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Politicising the ‘personal’: the resistant potential of creative pedagogies in teaching and learning ‘sensitive’ issues

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ABSTRACT

Drawing upon student narratives gleaned through qualitative interviews, this paper argues that teaching and learning ‘sensitive’ issues surrounding gender and sexualities through ‘creative’ pedagogies can be a mode of resistance against the reproduction of problematic social discourses, and to the negative impacts of neoliberalism on student’s learning within higher education. The findings point to the importance of speaking about sensitive issues; the value of creative approaches for enhancing learning; and that together these can enable students to articulate an agenda for social change. Students saw the ‘personal as political’ – of sharing personal journeys around sensitive issues as important. They further spoke of ‘apathy’ in an neoliberal era of student ‘consumers’ and how this could curtail ‘creative’ teaching and jeopardise learning. Overall, it is argued that creative approaches to teaching and learning sensitive issues can evoke a resistant potentiality which exposes the ‘hidden injuries’ (Gill, 2010) of the neoliberal university.

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Introduction

Utilising narratives from undergraduate students within higher education, this paper argues that incorporating personal experiences, and adopting more ‘creative’ teaching methods, are two crucial dimensions to facilitating student’s learning of ‘sensitive’ issues. The research aimed to ascertain which teaching methods students considered to be most appropriate for the teaching and learning of sensitive issues related to gender and sexualities. This research problematic was of interest to me as both my research and teaching focus upon gender and sexualities. I teach a range of topics, including strip-ping; sex tourism; cosmetic surgery; dieting and body modifications. These topics themselves can be sensitive for students and also for myself. Yet, as Lowe and Jones (2010) argue, defining when a topic is ‘sensitive’ is complex, and just because a topic may not automatically seem sensitive, this does not preclude ‘any topic’ from *becoming* sensitive. If any topic can become ‘sensitive’, this begs the question of *how* different topics can be taught. With these considerations in mind, I sought to find out how students consider that sensitive topics can be conveyed. Whilst recent years have witnessed the development

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of more ‘creative’ methods to *research* gender and sexualities, I wanted to consider how ‘creative’ approaches could be applied within a learning environment. To this end, eight qualitative interviews were conducted with undergraduate students completing a degree in or combining Sociology.

The tensions of teaching and learning sensitive issues, together with the methods we employ to do so, are discussed in the next section. An overview of the methodology follows, including how the research interviews themselves sought to incorporate ‘creative’ dimensions, before the paper details the key findings. These were: the importance students placed upon speaking about sensitive issues; the elicitation of personal narratives as one of the most powerful means for understanding ‘sensitive’ topics; and that creating a ‘safe space’ in the classroom, including breaking down boundaries between student/lecturer, were key to enhancing learning. Students highlighted how creative pedagogical approaches can engender all of these aspects to some extent. Overall, it is argued that creative approaches have the potential to forge social change in two ways: through being a means to critique problematic social discourses, and, second, through challenging the neo-liberal learning landscape in which students are conceived as ‘consumers’ and/or as ‘instrumental’ learners.

Sensitive issues in teaching and learning about gender and sexualities

Within the Social Sciences, learning about the social construction of gender and the social character of sexualities is a crucial component of understanding society’s everyday practices, policies, and laws. Yet, learning about issues pertaining to gender and sexuality can be sensitive, or there may be a ‘sensitivity spectrum’ (Lowe and Jones 2010, 2), within which certain issues are perceived to be more sensitive than others. There is widespread acknowledgement that speaking about gender and sexualities is no longer a ‘taboo’ in the classroom. As Nolan and Oerton (2010, 6) argue, ‘[c]learly, changes in attitudes (and exposure) to sex, sexualities and material of a sexual nature within the wider social world will transpose into classroom settings insofar as they will be reflected in students’ responses’. As we are witnessing a ‘mainstreaming’ of sex in the cultural imaginary (Attwood 2009), it could be argued that it is straightforward to discuss sexuality in the classroom. However, the question of even *whether* to teach about sexualities, gender and sensitive issues pertaining to these concepts, is still a contested issue.

