Feminist Pedagogy: Fractures of Recognition in Higher Education

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Introduction

This chapter will examine the possibilities for feminist pedagogy to respond to educational fractures and disadvantage. Gender in higher education is regulatory (re)producing inequities and extending historic institutional structures that shape belonging, '[i]n the halls of academe…At first women were transgressive just by virtue of being there' (Davies 2006: 500). Exploring the emerging tensions between academics and students in relation to queer, gender and feminist content I consider academic well-being, career progression and sustainability towards feminist academic futures. I draw on a critical incident in my own teaching practice to explore institutional responses and some of the personal and career implications of these pedagogic tensions. I will focus on ways in which pedagogy is gendered, shaping the content taught and the co-construction with students of academic subjectivity. I

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suggest that tensions emerging from feminist pedagogy are increasing in frequency and are examples of conditions in higher education wherein '[i]nequalities of gender are increasingly complex and insidious formations, often shaped by deep-seated but subtly expressed institutionalized misogynies' (Morley 2011, cited in Burke 2017: 3).

In her exploration of the obstacles for women academics, Savigny (2014) uses the term 'cultural sexism; the significant, invisible, normalising barrier to women's progression within the academy' (p. 795). Given the over-representation of women at lower academic levels in positions which also tend to take up a disproportionate level of teaching (MacKinlay 2016; McKenzie 2017; Lipton and MacKinlay 2017), how teaching within university contexts is experienced becomes critical for feminism and gender equity. Thwaites and Pressland (2017) note that higher education is a male dominated sector where the increasing focus on marketisation of education and increased competition for funding and jobs is counter to 'feminist values and practices' (p. 6). Following Thwaites and Pressland (2017), this chapter explores ways to navigate the contested terrain between feminist pedagogy and the market-driven institutional demands of higher education, 'this political outlook can lead to transformative events but can also create difficulties in a non-feminist department or a research climate that does not take gender seriously' (p. 6). This chapter will address fractures in feminist pedagogy in higher education by illustrating ways that gender operates within this context and begins to shape what feminist pedagogy can be and ways feminist teaching and learning practice can be both productive and damagingly disheartening. Feminist pedagogy is able to respond to educational fractures and disadvantage by contesting normative structures, challenging students to think critically and supporting higher education's aims of equity and inclusion.

Gendered Fractures in Higher Education

The academy remains profoundly gendered and within teaching and learning spaces a 'double-bind' exists where normative 'gendered expectations (that women be nurturing and supportive) conflict with the professional expectations of a higher-education instructor (that they be

authoritative and knowledgeable)…[which when transgressed] can also result in student disapproval' (MacNell et al. 2015: 294). In Living a Feminist Life, Ahmed (2017) suggests that 'When he is seen as professor, there is a way he too is not seen. They are seeing what they expect to see; they are seeing one person and not another as professor. Here comes the professor; *he* is the professor' (Ahmed 2017: 127).

Female academics tend to work within lower levels of the academy, teach introductory and bridging courses, or be on casual or fixed-term contracts, which influences the recognisability of female academics and also shapes their engagement with students (Bosanquet 2017). Australia has 40 research universities and despite increasing enrolments following the 2009 Bradley Review which sought greater participation for under-represented groups, structural inequities remain with Indigenous students, rural and regionally-based students and students from low socio-economic backgrounds having limited access, participation and achievement (James et al. 2017). In the Australian context, the gendered construction of the academy is illustrated in that

> more than 50 per cent of women at Associate Lecturer (Level A) reduce to just 16 per cent at Professor (Level E); there is a concentration of women in the fields of humanities and social sciences, especially in teaching and nursing, and a corresponding under-representation of women in science-related disciplines. (Winchester et al. 2006: 507)

Sonya Wurster (2017) focuses on the leaky pipeline; the attrition of woman from Ph.D. level to Professor level who exit the sector for complex and intersecting reasons,

> [i]n Australia, women comprise just over 50 per cent of graduates; however, they hold only 26 per cent of full-time, permanent lecturing positions. The numbers then decline at each subsequent level of promotion: only 20 per cent of associate professors and professorships are currently held by women. (p. 2)

