TEACHING FEMINIST GEOGRAPHY
Practices and perspectives

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Introduction

Forty years ago, feminist geography teaching began on the first elective courses on ‘women’s studies in geography or ‘feminist geography’ at a few universities in Aotaroa New Zealand, Denmark, India, Netherlands, the UK and the US (Peake 1989). These courses were created in response to the demands of critical feminist geography students. They were taught by a few feminist geography lecturers, who were able to organize them despite the resistance of the mainstream geographers in their departments.

In the past forty years, feminist geography teaching has undergone significant changes. Nowadays feminist geography, although still absent from some areas of the world, is taught in many countries across the globe, partly as a separate elective course and partly integrated into core geography teaching. Feminist geography teaching is much more diversified than in the initial period. This chapter focuses on the diverse practices and perspectives on feminist geography teaching and argues that what we teach and how we teach are highly dependent on where we teach feminist geography (see overviews of feminist geography across the world in Journal of Geography in Higher Education (Peake 1989), Espace, Populations, Sociétés (Creton 2002), Belgeo (Garcia-Ramon and Monk 2007), Australian Geographer (Johnston and Longhurst 2008) and International Research in Geographical and Environmental Education (Monk 2011)).

What we teach: the changing content of feminist geography courses

In the initial period, ‘making women visible’ and a focus on inequalities between women and men were the main aspects of feminist geography teaching. Feminist geography teaching started as a critique on mainstream geography ‘excluding half of the human in human geography’ (Monk and Hanson 1982). In a report on the development of feminist geography in German-speaking countries, Buehler and Baechli (2007) distinguish four stages in the field of gender and geography: 1. Women’s studies, aiming to include women’s lives in the discipline of geography; 2. Gender relations studies with a focus on the analysis of the (re)production of gender relations; 3. Men’s and masculinity studies; and 4. Gender studies, focusing on the construction of gender identities (see also Little 2007).
Early handbooks on feminist geography focused on feminism, gender and differences between men and women as its core concepts. Core themes at that time were the gender division of paid and unpaid work, women and the city, and women and development (see for example WSGG 1984). Handbooks and courses referred to women in general yet in practice focused on the lives of White, middle-class, heterosexual mothers with children in cities, and on the ‘others’: women in developing countries. A strong engagement with feminist movements and community activism and a commitment to social change characterized feminist geography teaching. In the initial period, feminist geography courses were taught by female staff for female students. Later, with the introduction of themes about men, masculinity and sexuality, male staff and students became engaged in feminist geography teaching as well.

Postmodernism and the ‘cultural turn’ in geography transformed feminist geography teaching, while at the same time feminist geography contributed to this ‘cultural turn’. Nowadays, the construction of gender identities, political structures and power relations and the deconstruction of gender and other binaries usually constitute the content of feminist geography courses. Cultural diversity and intersectionality form the core concepts. Feminist geography is influenced by Kimberlé Crenshaw’s conceptualization of intersectionality, which she defines as ‘the various ways in which race and gender intersect in shaping structural, political and representational aspects of violence against women of color’ (Crenshaw 1993, 1244). Crenshaw referred to two dimensions, gender and race, but the list of social dimensions has extended and includes now class, sexual orientation, age, ability, religion, geographic and linguistic origin. In line with the focus on cultural diversity and intersectionality, gender and geography teaching is, in many cases, integrated into broader courses on cultural diversity or development studies.

Definitions of intersectionality use geometric and geographical metaphors: crossroads (Hovorka 2015); axes (O’Neill Gutierrez and Hopkins 2015); lines (Metcalfe and Woodhams 2012); and mapping (Crenshaw 1993). These metaphors suggest that someone occupies one position on the line of gender and one on the line of race, and that a multiple identity is where the lines cross. This is a problematic way of presenting multiple identities and experiences of inequality and marginalization. As Mieke Verloo (2006, 211) argues, it ‘assumes an unquestioned similarity of inequalities, to fail to address the structural level and to fuel political competition between inequalities’, therefore runs the risk of marginalizing gender.

