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## Feminist Praxis, Critical Theory and Informal Hierarchies

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## Feminist Praxis, Critical Theory and Informal Hierarchies

### Cover Page Footnote

Huge thanks to Tracey Potts, whose work I hope I have done justice to and who I feel very lucky to work with. Thanks also for the supportive comments from the peer reviewers.

# Feminist Praxis, Critical Theory and Informal Hierarchies

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**Abstract:** This article draws on my experiences teaching across two undergraduate media modules in a UK research-intensive institution to explore tactics for combatting both institutional and informal hierarchies within university teaching contexts. Building on Sara Motta's (2012) exploration of implementing critical pedagogic principles at postgraduate level in an elite university context, I discuss additional tactics for combatting these hierarchies in undergraduate settings, which were developed by transferring insights derived from informal workshops led by the University of Nottingham's Feminism and Teaching network into the classroom. This discussion is framed in relation to the concepts of "cyborg pedagogies" and "political semiotics of articulation," derived from the work of Donna Haraway, in order to theorize how these tactics can engender productive relationships between radical pedagogies and critical theory.

**Keywords:** feminist pedagogy, informal hierarchies, critical theory, poststructuralism, neoliberalism

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This paper offers tactics for combatting hierarchies within university teaching contexts through discussing how to transfer principles developed in small-scale feminist workshops to the more structured context of university seminars. My work teaching media, communications and cultural studies at a Russell Group University in the UK is initially used as a lens through which to explore some of the barriers preventing precariously employed early-career researchers from realizing critical pedagogic approaches to education. On a more hopeful note—in the politically optimistic spirit of critical pedagogy (Freire 2004; Giroux 2003)—I then suggest ways in which combining tactics from activist and/or radical-educational contexts with social and political theory can actively attenuate some of these barriers. I argue, more specifically, that this approach can facilitate what Donna Haraway describes as a "political semiotics of articulation" (1992, 309): the risky process of producing knowledge by engaging with, rather than speaking for, actors implicated in the sociopolitical structures that you are trying to contest. In the higher education contexts focused on here, this involves creating space for students to relate their own experiences to the social and cultural theories at stake and reflect on the role of education in reproducing broader social power relations. What Haraway offers, however, is insight into the difficulties of reconciling a transformative critique of power relations with working in a context shaped by institutional and informal hierarchies that undermine the aims of critical and feminist pedagogies.

As Sara Motta (2012) suggests, in elite university contexts the neoliberalization of education has positioned students as consumers and lecturers as givers of prepackaged information; this inhibits more sustained engagement with radical theory, which could enable a reflexive critique of these hierarchies. These structural institutional pressures are compounded by the danger of certain students with particular educational or cultural capital (Bourdieu 1984; Giroux 1988) being more confident than their peers at voicing opinions or engaging in debate about this complex material. The classroom dynamic can therefore create additional *informal* hierarchies (in line with Freeman 1984). Ironically, this has been identified as

a particular problem between international and “home” students at the very juncture at which universities are being encouraged to “internationalize” (Pyvis and Chapman 2005).

Using Haraway to tease out informative tactics from my own teaching practice, I focus on two case studies from my experience on undergraduate degrees in International Media and Communications at the University of Nottingham. I suggest that these tactics could potentially be used to foreground—and even contest—the two “neoliberal assumptions” that shape higher education in the UK: the principle that universities should act as service providers and the notion that their primary function is to produce workers “to compete ‘freely’ on the global economic stage” (Caanan and Shumar 2008, 5).

### **“Theory Provision”: A Customer-Service Model**

If there are more complaints because students are more aware of what they should expect of funding and are more demanding, then I think that’s a good thing.... When there’s a fee of £9,000, the university is obliged to show what they’re doing and provide a decent service.

— David Willetts quoted in *Times Higher Education*

The rhetoric of “consumers” and “service providers” in the above claim, by UK universities’ minister David Willetts (Ruiz 2014), epitomizes characterizations of higher education in the UK as being shaped by a neoliberal agenda (Olssen and Peters 2005; Deem, Hillyard and Reed 2007). Though the position of teaching varies between disciplines, claims about the quality of education that this neoliberalization of the university can provide (as reflected by Willetts’s line of argument) are frequently not borne out in practice because the institutional structures of the university actively disincentivize engagement with teaching (Lewis 2008; Cribb and Gewirtz 2013).

In the UK, for instance, the Research Excellence Framework (REF) rewards departments with strong research records, leading to a drive to employ those with high publication outputs. A focus on teaching can therefore lead to “proletarianization” of academic work, inhibiting academics from publishing and resulting in a two-tier system between teaching- and research-focused academics (Ellis et al. 2014). This is a particular danger for early-career researchers due to teaching fellowships and hourly paid work often being the only post-PhD option in a competitive job market (see Lopes and Devan’s paper in this issue). Paradoxically, this often leaves those who are the most committed to teaching—so technically providing the best “service”—in an especially vulnerable position (Chalmers 2011; Hassan 2013). To avoid this trap, therefore, staff who are scarce on time are often forced to rely on teaching tools (such as PowerPoint) that do not lend themselves to dialogical teaching praxis (Hill et al. 2012). In my own role, this—unfortunately—sometimes led to me taking a didactic approach to teaching theory, which undermined the aim of the theory itself (a problem discussed in more depth below).

