
Power dynamics in feminist classrooms: making the most of inequalities?

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The Women and Geography Study Group (1984) concluded their landmark text *Geography and Gender* with a chapter about methods of teaching and research in geography. In the years since then, an extensive literature on feminist research methodologies has developed. Although there have also been some important discussions of feminist approaches to teaching (for example McDowell 1992; Monk 1985; *Journal of Geography in Higher Education* 1999; Oberhauser 2002), these have been considerably less prominent in the literature of feminist geography. Furthermore, subsequent discussions of research methods and methodologies have only rarely made explicit connections to questions about *how* we teach (but see McDowell 1994; Monk 2000; Silvey 2002). In a number of presentations I gave in research-oriented settings in the late 1990s, I drew on the old feminist slogan “the personal is political” as partial justification for speaking about issues to do with teaching and learning in university classrooms, which absorb much of the time and energy of most academics, but which are rarely mentioned in conferences and seminars outside “specialist” sessions. However, I did not, until now, take those papers further towards publication, despite the largely positive reception of my oral presentations. Thus, after my initial effort to insist that what many of us actually do for a large proportion of our working time merits serious discussion, I effectively capitulated to the pressure to prioritise the more highly valued effort of writing about research.

To counter this capitulation at least partially, this essay explores, and suggests ways of navigating, some of the dilemmas faced by feminist geographers in negotiating the power dynamics of university classrooms. My discussion also connects to debates about “self-reflexivity”, including especially Audrey Kobayashi’s (2003) recent, impassioned plea that we attend to the dangers associated with the public enunciation of personal positions and commitments. In particular, I will argue against the strategies of countering or minimising power inequalities between teachers and students, and against the routine use of, or presupposition in favour of, personal self-disclosure in the classroom. At first blush, my argument might appear to constitute a defence of entrenched hierarchies of power. However, what I hope to elaborate are ways of engaging constructively with the inevitable contradictions of working simultaneously for and against academic institutions, which I take to be characteristic of the positions and experiences of feminist academics (Bondi 2004; Culley and Portuges 1985; Gallop 1995).

Power and power dynamics can, of course, be theorised in many different ways. Consonant with the contradictoriness to which I have alluded, Judith Butler (1997, 8) has argued that subjectivity is deeply paradoxical in the sense that “the subject is not only formed in subordination, but that subordination provides the subject’s continuing condition of possibility”. Put very simply – perhaps simplistically – on this account, the power through which I become intelligible as a subject, which defines me and within which I am caught, is also the power that I experience as enabling me to make choices about how I teach, and much else besides. Thus, I embody power and power embodies me. I want to use this idea, and indeed to risk abusing it, by thinking about the power embodied by and through participants in university classrooms as always twofold. Teachers and students are caught within and embody structures of institutional power. But we are not simply ventriloquists’ dummies: we personalise the power we inhabit. And to think about power dynamics in feminist pedagogy I want to make strategic use of a simple and inevitably problematic distinction between what I will call “institutional” power and “personal” power. This distinction departs from Judith Butler’s (1997) analysis by focusing primarily on manifestations of power within conscious and largely cognitive domains. Thus, while I avoid treating power as operating *only* within such domains, I neglect Butler’s emphasis on the unconscious, psychic life of power, drawing rather more narrowly on the notion of power and agency as always paradoxical (for a different “take” on the validity and value of

such a strategy see Nelson 1999). My purpose is to think about the tensions between our interpellation within, and our capacity to resist, academic institutions, tensions illustrated in a very simple form by my initial effort to value teaching in conference presentations and my subsequent capitulation to institutional pressure to prioritise research.

By “institutional power” I refer to the power or the authority that attaches to people by virtue of their institutional positions. For example, teachers enter classrooms as representatives of degree-awarding institutions. We (I write as one of this “class”) have the authority to assess students’ work in ways that will influence their degree results. We also typically bear titles awarded by institutions of higher education, which serve to legitimate our positions as teachers and as examiners. Students occupy more lowly positions within academic hierarchies in that they lack the authority-conferring academic qualifications of those who teach them. However, they are endowed with other forms of institutional power, perhaps most obviously (and troublingly) as “consumers” who may be more or less willing to pay for the education on offer, and who express their “consumer” power through such mechanisms of student evaluations (see Nast 1999 for a critical analysis).

