

An Emancipatory Educator Finds Her Liberated Pedagogy

In a Laidlaw leadership meeting in the winter of 2021, we were asked where we wanted to be in ten years. With little hesitation, I responded that I wanted to be an emancipatory educator. It was a title I had invented for myself to describe the type of academic I hoped to be, though if asked, I could not give a clear definition of the term. I knew I wanted to teach in a way that uplifted people, connected to my commitment to feminism, but I had no clue how all of that would come together in practice. This summer, Laidlaw gave me the space and resources to explore what being an emancipatory educator means, and what types of leadership styles and tools I needed to accomplish my vision. For my project, I created six lectures on early modern women using a feminist pedagogy.¹ This lecture series teaches about how systems of power affected women's lives in the past, as well as how women have resisted and circumvented those oppressive systems. In this essay I explore how in creating this project, I formulated a unique feminist, liberatory leadership style in a classroom setting, and I added invaluable tools to my feminist survival kit that I need to live a life as an emancipatory educator.

Before going further, it is important to understand what feminist leadership looks like and why creating a feminist survival kit is vital to sustaining this type of leadership long-term. When shaping my feminist pedagogy, I looked to bell hooks' *Teaching to Transgress*, a guide to the feminist pedagogy she uses in her university classrooms. hooks' feminist leadership style is motivated by "service, giving back to one's community," instead of a "private longing" for "personal glory."² I was immediately drawn to this emphasis on leading to give back, not taking power for the sake of being in charge. Further, hooks stresses that a

¹ The women in this curriculum include Catherine of Aragon, Mary Fillis and Cattelena of Almondsbury, Ana Nzinga, La Malintzin, and Glikl of Hameln. Each woman comes from a very different background to create a diverse curriculum.

² bell hooks, *Teaching to Transgress* (New York City and Abingdon, 1994), p.2.

feminist leader must “consider issues of reciprocity.”³ Feminist leaders must think beyond themselves to those they are leading because both leader and follower must be an active participant for everyone to learn. If teachers are looking to liberate students, those students must play their own role in the process, making student participation key to this feminist leadership.⁴ Feminist pedagogy also tells us everyone brings important knowledge to situations from their own life experiences, meaning students have a voice in the classroom as well as teachers.⁵ However, this does not leave teachers devoid of authority in guiding the classroom, it simply means recognizing student voices hold weight. Teachers’ authority comes from their knowledge of the world and the ways they are willing to share that knowledge with others.⁶

hooks herself admits these tenets of feminist leadership are difficult to enact and can often exhaust feminist leaders. However, another feminist author, Sarah Ahmed, came up with the idea of a feminist killjoy survival guide which would give feminist leaders the tools they needed to sustain their demanding leadership style. Her nine categories in her survival kit are books, tools, time, life, permission notes, other feminist killjoys, humour, feelings, and the body.⁷ During my Laidlaw summer I have been able to build and personalise each element of this toolkit in different ways to sustain my feminist leadership beyond my final Laidlaw summer.

Increasing My Self-Knowledge

The first goal I set at the beginning of my Laidlaw summer was to increase my self-knowledge so I could successfully incorporate my understanding of a feminist pedagogy into my teaching. At the core of this goal was understanding what kind of teacher I wanted to be,

³ Ibid., p.11.

⁴ Ibid., pp.14, 17-19.

⁵ Ibid.,pp.70-71.

⁶ Ibid., pp.84-86.

⁷ Sarah Ahmed, *Living a Feminist Life* (Durham and London, 2017), pp.235-249.

and this required self-reflection about how I naturally lead and how I wanted to lead in the future. I knew I could not just take hooks' pedagogy and adopt it wholesale as my own because hooks wrote from her own experiences, different from mine. So, I started to think about the teachers I had in the past and what I did and did not like in their classrooms. I found the teachers I learned the most from were the ones who were excited about what they were teaching and who cared for their students. They encouraged us to think critically, ask questions, and do our own explorations of the subject at hand. Connecting these reflections to feminist pedagogy, I realised that these teachers were encouraging the reciprocity hooks spoke of. They wanted their students to participate in the learning process, so they created an environment in which it felt both safe and fun to explore topics that interested students. To adopt this into my own leadership style, I knew I would have to work on being a more flexible leader. My natural leadership style centres on maintaining control, but to create a positive environment for students, I needed to learn to give them the space to guide the classroom and its discussions in the directions that interested them. To incorporate this sense of flexibility into my curriculum in a way that worked for me, whenever I set a discussion question, I came up with multiple plans for different directions that question could lead. This way, the students have space to feel like they have a say in the lesson, and I can feel confident knowing I have plans for a variety of answers and conversations. Overall, this period of self-reflection was vital in giving me the space to meaningfully reflect on how I could adapt a feminist pedagogy to my leadership style.

