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The Knitivism Club

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Introduction

*knitivism:* 1 a doctrine emphasizing vigorous or militant knitting activity, e.g. the use of knitting in mass demonstrations, urban interventions, in controversial, unusual or challenging ways, esp political, causes. 2 the systematic use of knitting for political ends.

Knitting is often perceived of as a gendered and aged activity and conjures up images of grandmothers in rocking chairs, wool socks, and baby blankets. However, in the past decade alone, knitting has seen an increase in popularity among youth. While the do-it-yourself (DIY) movement and third-wave feminism are contributing factors to the knitting revival (Wills, 2007), other reasons include a new approach to connectivity and resistance. In a rapidly changing and unpredictable world, characterized by, among other factors, the unprecedented expansion of global flows and patterns of social interaction, youth are increasingly involved in complex forms of interconnection. While some scholars believe that today’s youth resistance seems obscure, transitory, and disorganized (Harris, 2008), knitivism demonstrates that youth have new ways of taking on politics and culture that may not be recognizable under more traditional frameworks. It is in these unfamiliar and unrecognizable gaps that pedagogies of touch take shape (Springgay, 2008).

Interested in contemporary artists who use knitting to resist and subvert dominant codes of gender, knowledge, and meaning making, Stephanie asked the students in her women’s studies class on feminist pedagogy and research to come to class each week with a pair of knitting needles and some yarn. She imagined her students knitting while discussing the week’s readings and shared responses to weekly themes. On a very basic level, she hoped that if everyone had something to do with their hands, the readings might seem less challenging, foreign, and out of context from their everyday lives. Moreover, she sought ways to introduce bodily knowledge and tactility into an undergraduate theory and seminar class. The knitting drew the class into a circle—a knitting circle—and feminist discussions were punctured by the click click of needles. In addition, by learning to knit alongside her students, Stephanie wanted to shift some of the power dynamic in the classroom, changing her role as “expert” and “teacher” to “co-learner” and “co-participant.”
Over time Stephanie introduced the students to contemporary knitters and knitting groups such as Cat Mazza, Janet Morton, and Knitta, exploring how their knitted work embodied feminist theory and pedagogy. As the semester unfolded, the students themselves decided to take their knitting public, which included knitting on the bus, tagging trees on campus, and holding a knit-in for Darfur, thereby turning theory into praxis. At the end of the semester, three of the students from the class formed a knitivism club. The group has more than sixty active members that represent the diversity of the Penn State student body. While there were no male students in the feminist pedagogy course, a number of male students and students from various racial and ethnic backgrounds are active members of the knitivism club. Some student members were already civically minded: volunteering for the Centre County Women’s Resource Centre, organizing events like Take Back the Night, or participating in other campus groups such as Students for Justice for Palestine. However, many club members are simply drawn to the knitting, their processes of civic engagement developing over time. The knitivism club has organized a series of knit-in events including a knit-in to raise awareness on campus about sexual violence and a knit-in at a university hockey game to raise awareness about the genocide in Darfur. They rarely knit objects but are interested in the intersections between the peaceful act of knitting, rupturing public spaces with knitting in large groups and human rights activism.

In the following section, images and autobiographical reflections by two of the club organizers, Sarah and Nikki, are stitched together. Since the inception of the club, Stephanie has been video recording the knit-in events, interviewing club members, and documenting (through images and observational notes) the clubs’ meetings and campus activities. However, both the pedagogical work of knitivism and the research study on youth civic engagement are participatory and thus the voices and experiences of those involved needed to be heard. This chapter will conclude with a section written by Stephanie, reflecting on her understandings of knitivism as pedagogies of touch. For more extensive information on the knitivism club please visit their website at http://knitivism.weebly.com/.

Voices of Knitivism

Nikki

Knitting in a Women’s Studies class created an interesting dynamic. Not recognizing the possibility of redefining the act of knitting, I originally thought that learning how to knit seemed somehow the antithesis of the progress of the feminist movement. However, once we learned how to knit, it became simply a peaceful activity in which we could all partake while discussing feminist pedagogy. Throughout our study of feminist pedagogy, I came to view our knitting as an opportunity to redefine gender stereotypes and together, as a Women’s Studies class, we were able to figure out a way to not only re-define the act of knitting but use it as a form of activism to support political issues.