Miller-Young (2010, 1) points out that ‘[t]here seems to be ... an unspoken warning ... [an] overwhelmingly cautious approach [which] seems to be rooted in a sex-negative and phobic protectionism’, which she argues, ‘instantiates hierarchies of pedagogy and knowledge that feminist and queer scholars have tried to contest’. As Lowe and Jones (2010, 3) argue, ‘students should not be sheltered from sensitive issues’ as analysing uncomfortable but crucial societal issues is key to a Social Sciences degree. Similarly, Dalton (2010, 5) argues that ‘fear of offending or anxiety about dealing with student reactions prompt many teachers to place sensitive topics in the ‘too hard’ basket’. Yet, ‘teaching sensitive topics has a pedagogical value in raising consciousness about important phenomena’ (Dalton 2010, 5–6). Thus, it may be that we have an ‘ethical imperative’ (Miller-Young 2010, 3), or that we would be doing ‘one’s students a disservice’ (Dalton 2010, 6), *not* to teach sensitive issues.

Yet, *how* these issues are taught is important. Utilising a variety of methods and resources can ‘enhance the manner in which sensitive topics can be conveyed’ (Dalton

2010, 2). McLean and Abbas (2009, 538) document ‘a change in transmission towards biographical methods which guide students to understand sociological languages through the lens of their own experiences’. Within Sociology there has been a call to engage in ‘live’ (Back and Puwar 2013), or ‘creative’ methods, and these suggestions are being applied to teaching environments. Attention has more recently been paid to how lecturers mediate emotions in teaching sensitive issues (Lowe 2013), and to how the interactions between, and the *reactions to*, students within the classroom impact learning and teaching (Lowe 2014). This paper explores the pedagogical issues that are pertinent to student’s learning of sensitive issues surrounding gender and sexualities.

Methodology

As this research discussed sensitive issues, it was considered that qualitative interviews, rather than a focus group or workshop, were the most appropriate method for hearing students’ reflections. Eight qualitative interviews were conducted with students studying Sociology. Students were sampled through an email invitation sent to second and final year students, which included a description of the research, making it clear that this was a separate endeavour to teaching. First year students were not sampled as I felt students should have more experience of university-level education so they could make informed comments upon different teaching practices. Students from the second year responded and I interviewed all those who expressed interest, yet I received no responses from final year students. This could be because, at the mid-way point through their final year, students may have been too busy to participate in something ‘extra-curricular’. Further, I was teaching second year students at the time so they may have felt more inclined to participate (raising potential implications for the power relations underwriting the research process, see ethical discussion, below). It may also be because my second year module raises a wealth of issues around gender and sexualities, and thus it might be assumed that if students are interested in taking a module which discusses such issues as a matter of course, they may also be interested in discussing these outside of the classroom.

Both my own identity and my theoretical positioning will have impacted the recruitment of students and the interview process. I identify as a woman, in my late twenties (at the time of the interviews), white, from a working class background, and see my sexuality as fluid. I am open in classes about my identity and the way I am often read or categorised by others in my wider fieldwork. Theoretically, I invoke a queer feminist approach as a commitment to disrupt normative and binary ways of conceptualising gender and sexualities, whilst recognising the embodied effects of these constructions on people’s lives. This entails questioning why heterosexuality continues as an organising principle of society, and why heteronormative assumptions are reproduced, even at the same time as they may be resisted. My openness regarding my positionality to students may have enabled a range of people to come forward, as reflected in the relatively diverse sample given the small size. I aimed to speak with a plurality of students in terms of gender and sexuality identifications, although I did not want to make students ‘declare’ their identifications as I did not consider this ethical. Further, my queer feminist theoretical identification means that I see identity as a fluid process, and I therefore did not want to ‘box’ students in to categories. At the start of each interview I stressed that students

were not obliged to provide socio-demographic data, and could define themselves however they wished (see [Figure 1](#) for their self-identifications). I also considered that perhaps if they *refused* to categorise themselves this could in itself be interesting. This proved to be the case, facilitating conversations with students about developing a queer approach to teaching sexuality.