While working towards this first goal, I was able to build my survival kit by adding books, emotions, and other killjoys to the tools at my disposal. In Ahmed's survival kit, books provide a source from which feminist leaders can draw knowledge and inspiration to sustain their praxis.⁸ During my project, I added hooks to the books in my survival kit

⁸ Ibid., p.240.

because I found her advice incredibly thought provoking and meaningful. I will continue to engage with her work throughout my career for inspiration. In addition to books, I was able to build the emotion section of my toolkit. Considering emotions and how things make us feel is important to feminist pedagogy since feminists recognize that emotions are important and valid in the work we do.⁹ In my own self-reflection about my past teachers, I thought about how they made me feel – Did they make me excited to learn? Did I feel safe in their classrooms? Did they make me feel discouraged or frustrated? This exercise helped me use emotions as a tool in my research, supporting my feminist praxis. Here, emotions helped to strengthen my curriculum by thinking through the importance of how teachers and leaders make their followers feel as this impacts their subsequent work.

Balancing Life and Work

The second goal I set for my summer was to improve my time management skills, balancing my research and lesson planning. Instead, I ended up focusing on balancing life and work far more. In my first week and a half, I managed to complete the majority of the research for my project, so I had plenty of time to work on my lesson plans. However, in week two my computer broke, leaving me without access to my work for five days. At first, I was frustrated, scared all of my good momentum was stalled. But in that forced time-off, I was able to go on vacation with my family and spend time enjoying my life away from work. When I came back to my project, I found I was more energized to do my work, and I had new, exciting ideas for my curriculum. I realised that as much as I like to plan and always be on schedule, sometimes life getting in the way can be a positive thing. I believe important to enacting a feminist pedagogy like hooks' is setting a work life balance that allows time for rest and relaxation to do the hard work of being a feminist leader.

⁹ Ibid., p.246: hooks, *Teaching to Transgress*, pp.155-156.

The lessons learned in finding a work life balance have built my feminist survival kit in teaching me how to use my permission notes and thus, have time to appreciate life. Ahmed's permission notes revolve around allowing oneself to say no to something or take a break when the work of being a feminist leader becomes overwhelming.¹⁰ Taking the permission note life offered me when my computer broke relieved so much of the pressure I felt about making this project perfect. It gave me time to talk about my fear with my family and friends who reminded me that the work I was doing was something I loved. This leads me to the second element of the toolkit I built, life. For Ahmed, life is part of her survival kit because feminist knowledge can often be drawn from our everyday experiences, so we must allow ourselves to live.¹¹ Taking that time off to just live sustained my work over the summer, helped to build my confidence, and inspired creative thinking.

The Key is Creativity

The final goal I set for this summer was to improve my ability to communicate with students in an engaging way to get them to think critically about history and power. Early on in creating my curriculum I realised there were numerous practical difficulties in trying to present the lives of such varied historical women. For some, there was only one source from which historians were trying to piece together whole lives; for others, the sources had colonial biases or were in languages I could not understand. I had to think creatively to overcome these difficulties in gathering information, and in presenting these limited and skewed sources to students. Due to the difficulties I faced with primary sources, I decided to discuss sources as part of each lecture. This gives students practice in interpreting primary sources, a key skill in college level history courses, while also encouraging them to think about how power affects our understanding of how disadvantaged groups lived in the past. I

¹⁰ Ahmed, *Living a Feminist Life*, p.244.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p.243.

worked hard to find different and creative sources for each woman, ranging from autobiographical entries to wills to illustrations. I hope these different sources will keep students interested and teach them to think in different ways about history.

In working on student engagement, I built the tools in my survival kit as well as the other killjoys who supported my work. For Ahmed, tools are simply those things that push us forward in our feminist work from pen and paper, to computers and communication skills.¹² I realised one of my tools in my survival kit was my creativity. I found myself continually surprised by my own creativity in coming up with solutions to the problems I ran up against, and I now have much more confidence in my ability to think creatively. I also found other feminists in my life who provided an incredible support system when I got stuck in my project. For Ahmed, other feminists are important because they help encourage us when work gets hard, providing examples and knowledge that can inform our own feminist practice.¹³ My advisors were incredible guides when it came to problem solving, helping to push my thinking in new directions. Additionally, my action learning group ended up being an amazing support system, always encouraging me to keep pushing when I felt discouraged. Without their continual support and guidance, I would not have been able to sustain my creativity and novel thinking to finish my project.

Conclusion

After six weeks of work, self-discovery, and research, I can confidently give a definition of being an emancipatory educator. They are leaders who are there to uplift their followers and help them learn skills that can be taken far beyond the task at hand. They are leaders who are committed to creating positive and safe environments for their followers, and they lead through example. I found hooks' guidance integral to constructing this definition,

¹² Ibid., pp.241-242.

¹³ Ibid., pp.244-245.

but equally important was taking hooks beyond the pages of her book into practice. Beyond the lessons learned from hooks, I found sustaining feminist pedagogy required support from those around me, as well as time and space away from work. I found thinking creatively and learning to be flexible were also key to enacting hooks' ideals. Without my Laidlaw summer, I would not have had the space to experiment with my leadership style and finally put a definition to my career goal of being an emancipatory educator.

Bibliography

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