I use the term “personal power” to refer to the unique ways in which people embody and “personalise” power. Personal power is a necessary aspect of the exercise of much institutional power, but it is also expressive of efforts to resist the smooth operation of such power, and often appears to function in ways that are at least partially independent of positions within formal, institutional structures. Consider, for example, the numerous ways in which students exert power within classroom interactions, perhaps by arguing impressively, interrupting each other, cracking jokes, remaining silent, offering each other encouraging feedback, creating distractions, or turning up late. As teachers we also personalise power in myriad ways, whether through our communication of enthusiasm or boredom about our topic, our friendliness or aloofness, our welcoming or evident dislike of interruptions during lectures, and so on.

Thus far I have described institutional and personal power without reference to social inequalities in classrooms, on which much discussion of feminist pedagogy focuses (for example Knopp 1999; Oberhauser 2002; Valentine 1997; Women and Geography Study Group 1984). However, the distinction is also salient in relation to these expressions of power: the mutually constituted inequalities of gender, race, class, age, sexuality, and disability are simultaneously always already “there”, and uniquely embodied and personalised by each of us. In other words, social identities can be understood as forms of power that incorporate institutional and personal aspects. Their institutional form is implicitly invoked by teachers (and students and researchers) who declare themselves “privileged” by virtue of, for example, their professional status, middle-classness, whiteness, maleness and/or straightness. Alongside such institutional power, the personalisation of social identities is suggested in many ways, including via expressions of egalitarian, anti-racist, feminist, anti-heterosexist, and queer political commitments that co-exist with acknowledgements of privileges associated with unmarked positions (see for example Elder 1999; England 1999).

Informed by such political commitments, the idea of empowering students from oppressed, marginalised and under-represented groups is popular among feminist teachers (Nairn 1997). On this account, what I have described as institutional power can be offset through the interplay between teachers’ and students’ capacities to “do” social identities differently. This entails resisting the complex power inequalities embedded in dominant versions of gender, sexuality, class, race, dis/ability, age and so on, by personalising them differently. Active learning is often considered a key mechanism of empowerment because only by claiming agency in relation to knowledge and knowledge production is it possible to enter into the transformational possibilities of education (Burkill 1997; Hughes 1998).

Although I am keen to challenge the reproduction of inequalities of class, ethnicity, race, gender and so on within higher education, I have misgivings about these appeals to empowerment. My misgivings arise partly because a substantial proportion of those I teach enter the classroom from highly privileged backgrounds and in important ways are thoroughly empowered already. I am, therefore, at least as much in need of strategies to trouble their exercise of power as to empower those from other(ed) backgrounds (compare Monk 2000). But even with those from much less privileged backgrounds, I think that a

more nuanced approach to questions of power is more appropriate for both students and their teachers, and allows us to unpack the dynamics of teaching and learning more effectively.

To elaborate, as a teacher I want to engage my students as equals in the sense of respecting them as persons and by establishing reciprocity in some aspects of our interactions. For example, I expect to be addressed in the same way as I address individual students: if I use first names when speaking to them, I expect them to do likewise in addressing me. In class discussion, I aim to take contributions (including silence) seriously, and, even if I contest what is said, or encourage silent students to speak, I attempt to do so in ways that communicate respect for the person of the (non-) speaker (compare Nairn 1997). It is not that I necessarily succeed, but that I seek to model and cultivate forms of interaction that are grounded in, and expressive of, a broadly humanistic commitment to accord others the respect with which we each wish to be treated ourselves. But at the same time as seeking to engage my students as equals, I also treat them in ways that actively maintain our different institutional positions and powers. Through my enactment of the role of the teacher, I implicitly insist that we are not equal, that I am more knowledgeable than they are about some things, and that I have the authority to evaluate their academic work. And while I invite them to evaluate my performance as a teacher, this is not an equal or reciprocal process. Notwithstanding the problematic politics of student evaluations and their impacts on teachers' careers (Nast 1999), unless I do things very badly indeed there will be no immediate penalties applied to me, whereas each student on a course for which I am responsible is subject to decisions about grades and so on, which I determine with a modest amount of scrutiny by my colleagues and peers.

The distinction I have drawn between institutional power and personal power maps onto this tension: my wish to treat students as equals connects closely to my sense of appropriate uses of personal power; my sense of our unequal positions stems directly from our different roles in the classroom. While this combination sometimes feels contradictory, on many occasions it feels productive and rewarding. By and large I enjoy teaching, and that means taking pleasure in negotiating this interplay between equality and difference, between respect and authority, between personal and institutional aspects of power. Indeed I would suggest that much of what goes on between teachers and students draws on subtle and fluid combinations of institutional power and personal power, as I elaborate in the ensuing examples drawn from my experience of teaching an undergraduate honours option course about gender, sexuality and cities to groups of 20 to 30 students.