Whilst a semi-structured interview schedule was devised to facilitate comparisons between participants, the ‘conversational’ style of the interviews enabled students to elaborate upon issues that they considered important. Interviews lasted just under an hour on average, and took place in private rooms on campus to ensure a familiar environment, but rooms were not ‘normal’ teaching spaces or my office so that it was clearly separate from a teaching scenario. As Jones (2002, 137) notes, particularly with research that discusses sensitive topics, the challenge is for the researcher to provide a permissive context for participants to speak. Following Brannen (1988), sensitive topics were introduced gradually to reduce the likelihood of distressing participants. Further, I employed visual and sensory elicitation strategies to contextualise the discussion with ‘creative’ examples. Photo and sensory elicitation involves a photograph or a sensory object being introduced in the interview to be touched and/or discussed. The examples included [Figure 2](#), a photograph of ‘Hetero(not)normative Barbie Doll’. This was a method I encountered at a creative methods workshop at Coventry University in October 2014. We were given dolls to ‘dress’ to explore our own gender and sexual identifications. I created ‘myself’ in the doll, and in interviews explained to students the reasoning behind my decisions for styling the doll. We also discussed a photograph taken at a workshop that I participated in to experience dressing differently for our ascribed gender and collectively exploring how we felt being in public and perceived as ‘different’. Another example explored was ‘Bad Sex Media Bingo’ (Barker et al. n.d.), a teaching game which entails students watching TV and crossing off statements that are evident in the programme. I also showed students images taken during my research with an erotic dancer in which I photographed her performances and conducted a photo-elicitation interview to discuss meanings of her work (Pilcher 2012). The final example discussed was the production of student-led films, and we watched an extract of ‘Students at Work’ (Reinvention Centre, 2006). The data was thematically analysed. Interviews were organised into tables to compare responses to the same questions,

Student	Gender	Age	Ethnicity	Sexuality	Religion	Disabilities
Laura ³	Female	20	White and Black Caribbean	Heterosexual	N/A	N/A
Ben	Male	21	Black British	Asexual	Agnostic	N/A
Vicki	Female	21	Black	Heterosexual	Christian	N/A
Lucy	Female	19	White	Heterosexual	None	Dyslexic
Jen	Female	19	White British	--- ⁴	Atheist	---
Tom	Male	23	German	Homosexual	Officially a Catholic but rather a non-believer	None
Zara	Female	21	British	Straight	---	---
Karen	Female	20	British Asian	Heterosexual	Islam	No

Figure 1. Student-defined socio-demographic details.



Figure 2. Hetero(not)normative Barbie.

and themes were developed which arose from similar responses and which highlighted issues that were important to students.

This research received ethical approval from Aston University. Informed consent was ensured through a participant information leaflet and a consent form which students signed. To prevent participants being 'harmed' by the research, a requirement of the British Sociological Association (2002, 5), a list of support services (including a link to the counselling services on campus) was provided and verbally outlined. Students were given the right to withdraw from the research at any time prior to publication. I identify with a feminist ethical standpoint and consider reflexivity to be an important dimension to conducting ethical research. Within this paper I have thought reflexively about my positionality as a lecturer and my role in the research process. As Skeggs (1994, 79) notes, feminist research places an emphasis on power relations, yet it is 'naive to assume power relations between researcher and researched can be non-hierarchical'. For instance, students may feel obliged to participate as I am their lecturer, or may be reticent to discuss my teaching practice for fear of it affecting my perceptions of them and/or their work. However, students did discuss examples from my classes, and two students mentioned aspects that they thought had not worked well. The interviews therefore provided a space for students to think critically about and shape my teaching practice. Despite this, I am mindful that the researcher/lecturer is still in a 'superior' position as they exercise 'a right to be regarded as a knower in a way that respondents do not have' (Letherby 2011, 71).

The personal is political: the importance of speaking about sensitive issues and the value of personal experiences

Students highlighted a range of topics that could be deemed sensitive, including discussions of when things ‘go wrong’ in sexual practices (Lucy); what happens ‘behind closed doors’ (Zara); domestic violence; sexual violence; child abuse; LGBTQA experiences; age of consent; pornography; dating applications; sex work; and the intersection of religious beliefs with conceptions of appropriate sexualities. What was striking was that all participants agreed that despite these issues being sensitive, they were acutely important to learn within their degree. Their narratives reflect Lowe and Jones’ (2010, 6) argument that no topics should be seen as ‘off the curriculum’:

Things like pornography they’re tricky subjects but I think it might be a good idea for people to talk about them cause whether or not you like it they’re still a part of life ... and I think it’s important to think about why. (Jen)

It’s a sensitive issue but we’re at a stage now where ... we can talk about these issues and we should talk about them even if it’s something that society doesn’t want to talk about. (Ben)

Some of these issues, domestic violence, sexual violence, child sexual abuse, they are such problematic issues that we need to talk about them, we don’t solve anything by not talking about it, how would we advocate for change? (Lucy)