The gendered profile of an academic limits and shapes recognisability for women academics, the 'desire for recognition is in actuality a

site of power, where who gets to be recognized, and by whom, is governed by social norms…the choice to be recognized (or not) within the constraints of normativity is a condition of agency in the doing and undoing of subjectivity' (Jackson and Mazzei 2012: 77). Davies (2006) agrees, noting that in neo-liberal institutions there is a 'generation of policies and rules that are *intended* to be transparent and to make the process of recognition (appointment, promotion, funding, publishing) available to anyone' (emphasis added, p. 501). However, the process of recognition is problematic '[w]e are vulnerable both to the power of the one who recognizes and to the terms of their recognition' (Davies 2006: 508). I suggest that a key site of recognition for academics is within their teaching practice. The dual mechanism of recognizability that both constrains and enables is useful to examine the everyday repetitive acts that regulate and shape our capacity for recognition. This enables an exploration of institutional structures that regulate the nature of being and becoming an academic and negotiations of our desire to be recognised as academics must be negotiated through these norms and regulations. I suggest that issues relating to sexism and belligerence from students becomes critical to teaching practice, job satisfaction, retention and wellbeing and contribute to the boundary maintenance of what it is (can be) to be and become an academic.

This chapter will explore gendered recognition for female teaching academics, conditions wherein 'the care work of teaching [is] both romanticised and devalued – materially and symbolically: women care, men lead' (McLeod 2017: 46). Existing research illustrates that female academics can experience precarious and disadvantageous conditions as they seek to be recognised within higher education. Disadvantageous conditions for women in higher education are illustrated in teaching evaluations bias. In the Netherlands, Mengel et al. (2017) examined 19,952 student evaluations and found that 'male students evaluate their female instructors 21% of a standard deviation worse than their male instructors. While female students were found to rate female instructors about 8% of a standard deviation lower than male instructors' (p. 2). The authors connect this gender bias evident in student evaluations to job market success, teaching awards, the reallocation of

resources away from research towards teaching-related activities, effects of self-confidence and beliefs about teaching and reasons why 'women are more likely than men to drop out of academia' (Mengel et al. 2017: 4). Anne Boring (2017) found similar gender bias in student evaluations in the French context, 'students give lower scores to women than men for the same level of teaching effectiveness' (p. 35). Boring (2017) notes the possible career implications for woman academics as institutions rely on these measures for promotion and tenure and discourage and demotivate women in the academy.

Research on gender bias against female academics by MacNell et al. (2015) demonstrate that 'students rated the instructors they perceived to be female lower than those they perceived to be male, regardless of teaching quality or actual gender of the instructor' (p. 300). Examining the experiences of bias and disadvantage within teaching and learning spaces is crucial because they are critical in regard to career development, progression, promotion and tenure/permanence and also one's own wellbeing. 'Given the widespread reliance on student ratings of teaching and their effect on career advancement, any potential bias in those ratings is a matter of great consequence' (MacNell et al. 2015: 293). Holly Smith (2012) agrees, stating that 'student feedback has real implications for our pay, promotion or job security, this sort of sexism must be taken seriously' (p. 750).

Within this context, teaching particular subjects with gender, feminist and queer content is arguably more likely to create conditions which challenge and are uncomfortable for some students. Sharp et al. (2007) note that in their teaching of gender '[a]t times, we feel as though the classroom environment is a 'war zone'. It is often clear that we can become objects of students' frustration and, at times, rage' (p. 543). Kuvalanka et al. (2013) surveyed 42 college/university instructors with regard to incorporating lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans, and/or intersex (LGBTQI) issues into family courses and noted the link between teaching controversial issues and a reduction in reappointment or tenure chances. 'The educators in our research faced resistance from other faculty in addition to students, teaching about transgender and queer issues' (Kuvalanka et al. 2013: 712). Emily Gray (2018) grapples with 'ontological deadlock that teaching in and about difference

can generate' (p. 2). In theorising 'tolerance' Gray (2018) discusses how students (re)produce and protect difference 'the student illustrates both the fragility of tolerance; minority voices are only welcome if they (re)produce the status quo, and also the way in which power circulates through tolerance discourse (re)producing the hierarchical relationship between tolerator and tolerated' (p. 9). Olga Marques (2017) shares her experiences of the considerable personal and career costs of teaching gender/feminist content in a chapter that discusses the 'embeddedness of gendered expectations and subsequent bias faced by women academics' (p. 53). Marques (2017) recounts an anonymous student comment that was repeated over 3 pages;