In course documentation and in the first session I argue that students come to the class as "knowledgeable urban actors", and I make it clear that I expect them to draw and reflect on their experiences of urban living within the course. Through such strategies I attempt to disrupt conventional hierarchies that locate knowledge as something to be acquired solely from academic authorities. But at the same time I exercise authority by demanding particular modes of participation in the class, as well as by insisting that extensive reading is required.

In one class session, when I was attempting to facilitate discussion after a short student presentation concerned with diverse experiences of urban living, a course participant asked the presenter for publication details of a paper to which she had referred. I invited the questioner to say more about what interested her, and she proceeded to speak eloquently and personally about her own identity in a context where discourses of identity were central to the discussion I wanted to facilitate. This was, in a way, my teacherly dream come true. Here was a student engaging very thoughtfully and vividly with the ideas I had asked the class to discuss. When she finished speaking I linked what she had said to particular theoretical terms that the class had come across. As I did so I chose to focus on one aspect of identity - race - which she had said was not important to her, while I was silent about another aspect of identity - religion - which she had said was more important to her. Now I do not believe that this was a problem for her or for the class as a whole, but to me it illustrated very clearly that I had utilised my desire to treat students as equals in encouraging her to speak, but that I had also utilised my authority as teacher to close down one line of discussion in preference for another. Thus, my valuation of her experience might be understood as exemplifying processes of empowerment, but such valuation was partial in ways that might simultaneously be construed as disempowering.

Put another way I drew on my personal power to foster a sense of mutual respect and then I used my institutional power to guide the discussion in a particular direction. I would suggest that teachers necessarily and productively engage both kinds of power.

This example illustrates the interweaving of institutional and personal power in ways that complicate processes of empowerment. It also highlights the recruitment of students into practices of self-narration and personal disclosure, on which a good deal of my teaching depends. In this context, it is not surprising that I have often reflected on my own practices of disclosure and non-disclosure in the classroom. Like many feminist teachers, I have sometimes faced direct questioning about my personal life, or been aware of speculation about it (compare England 1999). When such questions come from students who have disclosed a good deal about themselves either in class sessions or in one-to-one meetings, I have, not surprisingly, felt some obligation to reciprocate. Even without the pressure of direct questions, I have sometimes wondered if I should talk about myself in order to encourage students to talk about themselves, or to dampen speculation about me, or to equalise social relations in the classroom. I have, however, come to favour caution about such strategies because I think that feminist teachers can often make better use of our positions in classrooms by *withholding* information about ourselves than by engaging in self-narration in the same way as we encourage students to do. I offer two arguments for favouring non-disclosure over disclosure on the part of the teacher, concerned with power asymmetries and the signification of difference respectively, but first briefly clarify what I mean by personal (or self-) disclosure.

Teachers and students always communicate a great deal about themselves without opening their mouths: our names, physical appearance, clothing and comportment all generate impacts and “say” potentially important things about us. When we speak, non-verbal aspects of our speech, such as accent and timbre often “speak” at least as loudly as our words (Delph-Januirek 1999; McDowell 1990). Teachers, therefore, cannot help but reveal a lot of information about themselves. I use the phrase “personal disclosure” to refer to the active *narration* of stories of self, including particular experiences, incidents, and self-ascribed identities, such as stating one’s sexual orientation. To avoid the awkward proliferation of adjectives, I sometimes contract this phrase to “disclosure”, but in all cases I am referring only to acts of narrative self-disclosure.

I have described reciprocity as a possible factor in support of personal disclosure by teachers. However, the scope for reciprocity between teachers and students is always limited by the institutional contexts of higher education, which recruit the former into positions of academic authority, and the latter as supplicants seeking the eventual bestowal of academic qualifications. While both parties may seek to resist, subvert and exceed these academic hierarchies, they also actively “buy into” them, and cannot entirely avoid their grip without also relinquishing their institutional positions (as teachers or students). Thus, however much I draw upon personal values and personal power to cultivate mutual respect within the classroom, I must also work with these asymmetries. I am therefore a different kind of participant in the class from the students that I teach and this militates against relations of reciprocity. Indeed because my role is different I need to be alert to the fact that whatever I say is likely to be accorded a different kind of importance from what others say: much of the time my capacity to occupy the position of teacher depends upon this privileging of my voice, and it cannot necessarily be “turned off” in relation to personal statements. It is therefore important to be alert to the risk that undue weight, or authority, might be attached to views, and to any personal material, offered from the position of teacher. Personal disclosure from the place of the teacher, therefore, does not work in the same way as disclosures made by students, and teachers need to consider this asymmetry in relation to decisions about whether and what they say about themselves.