These comments reflect the student’s recognition that these are difficult topics, but also their awareness that a commitment to social justice requires the critical analysis of difficult phenomena. Students particularly valued how speaking about social issues can tap into the personal lives of students, and how this can enable them to ‘make sense’ of their lives and their peers’. As Jen says, ‘it’s important to hear about people’s experiences ... to think about what you’ve learnt in a lecture and apply it to people’s experiences cause that’s quite powerful and you’ll always remember it’. Three participants discussed a moment in class when a student opened up about her experiences, and how this had affected their understanding of the topic. As Jen says ‘I really respect her for bringing that up cause they’re not really the sort of experiences that you hear ... it was sensitive because they were personal experiences ... but it was important to hear about it’. Similarly, two students valued this moment for understanding how societal discourses impact on ‘real’ people’s lives. Personal experiences were valued for how they enabled students to understand experiences different from their own. As Laura articulates, ‘I think you need to see it from a different perspective in order to understand it cause otherwise it’s something you’ll never relate to cause you think it’ll never happen to you’. Further, for some students this connection of the ‘personal’ to public issues can be read as a politicised act, articulating the feminist sentiment that ‘the personal is political’. As Lucy says, hearing other student’s personal experiences is a means to critique ‘dominant ideas’.

Creating opportunities to speak about sensitive issues

It is particular approaches within the classroom that become crucial for learning about sensitive issues, and for eliciting these personal narratives. Before discussing student’s reflections on ‘creative’ approaches, I highlight some issues that emerged pertaining to

opportunities to learn about sensitive issues, namely: theoretical and practical approaches of the lecturer; creating a 'safe' learning space; and peer interactions.

Three students felt that being 'picked on' to answer questions in class was an inappropriate approach for learning about sensitive issues. This was because some students may not feel comfortable discussing sensitive issues, and should not feel that they have to, but also more broadly because this method does not give time to properly formulate a response. Tom, for instance, says that he dislikes this approach because 'I think afterwards that I wish I hadn't said that'. Tom suggested that an alternative could be to 'ask a final question at the end of the lecture for people to think about as questions can be complex and they may need more time to think'. Indeed, Caswell (2010, 8) notes the importance of not pushing students to respond to questions posed, as there might be 'good reasons for silence'.

Interestingly, three students spoke about the importance of the lecturer taking a *queer* approach in the formulation of a module that covers sensitive issues in sexuality. As Jen states:

teaching sexuality but maybe so it's not liked boxed, like gay or straight, so maybe following like the queer theory ... not in a kind of boxed way ... society says you're gay or straight ... the camp man, the butch lesbian ... but for a lot of us I think things are changing, I think that's not the case, I think it's a lot more fluid than that.

This comment and others from the students articulate the central tenant of queer theory's project to subvert normative conceptions of sexualities, and to expose the constructedness of ideas about sexual 'categorisation'. It thus makes sense that if we are asking students to explore the social constructedness of gender and sexualities, that our own teaching practices resonate with this: that we 'practice what we preach', so-to-speak.

Further, students said that the lecturer reflecting critically on their own identity can not only enhance understanding but can contribute to the classroom feeling like a 'safe' space to explore their own identities. As Ashe (2009, 10) notes, 'students respond more effectively when teachers are open about their own positioning ... and discuss their experiential and political investments in particular identities'. Similarly, Laura commented: 'if you brought a bit more of your experience in it could help open people up more about their experiences'. The lecturer's identity can therefore 'affect how students feel about such subjects and how they experience their learning' (Bhopal 2002, 109). Being reflexive about our positionality enables students to consider how the lecturer is socially located, and thus, importantly, how the knowledge that they are imparting is constructed.

Lecturers discussing more examples from their research was also a key aspect that all students felt was important not only for their greater understanding of the topic, but also in breaking down teacher/student power relations to create a two-way learning process. As Vicki says regarding a research photograph that I showed the class:

I was like, ooh is that what Katy does? Is that what she did? Yeah that's interesting ... I feel like there's certain lecturers ... I think we feel like they kind of talk down on us, whereas when we see a bit more ... from their research it's kind of a bit like seeing what they do, cause we're at the stage where we have to do like research methods and I think it like connects us a bit ... just seeing what you do, you just come across, you come across as a bit more human.

This suggests students value the opportunity to hear about the lecturer's research 'world' as it is considered to provide a personal insight in to how they 'do' social research. One

issue with this is, as Miller-Young (2010, 1) phrases it, I ‘cannot pretend I’m neutral’, in the debates on these issues. While students clearly value lecturers being open about their theoretical arguments informed by their research, we should be mindful, as Lowe’s (2014, 8) research found, that students may be concerned about exhibiting a different line of argument in their assessments, if they feel it does not ‘fit’ with the stance of the lecturer. It is thus crucial to reiterate at different stages of the course that while a range of positions and experiences have been discussed within the classroom, students can make whichever line of argument they see fit and that they ground this in theoretical and empirical evidence.

