Where do I belong?

Innovating the online classroom using feminist digital pedagogy.

Miranda Woodland

Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences, Athabasca University

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Dr. Elizabeth Lange

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In an opinion published by *Inside Higher Ed,* Peter C. Herman writes, "Online learning is not the future. Never was. Never will be. It's just not what students want" (Herman, 2020). The opinion was published online months after students transitioned from face-to-face (F2F) learning to an online environment. It seems that neither Herman nor his students were familiar with the online learning environment, and in fairness, it is different from what he and his students signed up for. It is easy to understand why given the abrupt transition, not to mention the many aspects of life that were disorienting early into the pandemic, it would be easy for Herman and his students to decide that online learning was ineffective.

However, only months before the first SARS-CoV-2 lockdowns, Maclean's Magazine published an article about the loneliness of university students attending in-person classes. The article points out that college and university brochures include pictures of *groups* of happy young students (Khaja, 2019) – campus communities – but the reality of moving away from home to attend post-secondary school is that it can be isolating: "[S]tarting post-secondary also means leaving behind valuable support systems—childhood friends, families, and at times entire communities" (Khaja, 2019).

These two articles raise important questions about the nature of transformative learning in online education: Do instructors understand the skills required to teach an online course well? Would students fare better if they could stay in their communities while receiving the same level of education touted by institutions offering F2F learning? Is the issue location – online versus F2F – or is it pedagogy implemented in these environments that leads students to draw conclusions about which experience is better?

This essay investigates how a feminist digital pedagogy can help foster community in online learning in higher education. First, it will review the history of distance learning, changes in technology, and neoliberal education. Next, it will present Chick and Hassel's (2009) framework for feminist digital pedagogy and its limitations. Lastly, it will discuss critical considerations for online distance education. By providing clear examples of feminist pedagogy in practice, the goal is to provide guidance on creating a transformative and inclusive online education environment in higher education.

Background

Distance Education

According to Paul Bouchard, "[t]he early 1970s saw the first theoretical discussions surrounding the particulars of learning at a distance" (Bouchard, 2013). While certain forms of distance education existed prior to the 1970s, the learner's experience was at the center of these discussions (Bouchard, 2013), given that learners were self-directed with little input from teachers. Due to the "transactional distance," there was little dialogue between students and teachers (Moore, 1993 in Bouchard, 2013). This model of forwarding information to students, who would then complete readings and forward assignments back to teachers is the banking model Freire (2000) argued against and continues to be a reason for teachers to be concerned about offering courses online, as the example in Herman (2020) reflects.

New Technology in Distance Education

Educator and online education pioneer Jane E. Brindley provides a reflection of her time at Athabasca University – starting in late 1977 - and subsequently the University of British Columbia in Susan Bainbridge and Norine Wark's book, *The Encyclopedia of Female Pioneers in Online Learning*. Brindley describes how "rudimentary" distance education was in the

beginning with technology at the time limited to telephone communication with tutors (“Jane Elizabeth Brindley,” 2023). The introduction of online learning with increased communication technology allows “…the opportunity for students to engage in collaborative learning and to have much better and timelier communication between learners and the instructor. Course design and teaching methods are based on research and provide much better support for students” (Bainbridge & Wark, 2023).

It is not only that online distance education (ODE) allows for more significant interaction and collaboration that has improved the distance learning experience, but also the women like Brindley who influenced the inclusion of care at support services for ODE students. As she notes, early in her career, support systems were "side-projects" even at brick-and-mortar institutions; implementing these supports at Athabasca University was innovative (Bainbridge & Wark, 2023). While Brindley never refers to herself or her work as feminist, her contributions helped shape ODE in a way that lays a foundation for feminist pedagogy in online classes.

While pioneers like Brindley encouraged a principle of care in online learning, there remain deficits in the Learning Management System. As Dron (2021) states, education is “a large and complex technology…[it] is the result of layer upon layer of other mutually constitutive and affective technologies that both combine and compete. When we build new technologies, from LMSs (learning management systems) to lesson plans, they are built upon and from others” (Dron, 2022, p. 156). Perhaps, the issue is that by building on the technology of distance education in its early forms of mail-in assignments, there is a tendency to rely on the transactional methods of distance learning. By calling online education “online distance learning," *distance* is literally put ahead of *learning*. A feminist pedagogy requires students and teachers to view the structure of the LMS through a critical lens: It maintains a top-down

approach to education and can only be repurposed insofar as instructors are willing to consider the effectiveness of their pedagogy in an online environment, develop new skills and tools, and hack the LMS mercilessly (Morris & Stommel, 2018).