> I hate your class and think it is a waste of time, clearly you are a lesbian because you don't shut up about your man complaints. This isn't a class that should be taught anywhere because feminism is a load of shit. I think you should be fired and you shouldn't be teaching [;] period. (p. 53)

Marques (2017) adds that '[w]omen colleagues recounted the accusation by disgruntled students of their being lesbian man-haters and offered me tips' (p. 54). As an early career feminist scholar Marques notes her development of a 'pedagogical approach that would ensure I present theories, concepts and gendered content in an engaging, provocative, yet non-confrontational manner…in which negative responses to personally challenging course content are not projected onto me as an individual' (p. 66). McKnight (2016) discusses feminism in teacher's identities and curriculum design and notes that description of sexist interactions with male students are 'hinting at a vast, unexplored sexism informing male students' relationship with female teachers…she tells us about the boy who uses the term 'retarded chick' to describe a teacher' (p. 10). These are confronting examples of sexist responses from students and are useful to provide a contextual overview of ways that women teaching in the academy negotiate difficult conditions. These negotiations of feminist teaching practice highlight gendered disadvantage embedded within institutional structures of market-driven higher education.

The Possibilities of Feminist-Activist Pedagogy

Feminist activist pedagogy may particularly trigger disgruntled student protests but also be a useful pedagogical tactic to respond to these tensions. These possibilities emerge because feminist-activist pedagogy begins with creating learning and teaching spaces that critically explore 'socially-contextualized knowledge claims, participatory learning and valuing personal knowledge' (Markowitz 2005: 44). Olga Marques (2017) acknowledges multiple feminist pedagogies, however '[d]espite ideological differences, all feminism and feminist pedagogies challenged the normative and encourage feminist scholars to reflect on the contradictions of our own practices and theory' (p. 61). A process of inquiry supported by critical pedagogies of discomfort which as Megan Boler (1999) argues, allow us to 'examine constructed self-images in relation to how one has learned to see others' and to 'recognise how emotions define how and what one chooses to see, and conversely, not to see' (p. 176, in Amsler and Motta 2017: 6). Feminist pedagogy is closely aligned with pedagogies of discomfort, 'grounded in the assumption that discomforting feelings are important in challenging dominant beliefs, social habits and normative practices that sustain social inequities and they create openings for individual and social transformation' (Zembylas 2015: 163).

Feminist pedagogical spaces can be subject-producing practices and spaces, for both academic and student we can begin to shape an understanding of the tensions and conflicts that emerge. Through my feminist pedagogical practices I aim for the 'affective power of the educational field to act as a counter-discourse; counter, that is, to the dominant social norms that seek to instil an uncritical relation to the world of business and to the role of education in "knowledge transfer"' (McRobbie 2009: 134). I work to build my feminist pedagogical approach which can be 'informed by awareness of the relations of power and knowledge underpinning the very existence, as well as the transmission, of the feminist curriculum' (McRobbie 2009: 133). Markowitz agrees arguing that feminist pedagogy seeks to 'ask students to become aware of how and why they possess their knowledge claims that they become cognizant of their power to create, shape and change knowledge' (2005: 42).

Within the teaching and learning co-constructed spaces I seek to develop, '[p]edagogies that actively engage students in dialogue about their own understandings of the connections between self, learning and economic' (Saltmarsh 2011: 123). McCusker (2017) suggests that feminist pedagogy values 'personal experience, diversity and subjectivity, reconceptualising classrooms as spaces for social justice' (p. 4). I suggest that a tension exists with feminist activist pedagogy wherein we aim to create collaborative, self-explorative and critical teaching and learning environments while we are also 'responsible for providing information and evaluating student knowledge' (Sharp et al. 2007: 545). This illustrates a clash of intent and capacity of pedagogy within higher education that it seeks to cultivate student subjectivity and evaluate them simultaneously. This tension is heightened within pedagogy and curriculum spaces that are 'questioning constructs of sex and gender, evaluating the implications of privilege and justice, and imparting all this information into a traditionally masculine discipline' (Marques 2017: 59). Following Taylor (2014) tensions between feminist pedagogy and the marketized university may also be productive and generative, that can enable rather than dissuade. The negotiations discussed here seek to not only recount experiences but also to begin to consider ways that these negotiations with students and structures can inform and build our feminist pedagogy.