Knitting is stereotypically viewed as a gendered activity performed only by women within the private or domestic realm. By taking knitting into a public realm, we were inevitably chal-

Figure 36.1 Photo: Stephanie Springgay.
lenging this stereotype. Moreover, because knitting is often expected to remain within the private realm, it lends itself well to activism because it draws attention. Penn State has a student body that is relatively inactive and apathetic toward political movements, and I thought knitivism would offer an opportunity for people to get involved in supporting various human rights issues. Knitivism is unique, avant garde, and incredibly innovative. Students are often attracted to new ideas like knitivism, and moreover, the peaceful nature of knitting provides a welcoming environment for all those interested. Moreover, knitting can attract a wide range of people from those who simply enjoy knitting as an art, to those dedicated to political activism, to those curious about learning more about both. Unlike some of the other activist clubs on campus, knitivism does not aim to make a show or cause conflict but rather to disrupt public space in a peaceful manner that raises awareness about human rights issues.

At the heart of knitivism is the peaceful act of knitting. It is this tranquil backbone that defines knitivism, more so than the idea of producing actual knitted pieces. We have knitted pieces, such as scarves, which we donated to the women’s shelter, but the idea of knitivism is not simply to produce items but rather to redefine knitting as a form of activism rather than a domestic chore. The inherently peaceful act lends itself well to activism in that it does not necessarily cause conflict like a protest or sit-in, but rather it welcomes spectators into the conversation.

What makes knitting a useful tool for activism is its stereotype of being a benign and private act. By taking this act to the public realm, we disrupt public space and thereby attract attention. In the knitivism club, we knit specifically for human rights issues, in common and highly populated areas of Penn State’s campus. Thus far, we have held events to raise money and awareness about the women in refugee camps in Darfur, and sexual assault on Penn State’s campus. Our knitivism events also collected and donated clothes and cell phones for a local women’s center in Centre County. We intend to continue with knitting for human rights, which can range from domestic to international political issues and across the spectrum from gay rights to indigenous rights.

Knitivism inherently challenges the gender stereotypes associated with knitting, which, at heart, embodies feminist thought. Moreover, knitivism works to raise awareness about many issues that are connected with women’s issues. Human rights issues inevitably affect women and thus our work in knitivism club is not solely political but feminist in aim. We work to raise awareness about issues and people who are not receiving the aid that they need. Feminist...
pedagogy acknowledges the intersectionality of these varying human rights issues and thus kni-
tivism is inherently a feminist activity.

Sarah

Learning to knit was not an easy task for me, and I was definitely frustrated and confused by
the concept when I first heard of it in my Women’s Studies class. My frustration and confusion
grew more from the disappearance of conformity in the classroom than from the task itself.
Never before had I been in a class where we had a choice throughout as to the direction of the
curriculum. Stephanie created a classroom in which feminism allowed discussion, and knitting
provided us with a medium for stimulating vigorous conversations and creative thought.

The class further developed into a discussion of using the act of knitting as a form of peace-
ful protest. We observed an organization of American artists called, “Knitta Please” who use
their knitting purely as a disruption of public space by tagging or leaving their knitted objects
in public spaces. This group takes the private, socialized, and gendered task of knitting and
allows it to have a voice outside of the home. Our goal as a class was to also give our knitting
this voice.

We decided to take our knitting outside of the classroom, removing it from the private sphere
and into the public. We knitted while riding public transportation and throughout campus. We
tagged trees on campus with our work and held a knit-in for Darfur in which we peacefully pro-
tested the genocide and provided a way for others to gain awareness of Darfur and to donate to
refugees. Knitting became a tool for us to reach out to the public in our community in a way that
has never been done before. Using knitting to protest is unheard of in this college town. In turn,
our protests may be quiet but we are seemingly heard often. We decided to take this concept of
peaceful and artistic protest and continue it through a University club. We have decided to dedi-
cate ourselves to the defense of human rights because we gained from our feminist pedagogy
class a sense of community and unity. Knitting for peace gave us a great way to take what we
learned in the classroom and move it into the public space.

We wanted to create a means of activism on our campus that could achieve similar goals of
other groups but in a very unique way. Our hope was to inspire our generation and lift their
spirits to a form of activism that welcomes them to join. We created a club in which the club
itself has a voice in what decisions are made for events and activities. We took these ideals from
our learned feminist pedagogy in the classroom and attempted to create this similar shared and
communal effort in the public eye for humanitarian efforts. Knitting is not just a relaxing and
peaceful act. Knitting is voices speaking out against the many injustices to human kind around
the world to create a better sense of global community through a peaceful shared act.