Fourth-Wave Feminism, Neoliberalism, and Access to Education

The fourth wave of feminism can be described as "rooted in the digital space and is characterized by engagement with social media and call-out culture" (Klassen, 2022) and "stresses the importance of women's share in media democracy. As [fourth wave feminists] believe, it assists in overcoming class distinctions and making good use of accessibility facilitated by internet technologies" (Malinowska, 2020).

When applied specifically to access to education, information available from Statistics Canada reveals that in 2020, almost twenty-four percent of women aged 15 and older reported taking formal training or learning through an organization or institution online; the number of men in the same age category was slightly higher at nearly twenty-six percent (Statistics Canada, 2021). While these statistics appear promising, there is a lack of data available with respect to online university enrollment at the national level. Additionally, these statistics reflect online course activities during a year filled with pandemic lockdowns and the transition to online learning out of necessity rather than choice. Further, the total percentage of women enrolled in post-secondary education in Canada in 2020/2021 was higher than the percentage of men – 57% compared to 43% - (Statistics Canada, 2021) therefore, more investigation is needed to determine the percentages of men and women who were able to transition to online post-secondary learning.

Spencer and Lange note the neoliberal impact on education "is that liberal adult education, including education for leisure, recreation, community development, social justice,

and critical understanding, is disregarded in favour of skills training and credentialism for the new economy" and that, "[t]he push to introduce new technologies into education is driven by a twin belief that this will be cost effective and will mimic the use of new technologies in business, thus preparing students for the new work world" (Spencer & Lange, 2014). According to Statista.com, the revenue from online learning is expected to reach over 6 billion CAD in 2023 (*Online Education - Canada*, 2023), with the bulk of earnings generated from online university education and the Canadian Digital Learning Association reports that post-secondary institutions will continue to expand their hybrid and online course offerings (Irhouma & Johnson, 2023).

While online course offerings increase, potential students still require a multitude of supports – financial means, family or spousal support to take on care roles, and employer support, whether to help with financial obligations or provide a flexible schedule - to make education accessible. Once students overcome these barriers and achieve access to the online classroom, how can educators provide a transformative learning experience?

Feminist Digital Pedagogy

What's in a name?

Looking specifically at online or digital spaces*, cyberfeminist pedagogy* "attend[s] to the ways in which digital technologies both subvert and reinscribe gender, race, and other corporeal hierarchies in virtual space… But cyberfeminist pedagogy would also commit to the tenets of feminist pedagogy such as ethics of care, community-based curriculum, collaboration, and embodied praxis." (Richards, 2011). Feminist digital pedagogy considers "how we can bring feminist pedagogy to the online [learning] environment, focusing on our teaching philosophies and values rather than on the limitations of the technology or on how we can operate under traditional and inappropriately gendered approaches to technology" (Chick & Hassel, 2009).

Keeping these nuances in mind, this discussion will focus primarily on feminist digital pedagogy. However, cyberfeminist pedagogy remains an important consideration for how feminist perspectives are incorporated into broader online communities.

Framework for Feminist Pedagogy Online

Chick and Hassel (2009) provide a three-part framework for implementing feminist pedagogy in an online environment. First, class dynamics and environment should provide an area "of mutual respect where both teacher and all students take active, responsible, and shared roles in the learning process" (Chick & Hassel, 2009). The virtual classroom should be a community where students can communicate their experience and knowledge and provide a caring environment for the wellbeing of all participants (Chick & Hassel, 2009). Much like the F2F environment, the pedagogical considerations provided in Table 1 are also concerns in the online environment.

Communication	Positionality	Power & Authority
How often do students communicate with each other? With the instructor?	What is the positionality of the students based on race, gender, sexuality, income level, (dis)ability?	Do students feel that they have a voice?
How often does the instructor communicate with students?	What is the positionality of the instructor based on race, gender, sexuality, income level, (dis)ability?	Is collaboration a part of class activities?
How are disagreements resolved?	Are students aware of their positionality/privilege compared to other students and the instructor?	