Following McRobbie, feminist pedagogy's utility is in its capacity to bring a critical approach to teaching and learning spaces to shift towards interrogating social norms 'seeks to cross boundaries, requiring students to leave their comfort zones and confront issues that are not nice to know, feminist teaching cannot please students or the university' (Naskali and Keskitalo-Foley 2017: 8). Jones (2011) describes a 'postmodern orientation' to teaching which is a theoretical model designed to explore multiple perspectives around truth, authority and reality, involving students' deconstruction, co-construction and reflectivity. The teacher in this orientation as Jones (2011) outlines is often the 'devils advocate'. This contesting and 'devils advocate' approach is difficult within the economic and performance pressures of higher education. 'Developing an explorative, fluid, nuanced approach that explores multiple subject positions and "truths" remains a challenge' (Ollis 2017: 472).

Ahmed (2015) notes these pedagogic challenges in her feministkilljoys blog 'Against Students'. In this piece Ahmed (2015) discusses the positioning of students in higher education as the 'problem student', 'related figures: the consuming student, the censoring student, the over-sensitive student and the complaining student' (Ahmed 2015: n.p.). Ahmed (2015) argues that it is when students are critical or challenge what is being taught that academics tend to dismiss students as 'acting like consumers'. I would also suggest that teachers in social science, social justice and equity and gender, queer and feminist areas are more likely to negotiate backlash or challenges relating to this content. Ahmed (2015) notes that such backlash or challenges can prompt some academics to 'hit the mute button' rather than delve into trigger warnings and difficulties of teaching content that may be sensitive to some. Ahmed (2015) suggests than rather than dismissing these difficulties as the issues of 'over-sensitive' students, trigger warnings and diving into these messy issues 'enable some people to stay in the room… [creating] safe spaces [as a] technique for dealing with the consequences of histories that are not over' (Ahmed 2015). These negotiations of space and pedagogy are messy because within university classrooms 'asymmetrical relations of power [are] not stable' (Ahmed 2015). In the following section I recount one of my own teaching experiences and reflect on this to further explore the tensions and utility of feminist pedagogy.

The messy and complex negotiations between students, curriculum and academics are central to exploring feminist pedagogy. These exchanges in university classrooms are part of the broader conditions of recognition, for the students, academics and the institution. Ways to negotiate and build capacities for critical thinking and challenge existing knowledge are fraught for both student and academic and an examination of the purpose and the conditions within which feminist pedagogy emerges is critical to understanding its generative possibilities.

Teaching Sociological Theory: Pedagogy Going 'Pear-Shaped'

During 2016 I began my first academic position, a fixed-term contract position where I was parachuted into a subject coordinator role for a 2nd year core Sociology theory subject. With very little teaching

experience and even less internal collegial mentoring, I negotiated the teaching and learning space and re-designed the unit based on critical inquiry pedagogy within which I was 'ready to relinquish power but students were not always ready to receive it' (McCusker 2017: 8). My aim was to introduce my students to the sociological imagination through social theory. I wanted my students to be able to connect social theory with the personal and back to the broader social issues concerning them and sociology more broadly. On reflection, these aims were lofty and beyond my inexperienced capacities as a first year academic particularly given the content. Such aims and questions in relation to gender, feminism and queer theories can 'carry emotional weight and ethical responsibility…[that] other lectures do not' (Allen 2015: 766).