Students also commented on practical elements being addressed to create a space that they perceived as ‘safe’ to discuss sensitive material. As Dalton (2010) argues, we have a duty of care to our students, and while we cannot predict when or how students will react to classroom material, we need to put measures in place to mediate this. Five students mentioned that recording lectures containing sensitive material was inappropriate, including:

I like how the lectures aren’t recorded so you feel that you can say what you want to ... they won’t want to speak out if they know it’s being recorded and people can listen to it over and over again. (Laura)

If we do get personal it’s not something that you’d like to hear spoken back. (Ben)

If they know it’s not being recorded they can be more open. (Zara)

[X] recorded everything and no-one really mentioned any sensitive issues. (Karen)

Students also discussed the importance of issuing a ‘heads up’ (Laura) about lecture content in the course description, and of reminding students throughout the course that the material being covered is sensitive. They acknowledged the attempts of myself and other staff to provide signposting to useful organisations in course handbooks, and of our stating in classes that students do not have to discuss issues that they are not comfortable with. They also valued the opportunity to speak in small groups about experiences ‘that they might not feel comfortable talking about in a big lecture’ (Jen). As Nolan and Oerton (2010, 13) argue, these measures are an attempt to gain ‘informed consent’, so that ‘students are made aware of the nature of the material that they will be exposed to’. Of course, we cannot ‘know’ the effects of the material on students, yet we have a duty of care to mediate their impact.

Students felt that providing space for sharing emotive and personal experiences is crucial. Yet they were also attune to moments when peer interactions can disrupt this ‘safe’ space. I found, as Lowe (2014, 7) argues, that ‘it was often discussions with their peers that upset them and that this was unpredictable *even with*¹ prior warning about topics under discussion’. Two students discussed moments when their opinions in class had been misinterpreted and had resulted in one instance in an ‘argument’ eschewing, and in the other, the student feeling upset that they had potentially offended another student. Further, Vicki discussed an instance where a student was speaking and she felt ‘not attacked but it’s just more personal when it affects you’. She said that another student’s comments were deeply upsetting, and that it affected her choice of modules, as she deliberately avoided taking modules that discussed similar topics ‘cause I knew someone would say something that I did not agree with’.

These accounts suggest that perhaps no amount of safeguards or careful planning of activities can predict the interactions that may take place between students, yet *how* these experiences are managed is crucial. Nolan and Oerton (2010, 10) argue that ‘student reactions can often be pivotal in classroom discussions, providing useful opportunities to explore and unravel their emotional responses and how these link to different theoretical positions’. Lowe (2013) argues that academic literature can be invoked as a ‘safe’ way of challenging problematic conceptions to show they are unsubstantiated. Yet, as in Vicki’s experience, it is not always the case that the lecturer can hear and therefore create these teaching moments. Providing opportunities to ‘debrief’ with lecturers after classes is thus a means of ensuring that topics are not considered ‘off limits’ because of a fear of student reactions, and that problematic views can be challenged.

‘Creative’ teaching methods in learning sensitive topics: pedagogical possibilities

As Tom aptly puts it: ‘all of these topics should be learnt about in class, of course it’s also important how to deal with them’. Four participants said that reading sociological literature was crucial in grounding their understanding of sensitive issues. Vicki valued how sociological writing critiques racist media representations that are usually left unquestioned: ‘I really liked Stuart Hall’s reading on racism and the media ... cause most of the time you know black people are printed in a certain way but you don’t really try to find out why’.

Further, all students saw the pedagogical value in engaging with ‘creative’ approaches to studying gender and sexualities. Figure 2 depicts the ‘Barbie doll’ example that I showed students during interviews. I explained that this was part of a workshop in which we represented ourselves in a doll, and after explaining my depiction of myself, I asked whether they thought this would be a useful means for learning about the social construction of identities. Students particularly valued the sensorial dimension of this approach:

People are a lot more creative when they’re actually doing something rather than saying something. I think people can hold back a lot when they’re just asked a question. Like if you gave them tools like that I think their identity would just come out ... and they would see that everyone is different, whereas when you’re speaking out in a class of 80 people you don’t want to be known as different ... It’d be something that they’d always think back to and they’d remember. (Laura)

It’s a good way of exploring ideas about yourself without having to talk about it. It’s a good idea cause no-one actually has to come out and say it. You can just do your own thing ... I think on a doll it’s physical not verbal and I think for a lot of people it’s easier to show visibly rather than speaking. (Karen)

It would be a really good way for people to, not jokey but you know a more comical way that isn’t so serious, for people to represent themselves. (Lucy)

It’s such an interactive way of doing it I think it’d really make people think ... because it’s such a visual way of looking at it I think it symbolises what you’re trying to say. (Jen)

In addition to being an apt means of conveying an analytic point, the doll is seen as giving the students a chance to participate in something that is different and thus memorable. The students highlight the ‘multisensoriality’ of our learning, and that due to the

sensitivity of disclosing identity, non-verbal stimuli may communicate more than language can facilitate.

