment where all in the class could feel supported, especially on weeks dealing with potentially upsetting content. As a group we openly discuss what a radically caring classroom might look like: this included a variety of suggestions such as not dominating discussion, letting those with lived experience speak, bringing others into the conversation, letting people be silent and checking in on people after class.

One of the other key changes made was to establish peer writing groups, where students were placed in small groups based on their chosen coursework topic, usually around 3–6 students in each. Each year there were usually one or two groups working on sensitive topics such as experiences of homophobia / transphobia, sexual violence / domestic abuse. Students appreciated being placed in groups with others working on similar topics, as this helped them academically (e.g. sharing readings and ideas), but for the groups working on more sensitive topics this was paramount for creating a safe(r) space where they could speak more freely. Groups met frequently throughout the semester, sometimes within scheduled classes, but often in their own time. In these small groups, students provided feedback on each other's work, but the groups also offered peer support for those writing about often difficult and potentially traumatizing life experiences. This marked a shift in how I originally conceived the purpose of the writing groups, initially set up solely to develop practical skills in reflective writing. Some of the groups thus inadvertently ended up being similar to the 'support circles' discussed by Fuller and Russo (2016), a pedagogical format that recognizes 'the power of drawing from our collective experience and knowledge', helping foster collective peer support and care. Many students were sharing experiences that they had until now kept private or had only shared with external support services. Breaking this silence and working collectively to process experiences of violence and oppression helped create new forms of support and connection, challenging the reliance on solely individualized psychological solutions.

They first met their groups as part of a three-hour writing workshop, prior to which they shared an extract of their work for feedback from their peers. The following extract draws on my experience of running the first workshop:

> A student messages me the night before … She's never spoken to anyone about what has happened before other than her mum. She's worried about what will happen if she shuts down, or gets visibly upset … I try and reassure her that she's not alone in feeling like this. I let her know that another student in her group has decided to join online and that this is an option. "You can take time out. You can pick another topic, you don't have to write about this". She replies, to let me know she *definitely* wants to write about this, that she needs to write about this … she'll come.
>
> I've booked the largest room I can find, it seats 150 at round tables, there are a mere 15 of us in class … Students gather in their groups, spaced out across the sprawling room. I visit each table, then send each group off to work together with a staggered time to return. The final group are the ones writing on sexual violence. The cavernous room is now empty but me and them. We speak about how they are likely to be feeling nervous, cultures of shame and silence make it difficult to speak freely. We discuss what each of them feel they need to make the group work. Unlike other groups they now have a private room booked for an hour so they don't have to talk in a public space on campus. There's still a slight air of uncertainty and trepidation.
>
> Time passes, groups begin to return then leave. I'm waiting for the last group. They are later than scheduled.
>
> They come back, chatting and laughing, they're sorry they're late they 'lost track of time'. Everything instantly feels lighter … The student who emailed is the first to speak. She feels relieved, she admires how open and brave people were. The student online joins in … writing alone has been difficult for her, so they are going to arrange to meet up regularly to write together. I take time to talk with them about some of my worries about the assignment, about opening up these past experiences, the suggestion from a colleague that writing about some topics become 'off limit'. There's a collective sense of outrage … 'we are adults, we chose to write about this, we want to write about this.' I talk with them about the limits to University support services, the lengthy waiting lists for external support. They laugh, they know, they know, *of course they know*. They tell me they are going out for dinner to get to know each other better. I let them know the room is booked until the hour if anyone wants to speak to me individually, no one does.

At times, because of the demographics of the module, there were limits to how well groups were able to function – e.g. some years there was only one student writing about racism – but often connections have been made across difference. But for some students the emotional aspect of peer support is not something they can fully draw upon (e.g. as they are not yet 'out' about their sexual or gender identity). Despite this, putting these infrastructures of care in place was vital to the module, resulting in networks of support and new friendships, stopping students writing in isolation, breaking stigma and cultures of shame, and creating a collective community where experiences of violence and oppression were shared. The peer groups helped build a collective sense of responsibility for creating a caring learning environment. It also shifted the caring dynamics within the class, moving away from solely a focus on myself as module leader as *the* carer, which, as I address below, is vital at a time when marketization and intensified performance measures are creating unsurmountable demands on staff time.

Radical care and burnout

So far in this paper, I have reflected upon some of the mechanisms I put in place to try and foster a caring learning environment. Yet it is important to highlight these endeavours took considerable energy and time, with care for students often taking precedence over my own self-care. In this section, I turn to questions about the institutional exploitation of care work under neoliberalism. Feminist pedagogy is a practice that comes with expectations about what a 'good' feminist educator should be: empathetic, caring, supportive, selfless and transformational: traits which are often readily co-opted by the neoliberal academy. Berlant (1997, 149) has written about the 'intimacy expectation' of politically engaged feminist pedagogy, and the 'unrealistic expectations about what kinds of safety, support, sustenance and affection institutions and people in institutions can provide'. The cluster of promises about what feminist pedagogy should be can often result in feminist educators setting expectations that cannot be met, committing so much time and investment that it leads to burnout. When running 'Gender, Sexuality and Space' I often found myself shifting from intense feelings of optimism to overwhelming moments of exhaustion and failure. There were times when teaching the class felt energizing, almost euphoric, a sense we were working towards something bigger. But such feelings of optimism and hope were only ever fleeting, and as time passed the worries reemerged: had I done enough? Teaching the module was often draining, exhausting, it became impossible to switch off. The students from the module graduated but new students arrived, each with their own stories to tell. Every story of violence took its toll: queerphobia, domestic abuse, sexual assault, rape.