I took this new position up as a challenge and relished the opportunity to revitalize the subject's content and delivery. I purposefully condensed the traditional and conventional focus on the 'three dead white men of Sociology' Marx, Weber, Durkheim to a minimum. In their place I introduced Foucault, Bourdieu, Freire, Bauman, hooks, Connell, Halberstam and Butler etc. Each week a different theory and theorist which we put to work on a particular social issue. I drew on critical enquiry pedagogy 'described as an interactive, student-driven process, where knowledge is constructed rather than transmitted' (Preston et al. 2015: 73). In the second week of semester, during tutorial class, one student directs the following questions to me:

What is the point of all this?
What is your role here?
What am I meant to do with all this?
When will you get to the solutions?

I was a bit taken-aback. I had not expected this series of questions. The whole class was silent, they seemed to be wondering what I would do with this challenge and the substance of the claim? What is the point of this subject? Good question?

My feeble response:

The point is to think critically about the interrelatedness of our society and to ask why do people, events and social understanding appear and operate as they do?
My role is to provide interesting content and to set engaging assessments tasks.
Your role is to engage with the material and complete the assessment tasks.
There are no solutions. I have a PhD and I still don't have any solutions, this is kind of the point of Sociology, if you want or need answers perhaps the science building is the place!! We have questions and exploration and critique but no unquestionable solutions.

This exchange illustrates that this student seems to be having difficulties with the content and my delivery of the ideas, theories and challenges which are inherent in a social theory subject. This student voices their concerns and reminds me that:

Opening a pedagogical space for students to speak about controversial issues in a lecture is challenging…For me, the idea of the lecture as a safe place (either for students or myself) is a fantasy. To suggest that the lecturer has the power to make this space safe implies a too simplistic and instrumental conceptualization of agency given the complexities of what it means to teach and learn. (Allen 2015: 767)

Zembylas (2015) agrees, 'there are no safe classroom spaces, if one considers that conditions of power and privilege always operate in them. For example, marginalized students' need for safety (i.e. not being dominated) seems incompatible with the privileged students' desire to not be challenged' (p. 165). Zembylas (2015) and Allen (2015) discuss the tensions between safety and challenging students and content, a balance that feminist pedagogy seeks to address.

The subject continued and during most tutorials the same student as discussed above spoke in often polemic and dominating ways to which I responded, diverted and deflected aiming to share the opportunity for all students to be engaged and heard. In week's eight, nine and ten I introduced Feminist, Gender and Queer and contemporary theories

to the group. In response to our discussion on Feminist theory, the same student comments:

> *We don't need feminism. The sexes are already equal. Feminism is just women using their bodies for sex to dominate men.*

In the moment, I did not know how to respond to this statement. I thought it was rude, ignorant and ridiculous, I felt that my anger to this student statement would not be a professional response. My response was to deflect this statement to the class as a group and I asked the cohort how they would respond to this statement. This was a mistake, the cohort responded with anger which got personal and unproductive. I intervened and asked the angered students to think and respond sociologically, provides some evidence to counter the original statement…they could not. I intervened again to defuse the angered exchanges and attempted to counter the students position that the sexes were 'already equal' by opening up discussions about the gendered wage gap, family-based violence, and gendered violence.

The pedagogic fractures within this social theory unit continued to escalate. The same disgruntled and disaffected student began posting a barrage of up to 20 controversial Youtube clips onto the subject's Moodle site. The titles of these videos included;

> *The war on men; The inevitable collapse of feminist societies; What you need to know about single moms; Top three lies of feminism; The myth of the gender wage gap; Queer theory pseudoscience; The war on boys; Feminism was created to destabilize society; Why do men become feminists?; Top four reasons being a single mom rocks REBUTTED; Black fathers matter; 36 stupid feminist questions answered; Ten secrets to being an alpha male; Alpha male vs beta male: Why being a beta male sucks; Feminism 2.0.*

I was advised by the Head of Department to delete these Moodle posts. The removal of their posts prompted the following student response:

> *You proved with deleting my posts that Feminists want abolish (sic) all ALPHA MALES, and as I said in class it is all about power and domination.*
> (emphasis in original)

The accumulative affects of the class discussions and the Moodle postings resulted in a class-cohort fracture that could not be restored. Removing the Moodle clips was too little too late as the rest of the subject's student cohort had read and responded negatively to the content which was largely racist, sexist and purposefully antagonistic, this resulted in the class becoming alienated and disengaged from the subject. Some students notified the universities equity and engagement office and advised that they did not feel safe in this class and requested official support not to attend for the remaining semester. Some students advised me and the equity and engagement office that they felt that the exchanges both in class and on Moodle were personal against me and that they were worried on my behalf. I was also worried about my safety and more concerned about the failures of my teaching and learning practices. The following section reflects on these teaching experiences and possible responses to the tensions arising from feminist pedagogy within higher education.