However, three students had reservations regarding the sensitivity of asking people to express ‘themselves’ through a doll. Tom says: ‘some people may be confused as to what to identify with and very uncertain so maybe this is difficult to have something representing them’. This links to my concern about this potentially meaning that students have to ‘box’ themselves into an identity category, something that is antithetical to my queer approach. We discussed the possibility of using the doll as *either* a way of expressing self-identity, or as a means for conveying ‘dominant’ societal ideals about gender/sexuality. Arguably, the fluidity of identities *can* still be conveyed through the doll, as my own representation in [Figure 2](#) represents the way I see my own identity as changing and contradictory. Yet, the point is to design activities that will convey the analytic point in a sensitive manner, and having both of these options for students could achieve this.

The Barbie example reminded students of an activity I had introduced earlier in the term, in which I asked them to bring in an object that they use that they see as something that makes their bodies gendered (an idea inspired by a former colleague, Karen Throsby et al., 2009–10). Students said the activity ‘made them think’ (Laura); that it was ‘exciting’ (Vicki); and they were interested in how people interpreted the same products to have different gendered meanings (Jen). What two students picked up on in these discussions, however, is that while these activities can foster a potentially ‘deeper’ engagement with a topic, this does not mean that students will be able to discuss just ‘any’ example. Lucy mentioned wanting to bring a bra to class, and Zara discussed a classmate who had considered bringing in a ‘vibrator’, both of whom decided ‘maybe not’ (Lucy), or that ‘there are some things that you want to talk about but can’t’ (Zara). Despite opportunities to explore sensory objects, students regulate their behaviour in order to maintain what they feel to be appropriate classroom boundaries.

Discussion of the ‘Bingo’ game (Barker et al. n.d.) revealed that students view interactive classroom activities, particularly those with a ‘novelty’ factor, as a key means to ‘open people up’ (Zara) to feel comfortable speaking about gender and sexualities. As Laura phrases it: ‘It’d certainly get ‘em going ... I think you’ll capture a lot more’. Ben also thought it would ‘spark a debate’. Similarly, Vicki sees the bingo activity as a means of breaking the monotony of traditional teaching methods: ‘I think we need more of this, like new ideas ... Bingo!’ Tom, however, thought the statements on the bingo card could be misinterpreted, or not read in a ‘satirical way’. Yet, students may challenge each other on their views. Lucy frames this as a productive tension, saying that ‘it would be interesting to see what people put cause I for example might cross off one and other people might not think that way’. Further, Jen had been introduced to this Bingo game in my media module, and said that ‘when I went home afterwards and put on the TV it really made me think’, and she will ‘carry on being quite critical’ in her future viewing. In a similar vein to Sargent and Corse (2013) asking students to photograph ‘gendery’ moments from their everyday lives, in which they found that students then noticed such moments in other photographs, Jen’s account suggests that the Bingo game continues her critical thinking outside of the classroom.

Students also felt that engaging with a lecturer’s research materials directly, such as through viewing a research diary, provides an opportunity to better visualise and communicate academic arguments. Four students spoke about how, particularly with sensitive

and controversial topics such as erotic dance, my research photographs of a dancer enabled them to explore the different meanings of dancing, to challenge dominant stereotypes:

It's good because it's real life so it's more meaningful, so if you just typed 'stripper' into Google it's not the same. (Jen)

Cause when you're talking they're not seeing what you've seen, they're just listening ... they might still have that 'oh well she might be forced in to it she might still be doing things that she doesn't want to do', whereas when you *see* it, and she's asked you to take these pictures so she wants you to see the truth. (Laura)

There's a dominant idea around stripping ... and these are a good way to say, you know, there's not just one way. (Lucy)

As well as the power of images to challenge dominant narratives, Ben and Karen recognised that students learn in different ways, and that visual techniques can elicit different responses than purely textual or verbal dialogue. Students discussed further creative methods which could facilitate learning about sensitive issues. Jen spoke of how showing and discussing mainstream comedy may expose the 'gendering' of bodies and how humour, in Tyler's (2008, 23) sense, is problematically 'community forming' in creating an Other who is laughed *at*. Both Lucy and Jen thought that creating a poster could help students think about representations of gender and sexuality that currently proliferate in the media. As Jen says, a poster 'might make you really think about ... how difficult it is to convey things without ... a hidden message'. Further examples discussed as useful 'creative' techniques for learning sensitive issues included: story writing and reading stories (Ben); drawing (Jen); trips (Lucy, Ben); students producing or bringing in photographs (Lucy); analysing music videos (Ben, Tom, Vicki, Jen).