For a module that openly addressed issues of gendered and anti-queer violence there were inevitably increased contact hours to try and make space for students to be able to come speak in private. Our commitment to feminist pedagogies and social justice can often lead to overwork, particularly the increased demands of emotional labour:

> "I'm here if you need me", my inability to say no? How can we say no when students are not getting the care they need.
>
> 'Was that another student crying in your office?' Well-meaning colleagues tell you to try to 'work on your boundaries, you need to sign-post them elsewhere', but there is nowhere else left to go. The system is failing.

As most scholars who teach topics relating to gender, race and sexuality will know, it is not just the time it takes to make space for your own students, other students who are not on your module begin to come to you: they have heard you will listen, they know you will care. Responsibility for care work in the academy is shaped by existing power inequalities, falling disproportionately on women, people of colour and queer academics (Manzi, Ojeda and Hawkins 2024; Mehta 2019). Women and minoritized scholars are more likely to undertake what O'Keefe and Courtois (2020, np) term 'the housework of the university': pastoral care, undergraduate teaching, mentorship and other work that is seen as less prestigious. This uneven care-work becomes particularly problematic in a neoliberal system of heightened performance measures, as care work takes us away from other more measurable outputs – the publications and grants that are required for job security and career progression.

As feminist educators we continue to strive to create something new within the violent and hollowed-out structures of the neoliberal academy. Yet a feminist desire for a more caring University is easily exploited within a neoliberal marketized institution, as we try and hold things together whilst the system fails.

> At times it all feels too much to hold together. But at other times it fuels a fire, a burning desire to create other worlds. For a second it feels like we might succeed, we see a glimpse of how things can be otherwise, a momentary flicker before burning out.
>
> Burning out.

Our commitment to social justice means we burn and burn, until often there is nothing left. Recent work has highlighted how the ideals of being a good feminist educator can intensify experiences of burnout: the expectation we will always be on demand, caring, empathetic. For example, Potvin and Dority's (2022) insightful reflections on their experience as adjunct faculty highlight how precarious working conditions increase the likelihood of exhaustion and burnout, which then hinders the capacity to practice caring feminist pedagogies. Burnout for feminist educators is thus an ever-present risk, especially in a hostile system that does not value, or often even recognize, the time and energy that such care work entails (Baker and Burke 2023; Mountz 2016). Within a marketized HE system that continually asks us to do more with less, workload models are calculated by hours spent in class and student numbers, leaving no space for a recognition of how certain pedagogical practices may require additional time for care work. Feminist educators often find themselves working in unreceptive environments: sometimes we might face overt hostility in a neoliberal system where our caring and emotional pedagogies are belittled as too feminized, too 'touchy-feely', as detached from 'employability skills', as not 'real' learning. In my own career, I have seen staff who speak publicly about being over-burdened with care work chastized for what is seen as their failed self-management, of not setting 'appropriate' boundaries. Those who are seen to care 'too much' are simply left to burnout. The neoliberal academy produces what Lynch (2010, 63) terms a 'culture of carelessness', driven by the 'principles of individualized academic capitalism' that values 'unbounded work'. Thus, as Bartos (2021, 313) notes 'the neoliberal university is arguably a site for uncaring practices to flourish'.

Yet neoliberal universities abound with what Bartos terms 'false care': caring practices upholding the existing neoliberal system, activities designed to help people keep going in despite of *everything*. Examples here include wellbeing activities around student examination time, mental health 'awareness' weeks or activities to build 'resilience': individual responsibility, individualized solutions. False care is an attempt to momentarily ease the symptoms rather than to disrupt the cause. These practices of false care undermine the radical potentials of feminist pedagogies. For Bartos, what is needed in the neoliberal university is 'radical care': a practice of care that disrupts, a practice that calls out the careless and violent conditions of marketization, a form of radical care that recognizes the burnout produced by the neoliberal anxiety machine. Radical care seeks to include all those that the careless system has cast out.