Feminist methodology forms a core element of courses in feminist geography. Feminist geography has developed a broad array of qualitative research methods: in-depth interviewing; ethnographies; action research; and a discursive analysis of spoken, written and visual material. Linda Peake (2015), however, criticizes both feminist geographers’ dismissal of quantitative methods and the association of quantitative techniques with masculine research practices. She argues that quantitative methods and GIS can be very valuable to feminist geography, as long as:

it can yield knowledge that is reliable, effective, and non-oppressive to women or to other socially marginalized or disempowered people; that it honours feminists’ commitments to taking seriously the experiences of these people on their own terms; that it addresses differences while retaining a capacity to draw general, even law-like conclusions, but conclusions that derive from specific historical and geographical contexts and not a generalized notion of women; and that it produces knowledge that can lead to transformative action in the direction of more democratic social relations.

Peake 2015, 262

In teaching about gender and intersectionality, we might therefore focus less on the dimensions and (often binary) categories and more on the power relations involved. Intersectionality
matters because of the implications of inequality, marginalization, exclusion, discrimination, prejudice, power and hegemony. In teaching, I emphasize, it is important not only to focus on patterns and mechanisms of hegemony and subordination (who is marginalized, subordinated, how and why) but also to highlight the agency, the way that subordinated people or groups are using their power and counteracting hegemony and their activism to create spaces of resistance in which the dominant culture is contested and reversed. It is important to give students, as the future generations of geographers, a perspective on transforming society and space.

**How we teach: feminist pedagogy in geography teaching**

A common starting point in a gender course is an assignment in which students are invited to reflect on the concept of gender from their own personal experience. They are asked to reflect on their own geographical and social background and to give examples of gender bias, gender blindness or gender prejudice and discrimination in their personal life as a starting point for more theoretical discussions.

Feminist pedagogy is usually characterized as non-hierarchical, using personal experiences and intersectional knowledges of students in a diverse classroom, with learning and teaching as instruments of empowerment and social change (Brown et al. 2014; Webber 2006). Feminist classrooms can be seen as ‘heterotopias’ (Kannen 2014), as safe places in which students feel free to speak about issues that they do not feel comfortable to speak about in other classes, together with: readings from different perspectives (Spencer 2015); student-led classes and field-trips (Van Hoven et al. 2010); assessment based on essay writing and reflection journals, instead of written exams (Lee 2012); participatory action research as a teaching tool (Grant and Zwier 2011); engagement with diverse communities, community organizations and social movements (Burke et al. 2017) ‘about, with and from’ (Tallon 2011); and unorthodox modes of expression, such as video-making, rap and blog-writing.

Feminist geography teachers adhere to these characteristics of feminist pedagogy yet at the same time share some ambivalences with respect to these characteristics. The main ambivalences refer to issues of hierarchy, safe classrooms, diverse classrooms, the role of fieldwork and separation versus integration strategies.

Non-hierarchical feminist pedagogy implies that students are learners and teachers, and that teachers are also learning. Feminist classrooms are indeed usually more inclusive, interactive and collaborative, and students usually have more impact on shaping course outcomes than in ‘mainstream’ teaching. Kath Browne is nevertheless critical about incorporating private, personal experiences of students into feminist geography classrooms: ‘The assumption that including the personal necessarily contests hegemonic power relations is problematic’ (Browne 2005, 352). Feminist geography courses as part of a university curriculum are inevitably hierarchical (Webber 2006). The teacher is responsible for the course, is assessing it and has to decide whether or not a journal, blog or video is good, or whether or not students are successful in connecting personal experiences and theoretical concepts. Feminist geography teachers are embedded in an educational system in which boards of examiners, university managers and external assessment committees are meticulously controlling the quality of the education, assessment and procedures.