The challenge not to reproduce the problematic meanings that the 'creative' method is trying to deconstruct

Some students discussed the potential to read different meanings from the creative materials but that there were some meanings that should not be reproduced. They valued teaching methods that would not reproduce the same problematic (sexist, heteronormative, racist, ableist, classist) assumptions that Sociological approaches challenge. Tom discussed a previous learning experience in which a classist assumption in a language text had not been discussed in a 'critical or reflexive way'. It is crucial to not leave derogatory statements 'hanging', and as Lowe (2013) argues, bringing the discussion back to the academic literature can assist with this endeavour. However, as Tom acknowledges, the teaching method itself needs to be constructed in the 'right' way, for as he says regarding debates: 'maybe people would feel offended depending on how the debate is set up'. How a teaching activity is set up is important – what question is being asked? What answers does this leave room for and what does it potentially shut down? This resonates with Hall's (1999) argument regarding the construction of debates within the media about 'race'. He suggests that if a debate is set up in purely binary terms – for example, a debate around immigration focusing on the binary of 'too full/not full' – then even the *oppositional* argument is stifled by the same racist logic. Hall (1999, 281) says if one argument is 'the number of blacks is too high' or 'they are breeding too fast' – then the counter

argument has to be that they are not – and it gets imprisoned by the racist logic that comes down to a ‘numbers game’. This does not break for a moment the chain of racist assumptions that hold this position in place. We need to think carefully about the assumptions underpinning the activities that we construct for students, and what narratives are possible within them.

Slightly different concerns arose in discussions of an image that I showed depicting a workshop that I had attended with the aim of dressing ‘differently’ to explore meanings of gender,² which entailed going into a town centre to see people’s reactions to our outfits. Seven students expressed concerns about the safety of students undertaking this due to verbal or physical abuse that they could experience. Further, two students were troubled by the problematic message that this activity could reinforce. Lucy and Tom were concerned that while the exercise is designed to enable people to experience what it feels like to be ‘Othered’, it could end up reinforcing the very notions that it seeks to challenge. As Lucy articulates:

It also might be problematic and put the notion on it that some people’s identities are *definitely* subordinate ... I think it might perpetuate it a little bit ... I’ve read some research around disability where people take on a wheelchair and it’s about how you’re taking on a little bit but you can never really have that full experience ... I think maybe it would perpetuate the idea that they *are* negative and putting a label on that.

From reading a number of other teaching approaches that incorporate role-reversal or students ‘playing’ with different identities, I argue that these methods might also reproduce problematic assumptions. For example, Berkowitz, Manohar, and Tinkler (2010) ask students to ‘walk like a man, talk like a woman’, and Messinger (2015, 160) encourages students to take on a different gender role in ‘speed dating’ role-playing. Similarly, Edwards (2010) designed an exercise where female students painted the nails of a male peer who wore the varnish for 24 hours. Edwards (2010, 365) found that male students ‘cope’ with gender bending by not going ‘out in public while wearing the fingernail polish’ or keeping their hands in their pockets. This is a problematic exercise to be put through if the person feels uncomfortable to venture outside, yet something equally concerning is going on in these examples. This is acutely captured in De Welde and Hubbard’s (2003) ‘coming out’ assessment in which they ask students to write a ‘coming out’ letter that is never sent, with the object of enabling students to analyse their own homophobic assumptions. Yet, this assumes that the majority of the class will be ‘innately’ heterosexual, and it does not account for students who may be currently or have previously wrestled with ‘coming out’. What these examples raise is similar to Diamond’s (2005) notion of the problem with ‘heteroflexibility’. While people may ‘play’ with their identities such as performing gender flexibility, ultimately by the fact that these are temporary exercises their ‘straight’ gender/sexuality is not threatened. This in no way breaks down heteronormative power relations, but rather may reinforce them.