Even if the “service-provider” model works, moreover, questions have been raised about whether this is an appropriate approach for teaching. The “service” approach engenders a mindset wherein staff are seen as providing prepackaged information that students either get “right” or “wrong” and bypasses critical reflection on how social and political theories can relate to students’ own everyday lives (Cribb and Gewirtz 2013). Effectively, therefore, the structures of the university not only undermine good teaching practice but inhibit the transformative effects of theory. More concerningly, Motta argues that both students and staff are actively discouraged from desiring change, due to desire itself being “structured to reproduce hierarchy, monologue and closure in British academia” (2012, 84).

What is implied by this argument is that both educators and students are ranked in line with the calculative logic of neoliberalism (Caanan and Shumar 2008, 5), with teaching or research evaluation results determining academics' career progression and examinations determining students' final degree grades. Because success is only measured in these terms, the

“rational” behaviour of the student is to learn to the test, to request education as a product and to resist when education as otherness and openness in content and form are delivered. The “rational” behaviour of the academic worker is to produce according to the values, timings and measures of commodification. (Motta 2012, 85)

The interpellation of both staff and students into neoliberal subject positions is exactly what social and political theories have potential to unpack; conversely, such institutional structures inhibit the capacity of theory to realize this potential.

### **Didactic Theory: The Inevitable Result of “Theory Provision”?**

Henry Giroux (1988, 2005) argues that social and political theory should lend itself to critical pedagogy by providing students with analytical tools to question the social structures that disempower them. More specifically, critical theory, critical race studies, and feminist and queer theory have potential to denaturalize intersectional forms of exploitation, which relate to class, race, gender and sexuality (Leonardo 2003, 2004). Therefore, such engagements with theory do not simply consist in the imparting of information but have potential to directly realize the transformative aims of critical pedagogy (Cho 2010). Critical and cultural theory should enable students to defamiliarize their “common sense” assumptions (Leonardo 2004, 11) in order to highlight (and create space to criticize) power relations shaping students' everyday lives and direct attention to the urgent sociopolitical problems that form the context for these everyday experiences (Grossberg 1994, 2).

This is not to say that theory is unproblematically radical, however, as evidenced by feminist critiques of critical theory for consecrating a white male canon (Braidotti 2013) and of cultural studies for its elitism (Hall 1990). As Haraway (1997) argues, theory can posit a transcendental viewpoint which assumes a veneer of neutrality. This is manifested, for instance, when attempts to “speak for” others in order to challenge socioeconomic exploitation imply that only the privileged theorist can expose the workings of ideology (Haraway 1992). As touched on in more depth below, this leads to misguided forms of ventriloquism where only actors assuming a veneer of objectivity are enabled to speak, whilst those they speak for are rendered silent. Feminist theories and pedagogies have, therefore, proven valuable in countering these problematic tendencies within critical theory by prompting closer reflection on the overlapping forms of power that shape sociocultural reality more broadly and highlighting how these relations can be reproduced in classroom settings (hooks 1994).

Combining radical pedagogies with critical social theories can thus be valuable in denaturalizing assumptions about sociocultural experiences and in foregrounding the relationship between power structures and education. Feminist pedagogies, however, draw attention to the difficulties in engaging students with these concepts without reinforcing the very social and cultural hierarchies they are attempting to undermine (Ellsworth 1989).

## Reconciling Radical Praxis and Antiessentialism

The perennial task faced in higher educational contexts is how to “teach” students about intersectional forms of exploitation without reproducing the structures that feed into this exploitation (Shor and Freire 1987). In terms of classroom dynamics, is it possible to make students aware of their own implication within these structures without presuming to speak for them or install hierarchies between students and staff (Ellsworth 1989)? This is a particular problem in relation to teaching poststructuralist theory—an important component of the critical theory that I teach—due to well-documented tensions between this body of work and calls for concrete political action (Moi 2011; Braidotti 2013), especially in relation to pedagogy (Lather 1995). Although these debates have abounded since the 1980s, such tensions have been accentuated by neoliberalism and the increasingly precarious position of early-career researchers in contemporary educational contexts. New sets of power relations have also emerged in higher education, which are associated with these broader political trends and require new tactics to counter (Motta 2012).

I have found Haraway’s political semiotics of articulation a useful framework for grappling with these issues within my own work, as it both constitutes the *object* of my teaching (social and cultural theory) and epitomizes the particular conception of knowledge production that is central to the critical and feminist pedagogies that inform my pedagogical *approach*. Though there is not scope to discuss the differences between these pedagogies here, as my focus is more on dealing with the practical question of hierarchies, the key principles I draw from both forms of radical pedagogy (in line with the affinities traced by Gore 1993, 7) are the following: a commitment to valorizing students’ own experiences; the relationship between individual and social transformation; an acknowledgement of the educator’s own implication in sociopolitical power relations; and connections with intersectional forms of activism. Before discussing the specific ways I have attempted to realize these principles in the context of the undergraduate classroom, it is useful to set out some of the pedagogic ideas that can be found in Haraway, due to the relevance of her work to my own experiences.