Democratic processes

Table 1: Considerations for feminist pedagogy based on the work of Chick & Hassel (2009)

In order to avoid students developing a feeling of isolation, instructors must ensure that the online environment is not a place where students merely login to drop off assignments (Chick & Hassel, 2009) and regular communication by the instructor is crucial for fostering student engagement (Chick & Hassel, 2009; Eudey, 2012; Honeycott, n.d.).

The second category identified in the framework is "Definition of Knowledge" (Chick & Hassel, 2009). Feminist instructors and students must consider how knowledge is constructed. In this case, the instructor analyzes how students learn in groups or individually, whether assignments require critical reflection or regurgitation, whether the authority comes from a textbook or is a synthesis of information from multiple sources including peer input and personal

experience (Chick & Hassel, 2009). In order to encourage dialogue between students, they are asked to take the lead in discussion forums, an "Ask the Class" (rather than "Ask the Instructor") message board is made available, and a wiki can be used to compile resources (2009, p. 204). The goal is to *simulate* F2F classroom interaction and "collaborative construction of knowledge…as students build on everyone who came before, making connections and striving for different perspectives" (2009, p. 205).

The third category is "Habits of Mind" specific to feminist pedagogy. In this case, "students have, ideally, developed thinking patterns that carry over into their other courses, their work, and their lives" (2009, p. 208). After the class ends, students should continue to recognize the influence of gender, race, and class in all aspects of life and continue to think critically about their interaction with power and authority. By fostering this awareness in students, feminist pedagogy contends it "instills a sense of responsibility to others beyond oneself and promote engaged and informed citizens" (2009, p. 208). According to this theory and framework, transformative learning is possible in an online setting.

Dialogue and Discussion Forums

In their dissertation, McKenzie (2019) provides a text message sent to a fellow feminist instructor: "In the classroom, I can see the change [in my student's understanding]. Even with a standard test, you can tell who gets it and who doesn't. But here? Online? Good luck…." (McKenzie, 2019). The main form of communication in online education is via discussion forums in the Learning Management System (LMS). While the potential benefit is that the forum, because time is not constricted as in a F2F class, "affords all students an opportunity to contribute to the conversation and to have their ideas considered by me [the instructor] and all

other classmates" (Eudey, 2012), there are many concerns about the limitations to the online forum (Chick & Hassel, 2009; McKenzie, 2019; Morris & Stommel, 2018).

A main concern is that discussion forums were developed and are implemented with the assumption that they can simulate F2F dialogue. Despite Chick and Hassel providing examples of how the discussion forum can be used, they also state, "[t]he silences of cyberspace and the frequently solitary nature of online learning mean that in many online classes there are rarely discussions other than what's assigned, no debates, no laughter, no groups sitting together and having heated or engaged conversations about anything" (2009, p. 198). Morris and Stommel take this critique a step further: "The discussion forum becomes a shackle, an assessed, graded component of a student's performance. It defeats its own purpose" (Morris & Stommel, 2018, p. 1275). Requirements such as frequency of posting, number or required responses to posts, due dates and word count minimums or maximums do not reflect the spontaneity or flow of F2F classroom discussion. Further, requirements do not encourage thoughtful engagement, they enforce attendance (2018, p. 1277).

The reality is that communication technology outside the LMS advanced rapidly through the 2000s and 2010s with "most students, no matter how diverse, are already online, using the tools familiar and relevant to them, tools connecting them to communities that compel them to engage" (2018, pp. 1295–1296). The discussion forum within the LMS is not only limiting by not replicating F2F discussion, it also has not kept up with the communication tools available outside of the virtual classroom. The discussion forum is inadequate for fostering community, especially the type of community necessary for social change. Other tools must be incorporated into online learning for social transformation.

Critical considerations for ODE from a feminist perspective

For Morris and Stommel, “teaching begins with inquiry. And that’s why digital pedagogy is so important…Only an attitude of pioneering exploration will make heads or tails of the potential for online learning; and it is the digital pedagogue who will lead that charge” (Morris & Stommel, 2018, pp. 547–548). The following sections review how principles of feminist pedagogy can be implemented in the online classroom.