Turning to my second point, however diverse the students we teach may be, it is very unlikely that classes of 20 to 30 students will themselves contain the range of positions and experiences about which feminist teachers wish to teach. In my own case, as I have already noted, many of those I teach come from relatively privileged backgrounds. In this context I want to raise awareness of differences and inequalities, without either over-burdening the few students who come from disadvantaged backgrounds or reproducing the exclusion of those not represented within the student body at all. For example I do not teach many welfare-dependent lone parents or the young people they raise, but I want to

encourage those I do teach (whose career ambitions and prospects often point towards influential positions that might make a difference to policies and practices in the future) to recognise such experiences without pathologising or exoticising them. In this context, I can use my own position in the classroom to educate students about social inequalities not only didactically, but also more experientially. What I mean by this is that I can mobilise our unequal power within the institution in order to encourage students, at least fleetingly, to identify with those less privileged than themselves. Thus my peculiar authority within the classroom can serve as a reminder of what it feels like to be relatively disempowered: while it does not generate insight into the specific experiences of excluded others, it may nevertheless enhance the capacity for partial recognition across difference. To achieve this, I need to emphasise power-inflected differences between myself and those I teach. It is important to add that I do not simply want to reproduce and perpetuate institutionalised power dynamics, but I want to create spaces within which students can reflect on their own and others' complex positioning within regimes of social inequality. This is one reason why personalising institutional power in ways that cultivate mutual respect is so important.

Non-reciprocity in relation to personal disclosure, in the context of mutual respect, may be one way of attempting to represent what Iris Marion Young (1990) has called "unassimilated otherness" within the classroom. Of course it is not the only strategy available and there may well be instances where the case for teachers to disclose personal information about themselves takes precedence over the rationale for non-disclosure. Indeed my point is that the question of personal disclosure can usefully be considered in relation to the maintenance of productive tension between institutional and personal aspects of power in university classrooms.

To elucidate what I mean, I want to draw on an example when I *did* use personal disclosure strategically, partly to open up discussion at a moment when I felt distinctly stuck. On this occasion the class had been discussing experiences of race and gender in urban life, and over a series of contributions, I became deeply uneasy about the use of the pronouns "us" and "them", which I thought entailed at least two different appeals, neither of which had been contested by successive speakers: I understood one speaker to have differentiated between a racially unmarked "us" and a racially marked "them", the next to have differentiated between a liberal, not-racist "us" as opposed to a racist "them", and a third to have reverted to the former differentiation. I was especially taken aback by the apparent assumption that none of "us" were racially marked because I had assumed (too easily I now realised) that this student group understood its members to be differently racialised. I felt torn between waiting for one of the students to trouble the assumptions being made and intervening myself. I thought I witnessed one student silently mouth a question challenging the use of the first person plural, and, while I wanted to make space for her to engage audibly in this discussion, I was acutely aware of the risk of calling upon her to "represent" racialised "others". I decided to intervene myself, saying that I had noticed, and was troubled by, the use of "us" and "them", inviting students to comment on the distinctions being drawn. My intervention was swiftly taken as criticism by the last student to speak before my intervention. I attempted to counter this, but – quite possibly because I sounded as taken aback as I felt – the entire class fell silent. My sense was that I had unintentionally intensified the silencing effect of the rhetoric of "us" and "them". At this point, I could, in theory, have proceeded in any number of ways. I cannot provide a clear account of why I decided on the course of action I did take, but, "thinking on my feet", I decided to draw on my own multiple identities to illustrate some of the complexities of belonging, privilege and outsidership. To do this, in addition to stating some things about myself that were already known, notably my gender, my whiteness, and that I was brought up in England (hence my English accent), I disclosed that I am the daughter of an immigrant Jewish father who had "married out", and that I live with my partner who I described as Scottish but to whom I did not attribute a gender. I chose these disclosures on the spur of the moment because I wanted especially to trouble assumptions about racialisation. I then asked the students to talk in small groups about their own sense of belonging or not in relation to any categories of identity they chose.