### Cyborg Pedagogies?

A number of thinkers have suggested that Haraway can be informative for realizing radical pedagogic aims as a form of “cyborg pedagogy” (Angus, Cook and Evans 2001; Garoian and Gaudelius 2001; Gough 2004). Though the cyborg was a relatively early figure in Haraway’s work, it represents an enduring theme—a challenge to the idea that knowledge production, and knowledge itself, can be pure and detached from sociopolitical context (Haraway 1983). By combining a series of conceptual oppositions within a single body, moreover, the cyborg disrupts epistemological hierarchies (between categories such as man/woman, culture/nature, human/machine, self/other) and thus challenges ways of seeing and interpreting the world that are predicated on these binary oppositions (Haraway 1983, 293). The cyborg, therefore, counters the “banking education” model where students are taught the “right” way of seeing the world and have to reproduce this understanding in assignments. This is because these normative ways of seeing are predicated on the binary oppositions that the cyborg actively disrupts (Angus, Cook and Evans 2001, 198). Cyborg pedagogies open space, instead, for experiences and understandings, which students might have, that do not “fit” with these dominant framings of the world.

Tim Angus, Ian Cook and James Evans give a concrete instance of how cyborg pedagogies could be enacted in practice when they describe using material objects as a starting point for thinking through the complex network of relations that lie behind everyday experiences. The example they provide is a student’s

image of a cup of tea, which he (Geoff) labelled as a “cybernetic organism” due to his sudden awareness of the complex network of relations that allowed the drink to become “reality”:

It could all so easily have gone wrong if one connection had not been properly made, if the order had broken down; if there had been a power cut; if the milk had gone off; if a plumber hadn't soldered that joint properly causing a water leak; if milk-tanker drivers had been part of the recent fuel protest; if his house had been flooded by the unseasonally high rainfall we have been having lately; if some crop disease had ruined a coffee harvest in Latin America; if the productivity of dairy cows in the UK declined; if his local shopkeeper had to close early that day due to ill health; if the kettle element overheated and melted the plastic; if he'd tripped over his flatmate's shoes and spilled his coffee on the hall carpet; if he had chosen not to buy that brand of coffee the last time he went to the shops; the list could go on and on. And that's the point: he's a “cybernetic organism,” a cyborg, a node in a network. (2001, 196)

This process illustrates the authors' aim of understanding the ways in which the relationships forged within this sociocultural network shape the lived reality of all the actors embroiled in it. Noel Gough, however, argues that radical pedagogies should do more and need to “experiment with the real rather than provide only tracings of it” (Gough 2004, 262). In other words, radical pedagogy needs to open up space for asking whether “reality” could be reconfigured differently and it should aim to transform power relations rather than simply mapping them.

### **Transforming Structures Rather Than Tracing Them**

Haraway's political semiotics of representation helps to develop a clearer sense of how radical pedagogy could be placed in productive dialogue with poststructuralist theory, whilst clarifying the difficulties of doing so in contemporary higher educational contexts. A key problem is of educators prescribing how the networks that are made visible by students should be interpreted. This problem is evoked by Haraway's concept of a “political semiotics of representation,” the process of advocates attempting to speak on behalf of those they are campaigning for in a misguided form of political ventriloquism: “Who speaks for the jaguar? Who speaks for the fetus? Both questions rely on a political semiotics of representation. Permanently speechless, forever requiring the services of a ventriloquist, never forcing a recall vote, in each case the object or ground of representation is the realization of the representative's fondest dream” (1992, 312). Drawing on debates about rainforest preservation, she describes how interventions into issues such as conservation or indigenous rights are often couched in language or deploy images that represent the rainforest as a space that needs to be separated from the human and saved from encroachment, in a process that reinstates the nature/culture opposition in constructing the inhabitants of the forest as indigenous or even nonhuman “others.” In other words, integral to a political semiotics of representation is the assumption that certain actors (be they indigenous populations, endangered species, or the forest itself) need to be spoken for by more powerful actors, as this is the only possibility of having their interests represented.

This has clear parallels with the example provided by Angus, Cook and Evans as, even though the process of mapping networks might reveal power relations, there is a clear danger of educators encouraging students to interpret such networks in particular ways. In relation to Geoff's cup of tea, for instance, they suggest: “You probably wouldn't say that slaughterhouse workers ‘collaborate’ with cows to produce cuts of beef, or that multinational companies make clothing ‘in collaboration with’ sweatshop workers. So, we're talking about connections, relations, power relations and responsibilities for them happening” (Angus, Cook and Evans 2001, 197). There is a risk here of certain actors (animals, workers) being spoken for in the way that Haraway is wary of, in order to represent them as being oppressed, a danger she sees as inherent in



advocacy (Haraway 2011). This approach, moreover, is also in danger of making students' observations fit with particular sociopolitical accounts of power, thus reinstating the educator's authority over students. While these cyborg pedagogies could be productive, therefore, it is necessary to reflect in more depth about how to highlight intersectional exploitation without predetermining how this exploitation is constituted and how to challenge it.