Generative Responses to Provocative and Volatile Feminist Pedagogy

My above reflections illustrate the failures and tensions in my feminist pedagogy practices teaching a social theory course. Sharp et al. (2007) discuss their experiences of teaching a course on gender, and note that 'students in our courses tend to experience the gender content as provocative and volatile' (p. 533). I suggest that the core and compulsory nature of this social theories course that I have outlined here contributes to elements of obligation and resentment which increases the 'potential to create a hostile class environment' (Sharp et al. 2007: 534).

Institutional responses to hostile teaching and learning experiences are required. One of the ways to respond to pedagogical failures, is to review the induction process, through which we gain awareness of the institutional supports and policies in regard to student conduct. I learnt about the student code of conduct after the event and from university staff outside my discipline and department. The other academics I spoke with about this experience, shared similar stories and issues

and had different strategies to manage it. I wondered if many of these strategies tended to pass the problem along to the next semester, the next academic and group of students.

Inequities of power and academic subjectivity within higher education are shaped by power relations with university classrooms. Institutional and political pressures tend to position students as consumers and as such students voice their concerns more readily and evaluation of academic teaching has intensified as has the focus on student retention and successful outcomes. Leathwood and O'Connell (2003) note in the UK context that students are constructed as 'active consumers of educational services, taking responsibility for their own learning as independent, autonomous and self-directed individuals' (p. 599). This may register a cruel optimism (Berlant 2011) for some students who don't or can't aspire to position themselves within this framework. Some student's expect lecturers and academics to be male, as 'persistent depiction of females as stereotypically sexualised or otherwise intellectually impoverished in relation to the positive images of men…to suggest that the 'intellectual woman' is an 'impossibility' (Coate and Howson 2016: 568–569). Students who are belligerent and aggressive may adhere to the notion that 'authority, status, expertise, scholarly standing and so on are perceived in academia…are more easily acquired by men and are more likely to be associated with male academics' (Coate and Howson 2016: 569).

Teaching demanding and complaining students, I argue, adds to the burdensome workload that already tends to fall disproportionately on women academics, together with 'boundary-less expectations and few rewards' (Angervall 2016: 11). Carson (2001) discusses the negative consequences of gendered teaching evaluations and student pressure noted 'the personal time and emotional costs involved in dealing with demanding and sometimes distressed students, were considerable' (p. 343). Filling in the student conduct forms, progressing through the institutional process to remove problem students, manage the rest of the class's issues, manage one's own insecurities and re-work teaching practices and question the content. These are exhausting processes and I suggest have a significant impact on workload. Briony Lipton (2017), highlights the 'cruel optimism' [of] our optimistic attachment to gender

equity and diversity policies as tools for improving the representation of women may be detrimental to achieving gender equality in academia' (p. 487).

Berlant's (2011) concept of cruel optimism is useful here to explore pedagogic experiences for both academics and their students. Berlant (2011) states that cruel optimism is 'like a new habit that promises to induce in you an improved way of being…They become cruel only when the object that draws your attachment actively impedes the aim that brought you to it initially' (p. 1). 'Cruel optimism is the condition of maintaining an attachment to a significantly problematic object' (Berlant 2011: 24). Berlant (2011) asks '[w]hat happens when those fantasies start to fray – depression, dissociation, pragmatism, cynicism, optimism, activism, or an incoherent mash?' (p. 2). I suggest the pedagogic experiences that I have recounted in this chapter could be regarded as 'incoherent mash' because the content and delivery became hijacked and they were allowed to become destabilised to the point of incoherence. The focus shifts away from content, critique of ideas and power and becomes unproductively polemic, personal and not fit for purpose. Activist expectations and possibilities are embedded in feminist pedagogy as academics seek to contest enduring inequities of gender, whiteness and power within both what we teach and how we teach.