Emphasize care and support

In a Women’s Studies in Religion online graduate-level seminar, Dhala and Johnson (2021) incorporated check-ins, check-outs and “vibe checks” into their weekly sessions as part of a holistic approach to teaching (Dhala & Johnson, 2021, pp. 168–169). Students are encouraged to share physical and emotional experiences, rather than solely drawing on research, so that mind and body remain connected (2021, p. 168). By students checking in, it allows teachers some insight into why the student may be participating in a certain way. Further, by the teacher also checking in, students can identify commonalities that can “help to create a sense of mutuality” (2021, p. 169). Check-ins and check-outs also help guide lesson plans. For example, if students express they are feeling stressed about an upcoming assignment during the check-in, additional time may be spent clarifying expectations. Similarly, the check-out can help gauge how students feel they are doing and give students another chance to express their voice with questions or comments (2021, p. 169).

Dhala and Johnson explain, “We were intentional in adopting an engaged pedagogy inspired by bell hooks's *Teaching to Transgress*. Our classroom was a place of mutual vulnerability for instructors and students” (2021, p. 168). In the Zoom-classroom-community students also volunteered for roles to maintain safety and fairness. These roles are vibe-watcher, timekeeper, and class host. The vibe-watcher not only steps in to address conflict, they also

watch for students who seem to be having a difficult time to ensure individual wellbeing (2021, p. 170).

The instructors maintained an embodied approach in a class that was moved from in-person to online by upholding a level of care. While some practices – bringing food to share and field trips – had to be discontinued, the practices described here could still be used in a virtual setting. Even if Zoom (synchronous) had not been an option, creating roles, periodic check-ins, and video posting can still be implemented in an asynchronous environment to foster connection (Honeycott, n.d.).

Encourage collaboration and co-construction of knowledge

Dhala and Johnson (2021) also describe their approach to collaborative teaching. As co-instructors with different intersections, the pairing could "model an approach to holding a diversity of perspectives and experiences" (2021, p. 171) which extended to students so that they had equal belonging. As suggested by Chick and Hassel (2009), guest speakers were also introduced to speak to their experiences. Students were also encouraged to share their "knowledge, experience and perspectives" (Dhala & Johnson, 2021) and student facilitation was incorporated into the assessment.

Utilize technology for meaningful engagement

Several sources (e.g. Chick & Hassel, 2009; Dhala & Johnson, 2021; Dron, 2022; Morris & Stommel, 2018) recognize the need to move outside of the LMS for a more engaged and meaningful experience.

However, moving outside of the LMS also raises privacy concerns. Morris and Stommel (2018), among others (e.g. Baker & Ryalls, 2016; Eudey, 2012), have suggested social media

such as Facebook course pages or Twitter with the idea that public engagement can broaden learning opportunities. From a cyberfeminist perspective, this raises concerns about the treatment of women, or any person who identifies themself as a feminist.

Chick and Hassel (2009) recommended the use of student webpages before social media was wide-spread and a billion-dollar industry. Rather than risk safety, student webpages, blogs and e-portfolios are options that should be encouraged today. When used in conjunction with discussion forums, students can create a broader showcase of knowledge and experience.

Technology is also a tool for praxis and social change moving outside the virtual classroom. Eudey explains, “The inextricable link between self and larger systems is a mainstay in feminist pedagogy and feminist activism. Feminist teachers and scholars advocate for connections between what is learned in the classroom and what occurs within communities and families, emphasizing the ways in which sex, gender, and sexuality are experienced and valued within societies, institutions, and disciplines” (Eudey, 2012, p. 237). She describes that often social change through service learning and activism are completed through face-to-face relationships, rather than participating in online civic engagement. However, there are social projects that are completed entirely online.

Eudey stresses that students are “especially adept at using video to elicit emotional responses from viewers. Students can be taught both to utilize these social networking tools and to be critical consumers of them (2012, p. 240). This is true in the case of YouTube, where full lectures on social justice topics are available, and now TikTok (Kattari & Hess, 2022). Again, if these are not options students are comfortable with, Eudey provides a list of service learning opportunities that students can participate in virtually: “creating or digitizing materials and submitting these electronically to an agency; posting materials to a website, wiki, blog, or social

networking page to support or promote agency activities or interests; creating or expanding an online presence for an agency; interacting online or by phone with agency clients, donors, or volunteers; working with organizational databases; engaging in research and outreach activities; and translating current agency materials into additional languages" (Eudey, 2012). When purposefully incorporated, these tools, along with a foundation in feminist pedagogy can provide students with a transformative learning experience that leads to social change.