### **“Reality” as Multiple: Opening Space for Alternatives**

Further insight into how these approaches could be transformative, rather than simply heuristic, is found in Haraway's suggestion that “the powers of domination do fail sometimes in their projects to pin other actors down; people can work to enhance the relevant failure rates” (1992, 311). It is this task that needs to be the focus of radical pedagogy, of enhancing the “failure rates” of any attempt to reduce people to “ground and matrix” for the demands of the current socioeconomic system (Haraway 1992, 311). To refer back to Gough's assertion that pedagogy needs to be experimental and transformative, rather than simply mapping “the real,” a potential way of making it so is to foreground how reality is actively constructed, as this suggests that “the conditions of possibility are not given” and that “reality does not precede the mundane practices in which we interact with it, but is rather shaped by these practices” (Mol 1999, 75). This approach, therefore, opens space for understanding that reality could be enacted differently.

As I suggest below in relation to examples from teaching, a useful way of foregrounding this construction is through highlighting that no one definitive version of reality exists. This could be achieved, in part, by foregrounding the *work* needed to maintain the sort of sociocultural relations that Angus, Cook and Evans outline in their discussion of Geoff's cup of tea, but this is only part of the process. Highlighting the work required to stabilize a particular sociocultural reality is still only tracing what exists at present, even if this is a critical mapping. One way of moving beyond this form of critical description, to open up dialogue about how relations could be configured differently, is through illustrating the coexistence of multiple “realities” (Mol 1999, 2002). Though this is a difficult task to achieve in the classroom, it has potential to valorize the experiences of students that do not conform to normative expectations. This is because a key way of unearthing multiple realities is through generating dialogue between students about their different experiences of the same cultural phenomena, dialogue that—I suggest—has potential to traverse institutional and informal hierarchies within the classroom. I discuss how I have attempted to do this in practice below, but before entering into this discussion it is important to situate my work within its institutional context.

### **Situated Teaching and Institutional Hierarchies**

In line with Haraway, it is necessary to briefly situate myself within the teaching context I am discussing; reflecting on my own position, however, does not just cohere with Haraway's theoretical aims but is useful for (in her terms) diffracting some of the normative structures that have shaped my teaching experiences. While these structures both have inhibited my own teaching practice and have also been a problem for early-career researchers in general, I suggest that they are becoming increasingly normalized as part of university life and (as Lopes and Devan argue in this issue) seen as a “rite of passage” in academic careers.

Firstly, my own position as a university teacher in what Motta describes as an “elite higher education setting” (2012, 81) crystallized some of the tensions faced by early-career researchers in light of the specific pressures of a UK teaching context where research—as opposed to teaching—is what secures (non-precarious) work (Young 2006; Lucas 2007).<sup>1</sup> As these experiences were developed in a global “top 100”



university, my work was also framed by the demands of an institution competing in this marketplace (a positioning that came with a corresponding degree of privilege that warrants interrogation). As touched on above, these issues are compounded by the broader neoliberalization of education that puts staff under increased pressure to meet the needs of student “consumers” (Caanan and Shumar 2008).

The subject I teach—media and cultural studies—is also a useful lens through which to explore the value of radical pedagogic approaches, due to its use of social and political theories that a number of commentators have argued lend themselves to critical pedagogy (Giroux 2003; Leonardo 2004). As a lecturer on degrees in International Media and Communications, the courses I taught also occupied a fraught position between—on the one hand—a drive to support the creative industries and, on the other, the more traditional role of these disciplines as offering a critique of these industries (Buckingham 2003). This is because, while the roots of these degrees stemmed from Cultural Studies, which has traditionally been seen as holding potential to denaturalize particular socioeconomic hierarchies and valorize marginalized forms of knowledge (Giroux and McLaren 1994), recent shifts in arts and educational policy have situated the value of Media Studies as its capacity to enhance industry (Ramsey and White 2015).

Drawing on my own teaching, therefore, helps to highlight some of the institutional and economic tensions that inhibit radical pedagogies in contemporary higher education contexts within the UK (whilst also, I suggest, resonating with wider trends bound up with the neoliberalization of the university). In particular, reflection on my own experiences helps to illustrate a set of problems that—as a number of other articles in this special issue suggest—are intensifying in the current socioeconomic climate due to the increasingly precarious workforce that this climate has created.

### **Informal Hierarchies**

A further problem that emerges in the teaching of theory is the formation of informal hierarchies within classroom contexts. These hierarchies can even be exacerbated by critical pedagogic practices, which bestow (often unacknowledged) educational and cultural capital on students and staff that can be difficult to contest using critical pedagogic approaches. This difficulty can, unfortunately, be accentuated by internationalization, when linguistic and cultural barriers can also lead to divisions between members of the student body that can be difficult to overcome without staff drawing on their authority to counter these tensions.

Informal hierarchies are defined in Jo Freeman’s *Tyranny of Structurelessness* (1984; originally published 1972), which identified how nonhierarchical organizations often develop informal hierarchies of their own; these become difficult to challenge as no one has the authority to do so. As has been touched on in other articles within this special issue, intersectional forms of oppression can also manifest themselves in classroom contexts and are not just intensified by institutional structures but by hierarchies between students themselves.