Feminist Pedagogies of Touch

As a teacher, I desire to create a classroom space in which theory is lived not only in the class-
room, but in the relationships and encounters between people. Favoring classrooms that foster
listening (Jones, 2004), accusation (Mayo, 2007), and critical dialogue (Ellsworth, 1989), I invite
my students to experience bodily ways of knowing, through such things as performance art or
media production.

Materializing bodily experiences in the classroom initiates new possibilities, new ways for
“bodies to matter” (Butler, 1993). This type of work may open up the possibility of pedagogi-
cal practices that attempt to work across the contradictions between self and other, private and
public, body and image, bearing witness to these contradictions, while inviting students to bring them together, to examine them, to experiment with engaging them differently in the world. Shifting the terms of representation, knitting and all of its tensions and contradictions may eventually produce transforming ideas—ideas that may work towards thinking about the world relationally, where “the goal is not to undo our ties to others but rather to disentangle them; to make them not shackles but circuits of recognition” (Gonick, 2003, p. 185). Knitting as an active reworking of embodied experience involves pedagogies of touch (Springgay, 2008) where knowing is constantly interrupted and deferred “by the knowledge of the failure-to-know, the failure to understand, fully, once and for all” (Miller, 2005, p. 130). It is the unthought, which is felt as intensity, as becoming, and as inexplicable that reverberates between self and other, teacher and student, viewer and image, compelling a complex interstitial meaning making process.

In proposing pedagogies of touch I draw on poststructuralist feminist pedagogies (Villaverde, 2008) and theories of inter-embodiment and relationality (Ahmed & Stacey, 2001; Grosz, 1994; Weiss, 1999). In her critique of critical pedagogy, Ellsworth (1989) reminds educators that pedagogies need to move away from “reason” and recognize that thought, knowledge, and experience are always partial—“partial in the sense that they are unfinished, imperfect, limited; and partial in the sense that they project the interests of ‘one side’ over others” (p. 305). Shifting emphasis from “empowerment,” “voice,” “dialogue,” “visibility” and notions of “criticality,” poststructuralist pedagogies problematize partiality “making it impossible for any single voice in the classroom...to assume the position of center or origin of knowledge or authority, of having privileged access to authentic experience or appropriate language” (p. 310). Rather, as Villaverde (2008) suggests, it is important that pedagogies engage with “dangerous dialogues” in “order to expose the complexity of inequity and our complicity in it” (p. 125). Deborah Britzman (1998) asks questions about the production of “normalcy” in the pedagogical encounter, creating the myth of the stable and unitary body/subject as the centre from which all else deviates. Unhinging the body from such normalizing practices, how might pedagogies of touch “think the unthought of normalcy” (Britzman, 1998, p. 80)?

Unsettling and rupturing the limits of normalcy and representation pedagogies of touch help us “get underneath the skin of critique...to see what grounds have been assumed, what space and time have remained unexamined” (Roy, 2005, p. 29). Furthermore, pedagogies of touch stress the need for civic engagement where transformations are connected to body and flesh and to a perception of the subject as becoming, incomplete, and always in relation (Springgay, 2008). Thus, civic action becomes unpredictable and adaptive (as opposed to enduring and universal) and it is what happens when we venture into the complexities of the unthought.

Knitivism is important for the ways it highlights how young people materialize their own bodied subjectivities, imaginations, and communities, and produce the new conditions for how they live their lives. Moreover, it embraces Nadine Dolby and Fazal Rizvi’s (2008) arguments that classrooms are no longer the sole pedagogical site for youth. To be relevant, responsive, and critically engaged we need to think about pedagogy as something in the making, as an embodied, experiential, and relational process that is irregular, peculiar, or difficult to classify only when viewed from the centre of dominant educational discourses.

Whether knitting or engaging in other relational encounters, pedagogies of touch enhance moments of knowing and being that are unfamiliar. Touch becomes a commitment to knowing that is engaged, emphasizing bodied encounters that are interrogative and unsettling. Pedagogies of touch open up feminist classrooms for other ways of understanding based on sensations and flows of interconnecting spaces, endowing education with contradictions and complicated knowledge.
References