For the student whose exchange within the social theories course is discussed here, my pedagogy and endless loops of questions, uncertainty and messiness is clearly alienating. The student is perhaps articulating a clash of expectations, that this type of learning space and the content represents to this student a cruelled optimism wherein, 'people's desires for things they think may improve their lot, but actually act as obstacles to flourishing' (Rasmussen 2015: 192). Here, a university education, the seeking of a qualification and the emancipatory expectations of education to 'improve their lot' is cruelled for this student within this pedagogic encounter. The student expects solutions and no solutions were forthcoming. This combined with the critical enquiry teaching mode becomes difficult for this student and he responds defensively. There is also a cruel optimism in this encounter for me as a new teaching academic. That my students are wanting and even demanding 'solutions'.

My desire to teach from a feminist activist position, to deliver critical enquiry pedagogy to address social inequities and unpack normative structures is cruelled (Berlant 2011) because for some students it refuses to acknowledge the institutional and structure elements within which I am teaching in. It fails to address the employability stakes which many students are invested, it fails to address my limitations as a teacher and the mis-match of academic becoming and everyday experiences. Cruel optimism (Berlant 2011) allows for examination of the expectations and desires for Ph.D. and new academics and how projections and optimism for teaching and 'making a difference' is cruelled as a point of departure from the reality of academic work. Utopian ideals are cruelled in the gap between how we may like to create a feminist academic life and the real and everyday experiences of being an academic. I suggest that my fantasies of feminist pedagogy are unachievable within the conditions of higher education. Following Rasmussen (2015) I also ask 'is transformation something that can be achieved as part of a broad political project within education and other spheres? Or is this a form of "cruel optimism"?' (p. 195).

The pedagogic difficulties I recount in this chapter refer to my beginner and somewhat inept teaching practice but also to a 'condition of possibility that also risks having to survive, once again, disappointment and depression, the protracted sense that nothing will change and that no-one, especially oneself, is teachable after all' (Berlant 2011: 121–122). My reflections on this teaching experience are about teachable moments and the creation of places and spaces for teachable-ness. 'To be teachable is to be open for change. It is a tendency' (Berlant 2011: 122). The cruel optimism of the teaching exchange I have illustrated here is the striving through optimism for my teaching to work towards activism, social change, gender equity and living a feminist academic life that is misplaced within the educational fractures in university contexts.

For Ahmed (2017) living a feminist life is informed by feminist theory which she notes is both intellectual and emotional work because we experience gender as 'a restriction of possibility, and we learn about worlds as we navigate these restrictions' (p. 7). This restriction of possibility can be uncomfortable and can create 'bad feelings and disrupting

the normal flow of things' (Murray 2018: 164). Murray (2018) notes that those who do not fit within the academy work harder to survive and are often understood as disruptive. I suggest that the disruption made possible with feminist pedagogy is one of the ways academics can further the equity aims of higher education and to 'living a feminist [academic] life' (Ahmed 2017). Rather than being against individual students who challenge and may be read as sexist, following Ahmed (2015) I focus on building my teaching and learning practices and to shape these negotiations into generative critical enquiry. This chapter has extended our understandings of student experiences, beyond framing them as consumers, by exploring institutional and social structures that shape student and academic experiences of higher education.

In Closing

In this chapter I have explored and reflected on my negotiations towards becoming a feminist academic. I have drawn on my own teaching experience to reflect on feminist pedagogy and the institutional and personal impacts of gendered teaching and learning. I acknowledge the practices and understandings of feminist pedagogy are not fixed and are creative in their application within diverse contexts. However, as a teaching and learning tool, feminist pedagogy focuses on resisting hierarchies, draws on personal experiences and seeks to contest normative thinking and ways of being. These negotiations within teaching and learning spaces have consequences for access, equity, progression and retention of both academics and students. I suggest feminist pedagogy is a mechanism for responding to gender inequities within and beyond higher education, but this recognition and pedagogic practice is not trouble-free, and can fuel 'emotional disjunctures'…both 'seductive and disturbing' (Taylor 2013). This chapter begins to explore how feminist pedagogy may result in *and* respond to educational fractures which limit equity and sustaining engagement for feminist academics.

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