In elite higher educational contexts, for instance, the dominance of students from higher socioeconomic backgrounds can result in disparities between levels of cultural capital (Bourdieu 1984; Giroux 1988). This, in turn, can influence students’ perceptions of one another and reinforce wider sociopolitical inequalities that relate to race, class and gender (Gerrard 2013; DiAngelo and Sensoy 2014). The nature of these hierarchies, however, has been complicated with the processes of neoliberalization that Motta outlines, as—rather than giving students capital that prompts them to prove their engagement with the material (in potentially intimidating ways)—the service-provider model has the opposite effect. Staff have to, instead,

“prove” their ability to break down and explain complex material for students, even if students themselves have not engaged with the readings (after all, students have paid for this service!).

In this context, conscientious students can become marginalized for doing work (i.e., readings) that they are never able to discuss in class, whilst students who have not done this work are confident at voicing opinions due to their cultural capital. This capital, however, is manifested as confidence to complain about shortcomings within the context of a commercial system rather than as academic competence or what Bourdieu terms a “sense of the game” (or understanding of how to navigate an educational system). Fear of negative student feedback (resonating with the rise in complaints praised by Willetts) compounds this problem, due to discouraging staff from speaking to students to determine why they have not engaged in the work. This, then, encourages the drive (outlined above) of staff teaching for assessment and students instrumentally learning what they need to pass quantifiable tests. To, again, reiterate Motta, this is not the fault of students or staff but a systemic problem reinforced by the service-provider model. Instrumental approaches to both teaching and learning are the “rational” behavior expected by this model, and the informal hierarchies that are perpetuated by these institutional structures within the classroom thus reproduce broader social and cultural hierarchies.

To remedy the problem of informal hierarchies in activist contexts, Freeman argues that certain structures are necessary, but only if they are designed to distribute power evenly. Any rules should ensure that “the group of people in positions of authority will be diffuse, flexible, open and temporary” so that privileged individuals “will not be in such an easy position to institutionalise their power because ultimate decisions will be made by the group at large”; and that “the group will have the power to determine who shall exercise power within it” (1984, 16). This problem (and Freeman’s proposed solution) resonates with some of the difficulties of teaching theory. As touched on by Motta, certain approaches advocated by both critical and feminist pedagogies actually undermine the potential for challenging informal hierarchies. This is because student-centered learning or dialogical approaches to teaching can—in contexts where students perhaps have higher levels of cultural capital than staff—lead to staff’s authority being diminished. A commitment to these methods, moreover, could lead to an inability to actively contest the reproduction of preexisting social hierarchies within the classroom, or even reinforce educators’ disadvantaged positions within more formal institutional hierarchies (in contrast with peers who do draw on their accrued capital). It is vital, therefore, to be continuously reflexive about the appropriateness of radical pedagogic models in order to avoid inadvertently reinforcing hierarchies rather than contesting them. To reconcile the need to counter informal hierarchies, whilst maintaining a dialogic space, it seems especially important to craft the flexible and open structures that Freeman puts forward; it is in relation to this task that insights derived from Haraway have proven particularly useful within my own work. The tactics I want to outline were developed in small-scale feminist workshops, so before focusing on specific examples of using these approaches in classroom contexts it is useful to outline the scope of these workshops and what I learned from them.

### **Nottingham’s Feminism and Teaching Network**

Postgraduate students established a feminism and teaching network at the University of Nottingham after running a series of successful workshops for undergraduates in 2009–10.<sup>2</sup> In 2009, PhD students from Law and English Studies ran a workshop to introduce feminist theory to undergraduate students after noting a lack of engagement with feminism on their respective degree programs. This resonated with broader trends, such as the closure of Women’s Studies courses and departments (Oxford 2008) and ongoing difficulty for feminist thinkers to negotiate tensions between their work and the academy (Telling 2013).

After a successful first workshop (attended by 30 students), the organizers were joined by postgraduates from sociology, cultural studies and critical theory (including myself) and went on to organize several other extracurricular workshops. At its peak, the workshop series had approximately 60 undergraduates attending, and throughout the sessions we developed a more in-depth awareness of how to engage students with diverse understandings and manifestations of feminism. After an initial workshop that focused on the different “waves” of feminism, for instance, we realized that our personal experiences about the lack of feminist theory on academic courses were borne out by students’ own understanding of feminism. Our decision to focus on the different “waves” of feminism was, in reflection, problematic due to not giving students enough space to explore their own personal experiences of some of the issues discussed. Time restrictions also meant that we were unable to enact the feminist pedagogic approaches that we had intended to be central to the workshops, as we were spending too much time providing sociohistorical context and then establishing key theoretical debates, which left insufficient time to enable students to relate the theories to their own experiences or engage in more interactive activities.