Continuously assess and adapt

McKenzie (2019) notes that during their literature review, "conversations between feminist teachers discussing how they practiced feminist pedagogy in online spaces was largely missing. There were a few studies which did specifically articulate, at least to some in some capacity, the ways in which the values of feminist pedagogic practices could be applied within online spaces" (Chick & Hassel, 2009; Turpin, 2007 in McKenzie, 2019, p. 92;) . As previously noted, the discussion forum can be student-facilitated, or students can be directed to resources outside of the LMS. However, McKenzie notes through their reflective practice that it is still hard to gauge student understanding (McKenzie, 2019). By implementing a post-course reflection assignment, McKenzie was able to make adjustments to their pedagogy for the online environment and to receive positive reinforcement that both students and instructors need:

> "As I sat grading this past quarter's final assignment, submission after submission left me feeling this urgency to share with others. See, look at this, look at what my student said. I felt like that five year old showing everyone they know a smile face sticker they got for done a good job. Why did I want to share it so badly? Was it just for bragging rights? No, I mean of course I appreciate the accolades just as much as any person does about doing their job well. But it was something more. Their stories. Their shared thoughts about their experience in my class, the applicability of what they learned in class to their lives outside of the classroom, and the changes in their lives – nearly every single one for the better – touched me, moved me and spoke of something that I only feel a facilitator for. Something that can only be expressed in reflected experience." (McKenzie, 2019, p. 110)

Conclusion

The debate surrounding the effectiveness of online learning in higher education is far from resolved. The comparison of isolation in online and F2F learning experiences highlights the need for a thorough investigation into the pedagogical approaches used in both environments. This essay has explored how feminist digital pedagogy can contribute to fostering a sense of community in online education that can lead to a transformative learning experience for students. By examining the history of distance learning, the role of technology and neoliberal education, and Chick and Hassel's framework for feminist digital pedagogy, this essay has demonstrated that the key to successful online education lies in the thoughtful implementation of transformative and inclusive pedagogical practices.

As the world continues to adapt to the technological advancements and diverse needs of students, educators must remain open-minded and reflective in their teaching methodologies. The use of feminist digital pedagogy provides an opportunity to create an empowering virtual classroom that delivers quality education and addresses the isolation and loneliness experienced by many students in higher education. By embracing and implementing the principles of feminist pedagogy and sharing the results widely, educators can help reinvent ODE and prove that online education has the potential to be an effective and transformative learning platform.

The quality of the educational experience is determined by the pedagogical approach employed by educators, not by technological tools. The success of ODE, therefore, rests on the ability of instructors to adopt and effectively implement feminist digital pedagogy and other inclusive, student-centered methodologies. As educators and institutions continue to refine their online teaching strategies, they will be better positioned to support and enhance students'

learning experiences, contributing to a richer, more connected, and fulfilling educational landscape.

EDST 630 Reflection

My in-person higher education experience resembles the student experience reflected in the Maclean's article (however, I didn't even have Netflix to binge-watch in the early 2000s). I was one of over fifteen hundred students in my first-year sociology "face-to-face" class. There was only a mid-term and final exam, both multiple-choice. While the class sizes decreased in the upper years of my undergraduate degree, it was hard to find a community to fit into both within my educational setting and in the broader context of being in a large city as an introvert. Now, my location is a small rural community and driving distance to family and friends but, it can still be isolating to go through an *online* degree program.

I chose feminist digital pedagogy as the topic for this paper as a student who has (once this paper is submitted) completed five courses with varying levels of engagement. A consistency is that the first week in each class includes introductory posts by students. However, continuing to build relationships throughout an online course is difficult. My experience and continued interest in feminist pedagogy led me to several questions: 1) How can we truly engage in dialogue if even the introduction feels like checking a course requirement box? 2) How are students expected to be engaged when instructors are absent? 3) If I was creating a course, how could I practice feminist pedagogy and make the course more innovative?

In some ways, this course reinforced my feelings about higher education as an institution. We discuss community, decolonization, and knowledge sharing and it is hopeful. But, at the same time, I ran for student council this year, and there were only 54 votes in total shared between 15 candidates. We discuss topics like civic engagement, or participatory democracy;

clearly not everyone practices them. That being said, enrolling in the MAIS program and participating in this class are not a “means to an end” for me as they may be for others. As much as I would love everyone I meet to go out and be a social justice warrior, I can only control my transformation and my contributions because of it.

I view transformation as progressing towards a better world – for everyone, not just the most privileged – and education as knowledge sharing in many forms: creative arts, storytelling, collaboration and dialogue.

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