Yet as I have noted, trying to create radically caring feminist classrooms whilst inhabiting these violent conditions can be both risky and exhausting. As such, over the years spent teaching 'Gender, Sexuality and Space', I have recognized the need to be more open and honest about the limits of what I can give: the boundaries of my caring capabilities, the limits on my time. Speaking of limits in a system that demands we be limitless is an important first step. Increasingly I am trying to start my teaching from a position of shared vulnerability with my students, a recognition of our shared inhabitation of these violent conditions. I speak with students openly about my experiences of teaching, of my oscillating feelings of optimism and depletion, the anxieties about getting things right, the limits we face as educators, the conditions that we are working under, the wider climate of rising right-wing populism that derides gender studies. This often leads to discussions about the conditions under which they are trying to learn: spiralling debt, a mental health crisis, everyday sexism, rising transphobia, corporate universities with their false care and endless platitudes. So, as Bartos (2021, 318) reflects, 'exploring how we are implicated or benefit from caring and non-caring relations within the university can result in academics and students feeling less disconnected, isolated, and autonomous'. Openly talking about limits and failure can be difficult in a neoliberal system where we are asked to constantly promote our 'teaching excellence' and 'innovation'. But it is vital to carve out space for vulnerability in order so that radical care can take place within, beyond and against neoliberal marketization.

Conclusion

This paper has presented autoethnographic reflections on teaching my final-year module 'Gender, Sexuality and Space', contributing to emergent debates on whether feminist pedagogies are even possible under the violent conditions of the contemporary neoliberal academy. Throughout, I have charted my attempts to create a more radically caring and liberatory classroom, with a particular focus on how the module dealt with student disclosures of violence. I have explored the tensions feminist educators face when trying to open space for students to draw upon personal experiences of violence without inducing further harm. 'Gender, Sexuality and Space' was a module that dealt with 'difficult' content, incorporating discussions of homophobia, toxic masculinity, domestic abuse and sexual violence. Whilst such topics are approached with care, there can never be a guarantee that the space will be 'safe' as learning spaces are always unpredictable. Yet to not speak of violence would be a form of violence in itself, perpetuating cultures of silence and stigma. Regulatory desires for a more sanitized and controlled classroom are a fallacy, as if violence is not already in the room.

However, as I have outlined throughout, making space for students to reflect upon experiences of violence and oppression can take an emotional toll on both students and staff. Bringing the personal into the classroom is always a risk. Yet this risk is often ignored or side-lined within wider literature around the transformative potentials of reflective learning, particularly at a time when practices that originated from liberatory pedagogy have been co-opted via 'innovative' calls for 'student-centred' and 'flipped' learning. As I have argued, opening space for personal reflections on violence and oppression can only ever take place within a radically caring and supportive learning environment. But attempting to carve out caring spaces within the neoliberal university can feel like an impossible endeavour. Creating a radically caring classroom must be thought of as a shared project between staff and students, but getting students to see the value of this whilst they are studying in a system underpinned by neoliberal rationality can be difficult: it demands a shift away from individual success to collective growth (Blazek and Stenning 2023). Furthermore, in a marketized HE system where staff are increasingly being asked to do more with less, the time and emotional labour such work entails may feel like an impossibility, particularly for those on insecure contracts. Increasingly staff are working within a system that demands fast-paced productivity, with expectations to simultaneously meet multiple (and often contradictory) measures of 'excellence': world-leading 'outputs', grant 'capture', teaching excellence and academic citizenship.

So, while the neoliberal university produces insecurity and anxieties for all, for feminist educators, and others committed to liberatory pedagogy, there are additional pressures when trying to create caring and transformative classrooms. Feminist educators often feel depleted as they support students through experiences of both personal and institutionalized violence. Feminist pedagogy seeks to disrupt and expose the violent conditions of the marketized neoliberal university, to create places of radical collective care in an uncaring institution, but pushing against a system can lead to exhaustion and burnout. Feminist educators will often fail, we miss the mark, we feel let down, vulnerable and depleted. Anxious and guilty that we have not done enough, whilst simultaneously shamed for taking on too much. Our commitment to feminist pedagogy is devalued in a system that wants us to take the less risky and less disruptive path.

Yet as I have proposed, there is much to learn from making these moments of failure and vulnerability visible. In a neoliberal system that demands we continually perform 'teaching excellence' we must carve out spaces to be able to share moments of depletion, tension and failure, for as Mountz (2016, 207–208) notes: '[i]n environments that privilege endurance and hard work, there is little space for discussion of ailments, burnout, and breaking points … people often suffer alone, silent, afraid to speak of fears and frailties'. It is only by breaking this silence and sharing these moments of depletion that we can better understand that these struggles are not a result of our own individual failures, but rather *as a failure of neoliberal marketization itself.* Sharing stories of depletion and failed attempts to practice feminist pedagogies can lead to a recognition of our shared inhabitation within the hollowed-out structures of the neoliberal university, the implications of working and learning under these violent and care-less conditions. Sharing moments of vulnerability between tenured staff, precarious staff, and students can open the possibility of creating caring connections. Together, we can create classrooms that have the potential to become sites of radical care: the care to witness, the care to hold each other up, the care needed to heal. It is only through pedagogical cultures of radical care that we can collectively survive the violent conditions in which we work and learn.

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