Subsequent workshops focused instead on specific topics or themes, such as second-wave feminism, the third wave and postfeminism, feminism and austerity, tensions within feminism, and feminist activism. In general terms, throughout the workshops I learned the importance of not making assumptions about what students felt about theory—particularly in relation to why certain students displayed antagonism towards feminism—and of the importance of enabling students to relate theories and historical examples to their own experiences. As explored in more detail below, and echoing Motta, as a collective we were also aware of the importance of introducing activist voices to the workshops and being reflexive about the limitations of the institutional context that we were working within.

Experiences in the workshop fed into my more formal university teaching, with the workshop focused on feminist activism proving particularly informative. In this workshop, to develop students’ understanding of some of the ideas explored by second-wave feminist activists, we developed an exercise that drew on Freeman’s arguments and encouraged students to relate her insights to their own experiences.

We initially provided the following quotes from Freeman:

Contrary to what we would like to believe, there is no such thing as a “structureless” group. Any group of people of whatever nature coming together for any length of time, for any purpose, will inevitably structure itself in some fashion....

The idea [of structurelessness] becomes a smokescreen for the strong or the lucky to establish unquestioned hegemony over others. This hegemony can easily be established because the idea of “structurelessness” does not prevent the formation of informal structures, but only formal ones....

Because elites are informal does not mean they are invisible. At any small group meeting anyone with a sharp eye and an acute ear can tell who is influencing whom. The members of a friendship group will relate more to each other than to other people. They listen more attentively and interrupt less. They repeat each other’s points and give in amiably. The “outs” they tend to ignore or grapple with. The “outs” approval is not necessary for making a decision; however it is necessary for the “outs” to stay on good terms with the “ins.” Of course, the lines are not as sharp as I have drawn them. They are nuances of interaction, not pre-written scripts. But they are discernible and they do have their effect. Once one knows with whom it is important to check before a decision is made, and whose approval is the stamp of acceptance, one knows who is running things.... (1972, 6–7)

Following this, we facilitated small-group activities and encouraged participants to discuss what they understood by “informal hierarchies” before relating the concept to their own university experiences. We asked them, in particular, to reflect on the sorts of problems caused by these hierarchies and whether they had experienced such problems; how they felt hierarchies could form; and what they personally could do (if they were one of the “ins”) to attain greater equality in a group. Rather than providing Freeman’s proposed solution to these problems, however, we instead asked participants to offer their own guidelines that could counter informal hierarchies without imposing formal hierarchical structures (whilst also reflecting on potential problems with these guidelines). Though I had initially hoped the task would generate discussion about hierarchies in general, and it did indeed give rise to a lively conversation about different types of hierarchical relations that students had experienced, the exercise also provided me with insights that went on to shape my approach to university teaching. This was because participants inevitably drew on their own experiences that predominantly derived from academic rather than activist contexts. Aside from the types of in-class hierarchy that were identified by participants, the rich discussion engendered by the exercise helped me to devise tactics for creating similar levels of discussion in more formal academic contexts; the exercise, therefore, fed into my own attempts to craft the type of structures outlined by Freeman.

### **Facilitating Engagement with “Everyday Theories”**

One of my first attempts to develop this flexible, but structured, approach to teaching was in seminars for a first-year module that explored theories of the everyday. The module was led by Tracey Potts, whose own research focuses on the politics embedded in everyday practices, spaces and material culture (Holliday and Potts 2012; Potts 2015). Her module, *Cultures of Everyday Life*, built on this theme, aiming to make the work of “everyday-life theorists”—such as Henri Lefebvre and Michel de Certeau—both accessible and politically meaningful to students. The purpose of this theoretical engagement was to playfully open up discussion about the cultural politics of everything from snacking to walking, from motorways to electricity, and enable students to grapple with the power relations embedded in the everyday. Though the module thus lent itself to critical pedagogic praxis—in line with Leonardo’s arguments that theory should defamiliarize cultural norms and values (2003, 2004)—I was always aware of the danger of encouraging students to “read” objects or practices in a prescriptive way.

Akin to Angus, Cook and Evans (2001), the lectures articulated some of the complex networks of social relations that underpin material culture and ensure that this culture is beneath our notice (and the relations sustaining it are beyond question). Whilst the aim of the lectures was to expose these (ordinarily invisible) networks to scrutiny, they achieved this by exploring *multiple* ways in which these entities could be understood (epitomizing the pedagogic ideas discussed above, in relation to Haraway). Everyday activities such as listening to iPods, for instance, could be seen (resonating with Adorno and Horkheimer 1997) as everything from a commodification of the act of walking (by overlaying an everyday commute with commercial music) to cultural resistance to commercial rhythms imposed by the infrastructure of the city (Bull 2004, 2007). In seminars, however, I was constantly aware of inadvertently shutting down the potential for multiple readings that had been opened up so productively by the lectures. There was a tendency for me to “explain” the readings in more depth rather than creating a more dialogical space where the theory could be related to students’ own lives. This was compounded by a degree of resistance (akin to that identified by Motta) where students—at least initially—did not grasp the theories at stake due to failing to engage with the readings.

In addition to these obstacles, there was initial resistance to the perceived content of the texts; students, in other words, illustrated the resistance to transformative education that Motta identifies. They initially seemed to feel the theories had no immediate “use value” to media and communications (although we would have certainly contested this perception!), and this, in turn, closed students to the transformative potential of the module due to inhibiting engagement with the texts. This lack of engagement was in danger of reducing the goal of the seminars as being to learn theory for the sake of succeeding in assessment alone, rather than reflect on its significance to their own experiences (echoing the debates about the problem of the calculative logic of neoliberalism).