A second ambivalence regards the issue of ‘safe’ classrooms. Students in feminist classrooms are supposed to be free to speak about personal experiences and need a safe environment to do so. Several authors, however, refer to the feelings of discomfort, in particular for those students who are becoming aware of their privileged position for the first time of their life. Audrey Kobayashi reports on her experiences as a teacher of classrooms on racism: ‘I feel
sometimes as though I carry a bomb into class, and if I am unsuccessful in establishing the right degree of comfort (or discomfort) it will explode with irreversible results’ (Kobayashi 1999, 180). Stephanie Simon (2009) reports similar experiences after showing Paris is Burning, a movie on drag balls in New York in the 1980s. She chose this movie to start a discussion on compulsory heterosexual urban spaces, but it created strong feelings of discomfort and silence in the classroom. Later, she was able to have a meaningful conversation, starting from the feelings of discomfort. Can classrooms be safe and uncomfortable at the same time? Or do we need (a certain degree of) discomfort to challenge existing stereotypes and hegemonies, and should we give up our claim of ‘safe spaces’?

A third ambivalence concerns the issue of homogeneous versus heterogeneous classrooms. For geography in particular, as a discipline with a focus on diversity, to create a fruitful platform for discussing issues of gender and intersectionality a diverse classroom is necessary. As Glen Elder argues (1999, 88): ‘queer theorists argue that geography is useful for thinking about identity because identity is more fluid than fixed … queerness captures a delightful sense of unbounded chaos and uncertainty and it helps me to think about identity.’

Other authors are more critical about the issue of diverse classrooms. William New and Michael Merry (2014) refer to Allport, who already in 1954 had formulated five conditions to avoid stereotypes: equal status between persons of different backgrounds; common goals; intergroup cooperation instead of competition; mutual recognition of authority; and personal interactions between persons of different backgrounds. New and Merry report on a pedagogical experiment by Alison Jones in Aotearoa New Zealand, which had separate subsections for Pākehā (White students, usually of European descent) and Māori (Indigenous Aotearoa New Zealand) students. The White students did not like it, because they missed the ‘minority’ experiences, while the Māori students felt relieved: in ‘the segregated setting they felt much more comfortable expressing themselves, without the pressure of becoming someone else’s “other”’ (New and Merry 2014, 215). Victoria Kannen recounts the ‘lone Other’ in the class. As the only male student in her classroom complains: ‘That’s why I am always asked to talk from the “guy” perspective – but why should I know it?’ Asking him to speak ‘on behalf of’ is problematic, because ‘it requires these students to use one of their identities as if it is separate from the rest of how they understand themselves and politicize it in a way that may not be comfortable or appropriate for them’ (Kannen 2014, 63).

In a session of the IGU Commission on Gender and Geography in 2013 in Kyoto, Ellen Hansen presented a paper on ‘Gender, Ethnicity, and White Privilege’. She shared her difficulties in her efforts to deal with teaching about White privilege in the context of an overwhelmingly White student and staff population at her university in a small town in Kansas, using the ‘privilege walk’ as a teaching instrument. This was one of the many situations in which I, coming from a non-Anglophone country, felt myself to be an ignorant outsider. I had never heard of a ‘privilege walk’; it looked like a very exotic teaching tool and I couldn’t imagine how to use it in my own teaching. Ellen Hansen explained that one of the male students became angry and accused her of assigning him a role that he did not deserve, leaving out issues of socioeconomic class. Her presentation at the IGU conference resulted in a lively debate in which many people exchanged experiences and suggestions about how to deal with such a situation. My ambivalent feelings are connected with the necessity, on the one hand, to use categories (often binary) to explain and discuss intersectionality and, on the other hand, to avoid such categorization and the use of binaries. The work of Maria Rodó-Zárate on ‘relief maps’ as a methodological tool to analyse and understand intersectionality is innovative, in this respect (Rodó-de-Zárate 2014). This methodology does not necessarily start with preconceived dimensions or categories, but with everyday experiences or feelings, using questions such as ‘Where do you usually go, which
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places do you like most/least, why don’t you like this place’, and only gradually introducing dimensions – ‘Would you feel the same if you were a boy/White’ – and so on. Students in diverse classrooms can compose, analyse and discuss individual as well as collective ‘relief maps’ (Baylina Ferré and Rodó-de-Zárate 2017).