In describing this moment in a classroom I do not want to make any claim about the in/appropriateness of my interventions, or the possible alternatives (see for example Cook 2000). With the benefit of hindsight, I think that I used personal disclosure in an attempt to reverse a situation created by the stultifying effect of my first intervention. However, my intention here is not to conduct a post-mortem but to offer a brief analysis of the

operation of power. First, in my initial intervention, I drew on my institutional power as teacher to challenge students to reflect critically on their own assumptions. I had hoped that the manner in which I spoke – my personalisation of institutional power – would enable students, whether or not they had already contributed, to come into the discussion in ways that either troubled or stepped outside “us” and “them” formulations. This did not happen, and instead my intervention was declared by one speaker as an accusation, perhaps a public shaming, and therefore something closer to a mild abuse of power. Whatever other students were thinking, this was not publicly contested. I wanted students to continue the discussion; they, as a silent collective, resisted. My first intervention, together with its reception, could therefore be read as polarising the power dynamics of the classroom: we were collectively, albeit unwittingly, enacting an “us” and “them” dynamic between teacher and students. This, I would suggest, manifested the temporary loss of any potentially productive tension between institutional and personal aspects of power: there was no “space” available in which to unsettle the enactment of the crudest forms of institutional power.

This example also illustrates some of the complexities around strategies for responding to quiet students. Before my first intervention, I had guessed that at least one student had chosen to remain silent despite having something important and challenging to say. I wanted to respect her choice because my judgement was that the classroom had become an environment hostile to anyone who experienced themselves as racialised. I interpreted the silence that followed my first intervention as collective resistance and responded to it initially by filling it with my voice and then by breaking up the large group as a means of defusing what I perceived to be the “us” and “them” dynamic. Frequently the reasons for individual students remaining silent are far from obvious, and for that reason I often prefer to use methods that engage the group as a whole rather than particular individuals. Turn-taking is one useful device, whether used within a large group or small groups. One of the effects is sometimes to shift the focus of the “problem” from quiet students to verbally dominant ones (who struggle to wait for their “turn”), and to highlight how some students feel compelled to fill quite short silences whereas others need a moment of silence before they feel able to speak (also see Nairn 1997).

Turning next to my use of personal disclosure, what I said was highly selective and targeted. It was not intended to encourage further curiosity about me, and did not solicit direct questions of that kind. Indeed judging by what ensued in the session concerned, it achieved what I had hoped it would, namely to solicit from students more complex narratives about their positioning in relation to (racialised and gendered) notions of belonging and outsidership. Space for exploration had been re-opened. So why did my second intervention “work”, and how does it relate to my argument against the use of personal disclosure by teachers? I would argue that my use of myself as an example helped to prise open the polarisation between “us” and “them” enacted in the classroom not because of the specific content of what I said but because I (re)personalised my institutional authority in a way that at least suggested scope for identification with me and dis-identification against me along dimensions other than our respective status as teacher and student (compare Skeggs 1997). It might have been enough to limit myself to aspects of my social identity that were already well known to the class; that I chose to go further probably encouraged students to problematise categories such as “white”, “English” and “Scottish”. More importantly, because I had not previously used personal disclosure in a comparable way, my use of self was anything but routine, thereby helping to break a difficult dynamic. It follows from this that self-disclosure by teachers needs to be used judiciously because it constitutes what might be regarded as a “scarce resource”. Put another way, in my work with students, including perhaps especially students from relatively privileged backgrounds, I need to make the most of the power inequalities of the classroom rather than necessarily seeking to minimise them.

Personal disclosure is an aspect of what is often called “self-reflexivity” in research literatures. I have used the term “personal disclosure” because my focus is narrower. However, I think that my argument has purchase in relation to research relationships as well as classroom relationships. I therefore agree with Audrey Kobayashi (2003, 349) when she argues that “there are some limits as to how useful public reflexivity is, either to encouraging analytical exchanges with other scholars, or to advancing an activist agenda that might improve the world”. I have argued, similarly, for caution in relation to self-disclosure in the classroom, encouraging teachers to consider its disadvantages as well as

it potential value. I have suggested that teaching about social inequalities in the classroom requires us to mobilise our power strategically and not necessarily to minimise inequalities and hierarchies. Although feminist academics seek to break down hierarchies – for example, in questioning where and in whom knowledge resides – we also need to foster awareness of the social inequalities and power structures within which our lives are lived, and which necessarily pervade the contexts in which teaching and learning takes place. I have used a necessarily crude distinction between institutional power and its personalisation in an attempt to explore how we negotiate some of the tensions that flow from this combination.

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