We devised several tactics to challenge this dynamic. Firstly, we tried to orient seminars around activities where students were actively doing things that fed into and illuminated the theories at stake. In other words, we used practical activities as a route into the theory rather than understanding the theory first. Seminars were thus not about clarifying theory but actively theory-building, through reflecting on students’ own experiences, before synthesizing relevant theories to make sense of these experiences. Echoing Angus, Cook and Evans, one example of this was using students’ own images as a platform for discussion. Though social networks have significant political problems (discussed in the second case study below), in this module Facebook proved useful as a repository for student images (see *Cultures of Everyday Life* 2014). On a week-by-week basis, we asked students to upload materials that loosely related to everyday topics we were discussing and used these images to generate discussion in class about what they meant to individual students before defamiliarizing them using theory.

This activity was valuable in challenging both formal and informal hierarchies in seminars. On a more formal level, it challenged simplistic notions of “use value,” as imposed by university assessment procedures, by situating the transformation of students’ experience as central to the module. On an informal level, this approach countered some of the hierarchies within classes by privileging difference. Students’ contrasting experiences of the everyday were framed as a valuable academic tool, with dialogue about differences in everyday experiences playing a key role in defamiliarizing culturally normative assumptions.

This approach, therefore, was useful in recognizing multiple experiences of the everyday, which—in line with the principle of cyborg pedagogies—opened space for reflecting on how things could be configured differently. Images of alcohol, for instance, opened discussion about how social situations that are enjoyable for certain students could be alienating experiences for others. Images of technology, similarly, generated discussion about how students from China felt they “had to” create a Facebook account as soon as they came to the UK or be excluded from social events. Even trivial interactions, such as queuing for buses—prompted by several images of public transport—led to students explaining about their fears of appearing rude after contravening implicit social norms. I could not be a service provider in this context, as the material we were working on was generated by students themselves, leaving it impossible for me to contextualize it. What I could do, however, was structure the classes by asking less confident students, or those with different experiences of the everyday, to explain their images.

The module, therefore, enabled me to privilege the experiences of those students with less academic capital (manifested as confidence). This approach put everyday theories into practice, by actively getting students to defamiliarize their own experiences, but in addition—perhaps more importantly—this was done through explicitly deconstructing differences between students and using these as a route into grasping the theory. I was thus able to avoid imposing my own understanding of power relations as an interpretative framework for material culture, as well as prevent culturally normative conceptions of everyday life (on the part of dominant groups of students) from prevailing. The approach offered, moreover, a way of



foregrounding the material significance of the theories by showing—in a concrete sense—that everyday life could be enacted in very different ways, which are embroiled with very different sets of power relations. I saw this approach as putting Haraway's insights into practice by helping both myself and the students resist roles set for us by our institutional context—preventing us from being reduced to the roles of customers and service providers, respectively. It also enabled a more dialogical relationship to emerge between students, by valorizing not only individual experiences but the need to compare one another's experiences—opening up (in Mol's terms) the potential for reality to be enacted differently.

It is important to note, however, that realizing these aims is often a messy task, as such tensions cannot always be reconciled. Whilst this particular module lent itself to unsettling everyday assumptions, and provided clear routes for doing so without drawing on my authority, further exploration is needed about how to deal with topics that lend themselves less obviously to achieving such outcomes. When deconstructing ideas of race and gender, for instance, reflection is needed about whether radical pedagogic approaches necessarily trump the task of challenging normative worldviews. The tactics developed in the module, nonetheless, have continued to inform my subsequent work, even if balancing these aims is sometimes a messy and experimental process.

### **Fostering Critical Reflexivity about Technology**

The second case I want to discuss is another first-year core module, Communication and Technology, which was designed to explore the cultural impact of the Internet and enable students to reflect critically on their own uses of digital media. The engagement with activist texts, as explored in feminist workshops, proved a particularly useful approach in the module. Drawing on activism in the workshops was a way for us to make feminist theory meaningful; for instance, our exploration of second-wave feminism was dramatically strengthened due to including a discussion with a feminist activist who shared her experiences and really brought home to students why things they take for granted today were so important. Texts from activists were also regularly used in the workshops to make theory more politically meaningful and illustrate how feminism related to people's everyday lives. In line with the central tenets of feminist pedagogy (Luke 1992; Castillo 2011), we also attempted to use this engagement with activism to challenge the consecration of a particular academic canon and open up questions about what types of knowledge are privileged within the university.