A fourth ambivalence is the role of fieldwork in feminist geography teaching. Fieldwork is usually seen as fundamental to teaching geography, to ‘deepen experiences with place, broaden student learning, facilitate methodological training and enable the transfer of soft skills and tacit knowledge on what it means to be a professional geographer’ (Glass 2015, 485). Feminist geographers, however, criticize fieldwork practices in geography because of exclusionary processes, the tendency to exoticize and the priority of ‘sight’ above ‘cite’ (field observations above reading theories) (Monk 2000). Geographical fieldwork, in particular international fieldwork under demanding conditions, leads to the exclusion of specific groups of students such as female, gay, older or disabled students (Hall et al. 2004). According to Nairn (2005), fieldwork has the tendency to exoticize and to reinforce thinking in binary categories instead of contesting binaries. One way to counteract the ‘exoticizing’ outsider position of students during fieldwork is through a service-learning project of Ann Oberhauser (2008), in which students become insiders as volunteers in community organizations as a way to critically engage in and reflect on geographical concepts. Similar experiences are reported on the role of apprenticeships as a way of insider learning by Hanna Carlsson (2017), who used an apprenticeship to learn about the embodied construction of gender in the masculine spaces of boxing gyms.

A final ambivalence concerns the separation versus integration strategy already discussed in 1982 by Monk and Hanson: the ambivalence between teaching separate courses for groups of students who are really interested, and introducing gender issues into the usual courses for all geography students. They argue that integration is necessary. ‘Only in this way, we believe, can geography realize the promise of the profound social change that would be wrought by eliminating sexism’ (Monk and Hanson 1982, 11). Louise Johnson is more sceptical about integration: ‘As a result, putting gender into geography could well just add “women’s concerns” into an unaltered discipline and deflect the feminist focus on women’s oppression and patriarchal power’ (Johnson 1990, 16).

Feminist geographers usually have a dual strategy, and do both. They experiment with new forms of teaching and ‘radical’ literature in separate courses and use more mainstream pedagogy and ‘acceptable’ reading material, packed up in general courses on cultural, social, urban or development geography (Droogleever Fortuijn 2008). What is seen as experimental or mainstream and radical or acceptable, however, depends on the specific context in the faculty, university or country (Monk 2011). This brings me to my third point: where we teach feminist geography. How important is the learning environment? What are the differences between countries, universities within countries, faculties within universities and between monodisciplinary and interdisciplinary programmes?

Where we teach: the importance of the learning environment

Judith Timár and Éva Fekete report on the development of feminist geography in East-Central Europe. In the context of a traditional, male-dominated geography department, they use a strategy of ‘adding’ gender. They quote the Romanian experience of Sorina Voiculescu and Margareta Lelea, using mapping and counting as convincing and acceptable tools: ‘At first the students were very sceptical as to how gender can be part of geography. In order to build on familiar terrain, the course started with maps of indicators relevant to gender by nation-state’ (Timár and Fekete 2010, 779). The way that gender and intersectionality are taught and the
way that dimensions of intersectionality are seen as important depend on the learning environment. Judit Timár (2007) challenges the Anglo-American hegemony in feminist geography that prioritizes theory above empirical work and applied research, and symbolism above a focus on material world and spatial differences of gender inequalities. Saraswati Raju (2002, 173) criticizes postmodern Anglo-American feminist geography as ‘an academic luxury that we from the “Third World” cannot afford’.

As feminist geography courses in non-Anglophone countries make use of the abundant feminist geography literature in the English language, they are influenced by the way of thinking in Anglo-American feminist geography. At the same time, they struggle with the dominance of Anglo-American perspectives and the English language. Several authors refer to the linguistic challenge, in that the binary concepts of sex and gender do not exist in many other languages (Garcia-Ramon, Simonsen and Vaiou 2006; Huang et al. 2017; Louargant 2002), and a discussion with students in their own language about these concepts results necessarily in a different debate from that in a classroom with American or British students. Course content mirrors the specific focus of feminist geography in their own country, for example on: issues of work and everyday life in Nordic countries (Chardonnel and Sanders 2002); informal care relations and the family in South-European countries (Garcia Ramon, Simonsen and Vaiou 2006); poverty and livelihoods and gender and environment in Ghana (Awumbila 2007); social movements in Latin-American countries (Veleda da Silva and Lan 2007); rural–urban migration and transnationalism in East Asia (Chiang and Liu 2011; Yeoh and Ramdas 2014); the intersections between sexuality, post-coloniality, indigeneity and race in Australasia (Johnston and Longhurst 2008); or public and private spaces and migration and the diaspora in the Middle East (Fenster and Hamdan-Saliba 2013).