Student ‘apathy’ in a neoliberal era of student ‘consumers’: challenges for ‘creative’ approaches

Yet there is a tension that students raised regarding the impact of the neoliberalisation of higher education, and how this may conflict with creative pedagogical approaches. Students criticised the neoliberal conception of students as ‘consumers’ in a global

marketplace, critiquing how within this conception some students may wish for a more instrumental learning process (or ‘spoon feeding’). They voiced their concerns about the impact this can have on their opportunities for deeper learning, and their frustrations with students who sought to learn in this way. For example, when discussing the idea of making a film as part of their learning about gender and sexuality, in which they could conduct ‘real’ research, interviewing people and presenting the film to the class, some students articulated concerns around students being apathetic towards this method. As Zara says: ‘I think a film people will be like ‘oh it’s another thing that we need to do, its adding to the pile’ sort of thing’.

Similar ideas arose in discussions with students about the class taking a field trip to a place of interest relevant to the course. As Ben says, ‘I’d be 100% interested in that [but] something that I’ve learnt through Uni is that people won’t participate in things if they don’t feel that they’re gonna get anything out of it’. In discussing the idea of students creating blogs related to the course, Zara raised this issue of student’s potential instrumentality: ‘I don’t think a blog people would bother doing ... cause people don’t wanna work extra ... people cannot be bothered. If it’s assessed then they would, if it was like 10% they would try’. Five students also said that the dressing-up workshop would be hard to get people to participate in if they could not recognise how it would enhance their marks. These comments echo Wagner and Shahjahan’s (2015, 247) concern that students conceive of universities as spaces where:

they are expected to sit and listen ... Varying from this prescribed formula sometimes initially leads to dismay among students, who believe that they are not getting the product they believe they have paid for ... Such attitudes are consistent with hegemonic neoliberal thinking that posits education as a commodity ... approaches that trouble certainty or complicate the status quo tend to be resisted.

Yet, some of the students in this research *are* critical of this attitude, and consider it as detrimental to their deeper learning, suggesting that there is scope for developing these methods which challenge the ‘status quo’.

Conclusion

Student’s accounts reveal that the ‘personal is political’ in their understanding of sensitive issues. They view breaking down the barriers between teacher/student and being able to exchange personal experiences, as crucial to their own learning, and to the creation of a ‘safe’ space in which to discuss sensitive issues. They valued opportunities to experiment with creative methods where they saw these as usefully conveying an analytic point. Students were concerned about the safety of their peers, and that activities should not reproduce the problematic message that the exercise had set out to challenge. Students navigate tensions between the increasing neoliberalisation of higher education and the challenges this presents for their deeper learning.

All of these ideas are linked. Even the fact that we are still talking about some of the sensitive issues that the students describe as difficult but important to talk about – such as the prevalence of domestic violence and rape – suggests that we are far from being in a ‘post-feminist’ or a somehow power-free era in which the neoliberal subject exists individually, and their life is merely a matter of their own ‘choices’ and exercising of agency. Rather, we live in an era marked by gender-based violence and structural

inequalities, which are resisted and challenged, but are still operating. Moreover, the neoliberal agenda is fundamentally opposed to the feminist project of recognising that equality has not been ‘won’, and thus the challenge is for our teaching methods to produce a commitment to social justice. As Nash (2013, 421) articulates regarding ‘blogging’ in a feminist classroom: ‘[t]he aim is for students to move from being passive recipients of knowledge to active communicators who are less inclined to pass off gender equality as a ‘given’’. The students in this research’s desire to politicise each other’s and the lecturer’s personal experiences, creates a teaching moment which not only breaks down student/teacher hierarchies but also actively challenges the neoliberalisation of this relationship in to one of imparter of knowledge/consumer. As hooks (1994, 21) argues, in moments when ‘professors bring narratives of their experiences into classroom discussions it eliminates the possibility that we can function as all-knowing, silent interrogators’. Rather, creative teaching methods, and sharing personal experiences, present a direct challenge to ‘neoliberal thinking that focuses on preparing students to be players in the global marketplace, rather than partners in social change action’ (Wagner and Shahjahan 2015, 249). Therefore, I argue that teaching and learning sensitive issues surrounding gender and sexualities, and utilising creative methods to critique social inequalities that persist, becomes much more than a classroom exercise but rather forms part of a wider political project to expose and critique the ‘hidden injuries’ (Gill 2010) of the neoliberal university.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

Notes

1. Italics, my emphasis.
2. Image not reproduced here for copyright reasons.
3. Students have been assigned pseudonyms to protect their identity.
4. — denotes no response. ‘N/A’ is the response students gave themselves.

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