In Communication and Technology, I tried to translate these insights to an undergraduate module that focused on cultural transformations brought about by the Internet. In general terms, I introduced texts by activists, for instance, including materials ranging from radical pamphlets (by the Diggers and the Levellers) to Zapatista communiqués and extracts from the (anti-McDonald's) McSpotlight website. Unlike Motta's description of using activist texts to the same end in postgraduate contexts, however, this was not a straightforward solution in the context of a first-year undergraduate module. Due to the aforementioned difficulties of encouraging students to engage with the readings, students initially relied on me teaching them about thinkers in class (i.e., speaking for activists rather than engaging students directly with their arguments). Again, this led to a problematic political semiotics of representation, where I was not only portraying activists' ideas to students but causing students to interpret activism in line with my own perceptions. I attempted to counter this effect through drawing on my experiences of engaging students with activist materials in the feminist workshops. Instead of asking students to read about political ideas we were looking at, therefore, I encouraged them to see how these ideas were enacted in practice and then discuss how best to realize them on their own.

A key initiative I wanted students to engage with, for instance, was the development of radical participatory media, using Indymedia as an example. Indymedia is a transnational participatory news network constituted by a number of interconnected local news sites where activists publish news stories that are entirely unedited (Garcelon 2006). The network was designed to be an experiment in “direct democracy” to test whether a nonprofit and nonhierarchical news site could be realized in practice (Giraud 2014). The network, therefore, was intended to be free of the “filters” generated by money and power that allegedly shape the mainstream media (Herman and Chomsky 1995) and to avoid internal hierarchies between its members (Pickard 2006a, 2006b). A key tenet of the site was also its engagement with marginalized social groups, with local collectives engaging in outreach work to encourage participation by these communities rather than speaking for them (Pickerill 2003, 2007), in order to avoid descending into the problematic forms of political advocacy described by Haraway. In recent years, however, the network has faced a decline, due in part to the emergence of informal hierarchies that prevented it from countering alienating power relations between its participants (Frenzel et al. 2010; Uzelman 2011). By exploring this type of news production, I wanted students to reflect on the political potential of digital media whilst also understanding some of the problematic power relations that could arise through engagements with technology.

One way of developing understanding about Indymedia could have been to assign readings about autonomous politics and then relate these concepts to the particular case of the news network. Instead I turned the lecture into a workshop and gave students reading materials from the site, asking them to determine which norms and values they felt the activists were espousing. I drew on an example of an activist being “outed” as an undercover policeman online, which had led to extensive discussion within the Indymedia community about how to use the site responsibly, in light of concerns that its anonymous publishing system could be abused to level accusations at innocent individuals (Indymedia 2010). I felt that the complex discussion about this dilemma that emerged online, about how to authenticate claims in an open news environment, would prove informative to students. After using this workshop to gain a basic understanding of autonomous media praxis, in corresponding seminars I asked students to collaboratively develop their own set of participatory media guidelines. I asked in particular for them to reflect on both the formal (institutional) hierarchies the site was resisting and the informal hierarchies that could emerge as an inadvertent consequence of this rejection of structure.

In effect, therefore, both this approach and the focus on activists’ work enabled discussion of a set of sociocultural relations that paralleled the experiences students were facing in class. By focusing on both the institutional pressures facing mainstream news production and the informal hierarchies facing radical-participatory media, they were able to reflect critically on who has access to producing and consuming knowledge, what is at stake in this process, and what structures can be put in place to both resist institutional power relations and avoid more informal hierarchies. Through this form of engagement with activist texts, therefore, students were able to gain a sense of how knowledge could be produced differently. Again, this occurred through foregrounding the existence of multiple realities (in this instance, different experiences of capitalism, news media and information production) in order to open space for dialogue about the possibility of other forms of social organization.

## **Conclusion**

Both examples I have drawn on here illustrate my attempts to put pedagogical insights derived from Haraway into practice through developing tactics to engage students with theory in a way that placed their own experiences at the forefront and allowed them to construct theoretical knowledge outwards from these



experiences. This approach helped me to avoid being positioned as a service provider whose role was to explain theory in a didactic way. It also positioned students as having a key role in knowledge production rather than being passive recipients of it. Although these are standard tactics within radical pedagogies, the neoliberal tendencies within higher education, which have been discussed throughout this article, have demanded further reflection about how to combat new barriers to engaging students with theory in a politically transformative manner.

The first step, in line with the concept of “cyborg pedagogies,” was to encourage students to understand that sociocultural reality is not stable but requires work and to open questions about who bears the consequences of this work. Encouraging students to draw on their own experiences (either through discussion, as in the feminist workshops, or through providing images, as in *Cultures of Everyday Life*) proved to be a useful starting point for this process. In line with Gough, the next stage was to prompt reflection on how these relations could be configured differently. Drawing on students’ own experiences was a means of achieving this, through exploring the coexistence of multiple realities that not only relate to students’ differing experiences and expectations of everyday life (derived from their specific cultural contexts) but to the different ways they experience the exact same phenomena due to their position within broader sociopolitical relations. Through using these differences as a platform for breaking down notions of a unified, normative sociopolitical reality, space was opened for asking whether things could be otherwise.

I do not mean to claim that realizing these approaches in practice is always a straightforward process, especially in light of new dangers opened up by the neoliberal “theory provision” model, which not only reinforces informal hierarchies but generates new power relations between staff and students that radical pedagogy can even accentuate. The tactics outlined above, however, can be a starting point for further explorations of how to resist the pressures of both institutional and informal hierarchies in higher educational contexts.

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