In 2009, I analysed the various ways that feminist geographers design assignments in which students are required to make observations on gendered behaviour and communication in public urban spaces (Droogleever Fortuijn 2009). The analysis resulted in two interpretations to understand the differences in teaching styles: one in connection with differences in national teaching cultures; and one in connection with disciplinary differences in teaching. The first interpretation identified both an Anglo-American informal, open, relational style with a focus on the research subject and theory, and a continental European more formal and protocolized style with a focus on the research object and methodology. The second interpretation focuses on differences in disciplinary embedding: the difference between geography embedded in a social sciences or humanities environment and geography in a planning, architecture or natural sciences environment.

Traditional academic cultures and male hegemony refer not only to the management and academic staff but to students, as well. Heidi Nast (1999) discussed the paradox of critical pedagogy and student-centred learning styles in a Catholic university with a traditional, male-dominated population of students who express their dissatisfaction in their student evaluations. In line with an integration strategy, Heidi Nast had included issues of gender, race, class and sexuality in her ‘Social Movements of the Twentieth Century’ course and found that the students complained: ‘Frankly, I was offended by much of the readings we had to do. I feel that I am attending a Catholic university and am appalled that the teachings of the Church are completely denounced in this course’ (Nast 1999, 105). A strategy of separation, however, is a vulnerable one in a neoliberal academic context in which the number of enrolled students represents the most important criterion in the decision on whether or not to keep an elective course on the programme. Robyn Longhurst (2011) and Maria Dolors Garcia-Ramon (2011) report on the tough competition of technical (GIS), planning, management, economics and business studies electives, at the expense of courses on gender. Robyn Longhurst and Lynda Johnston
emphasize the openness of the newly founded universities to feminist geography teaching, compared to the older, traditional universities, and the importance of a social sciences and humanities faculty (instead of a natural sciences faculty) to embedding it to open up opportunities to teach sexualities, space and place in Australasia (Longhurst and Johnston 2005; Johnston and Longhurst 2008).

Several authors (Chiang and Liu 2011; Drucker 2016; Fenster 2011; Timár and Fekete 2010) demonstrate that interdisciplinary programmes are much more open to gender issues than disciplinary geography programmes. Interdisciplinary programmes are more open to innovative teaching styles and have a more diverse teaching staff and student population. Robyn Longhurst (2011) notes that geography departments with a high percentage of female staff are more open to teaching feminist geography courses and to including gender themes and perspectives in core courses.

Conclusion

Due to the long history of feminist geography in Anglophone countries and the availability of an extensive body of feminist geography literature in the English language, Anglo-American feminist geography has had a strong impact globally. In many places in the world, feminist geography developed from women’s studies into postmodern feminist geography, with a focus on cultural diversity, intersectionality and identity.

Feminist geography teaching globally is characterized by a focus on gender relations and gender identities, a practice of using qualitative methodologies, non-hierarchical pedagogies and a strong commitment to social change. What we teach and how, however, are highly dependent on context. Teaching practices and perspectives differ between countries, linguistic communities, universities, faculties and (monodisciplinary or interdisciplinary) programmes. The course content in feminist geography teaching reflects the major social and political themes in a specific country. The context of the university (new or traditional, religious or secular), the faculty (geography embedded in a social sciences or a natural sciences faculty) and department (high or low proportion of female staff) have an impact on course content, methodology and pedagogy in feminist geography teaching. International contacts, meetings and exchanges of practices enable feminist geography teachers to learn about teaching practices and perspectives globally and to adjust them to fit the specific context in which they work.

Key readings


References


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