Witnessing with cameras off: Feminist pedagogy and the Zoom classroom

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Witnessing with cameras off: Feminist pedagogy and the Zoom classroom.

In March 2020, many of us were sent home from campus and introduced to Zoom as a new mode of teaching. Experience quickly exposed limitations: those with reliable access to technology and a safe, private, and quiet place where they could focus on their studies were more likely to succeed; women, who are often required to perform most, if not all, of the household labor, were disproportionately disadvantaged in a model which relocated learning to the home; and Zoom “flexibility” cut like a double-edged sword through a work/life balance that already demanded that we be “always on.”

Despite these limitations and other challenges, I saw amazing things happen in my Zoom classroom, and came to believe that feminist pedagogies were always already embedded on the platform. With Covid as a co-temporality (Madison, 2007), which connected students at the same time as pulling them apart, our class employed intersectional ways of knowing to bear witness to each other and transform our collection of “me’s” into a collective “we” (Calafell & Chuang, 2018).

Zoom as feminist pedagogy
The basic features of Zoom – screen sharing, breakout rooms, the chat, and emotive reaction buttons – mirror feminist pedagogies by providing diversity of voices, dispersing control of knowledge production, and delivering interactive, community learning.

Anyone in the classroom can Share [their] Screen, and when we activate this feature, we shift authority from singularly held by the teacher to collectively shared by the community. This de-centering continues as students enter Breakout Rooms where they have full autonomy to act as experts and work together in ways which privilege their perspectives, strengths, and lived experiences.

In their course reflection papers, students referred to Breakout Rooms as “safe spaces” where they “could ask questions without fear” and learn through each other. Students reported “feeling empowered” through their ownership of the Breakout Rooms and feeling more accountable to the fuller learning community in the main Zoom room, which they would report back to after breakout sessions. They were more committed to each other, which meant that they showed up for one another both literally, through near perfect attendance throughout the semester, and emotionally, through support given in the Chat and through Reaction emojis.

The Chat also served as a productive site where multiple and diverse voices would raise organic, and often parallel, discussions. Students used the Chat to share and excavate experiential knowledge, making it a powerful, community-centered knowledge (re)sourse. Reaction buttons provided another alternative avenue for participation, which centered the expression of affect critical to community building and maintenance. Both the Chat and Reaction buttons provided flexibility for students whose learning space did not allow for camera or microphone forms of participation. The Chat and Reactions provided genuine and important contributions, rather than artificial or shallow participation, as they were contextually salient and valued by community members. Students reported preferring the “more personal” modes of these features and valuing them as “little things in class that made [me] feel more connected.”
Covid as co-temporality & co-performative witnessing

Together in our Zoom classroom, Covid provided a “co-temporality” (Madison, 2007) – we all recognized that we actively shared this distinct time, regardless of our physical locations and disparate identities. The cis-white-hetero-woman taking classes remotely from her family farm occupied common ground with the trans-Asian American-queer-man logging into class from the back room of his service industry job in a nearby city. Younger siblings bounded into our classroom, which was also their living room; our classmate was not just our classmate, but also their sister. By occupying our Zoom classroom, we were in action with others “inside the politics of their locations, the economies of their desires and their constraints… inside the materiality of their struggles and consequences” (Madison, 2007, p. 829). We were engaged in the political act of co-performative witnessing.

In being there and with one another, we opened spaces for each other to tell stories, speak of experiences, and “excavate the knowledges and belongings” that had long been marginalized by systems of power on the basis of our genders, races, classes, etc. In this radically collective space we built, we realized our identities as not only intersectional but also both/and. Both marginalized as queer, trans, Latinx, Black, woman, etc. and capable as knowledge producers and agents of change. Our Zoom classroom “cut across” fixed locations of time, space, gender, race, and class to “resist, survive, and to (re)make culture and belonging” (Madison, 2007, p. 827). During Covid, this was just what we needed.

Toward the “both/and” beyond Covid and Zoom

Reflecting through the lens of feminist pedagogy, I saw both Covid and Zoom as borderlands – we are here, but not here; we are together, but apart. Zoom and Covid operated as trafficked intersections, places where things were negotiated and where we tried to survive. For me, survival meant leveraging Zoom affordances for feminist pedagogy, and being “visible in solidarity” with students, rather than in power or in charge (Calafell & Chuang, 2018, p. 111). I accomplished this through intersectional reflexivity, by revealing and sharing the multiple and simultaneous ways in which I am privileged and marginalized (Jones, 2010).

As I sensed the collective fear, stress, and anxiety in our Zoom classroom, I realized that I had to “put [my] body in spaces where [I felt] at risk, because doing so may create a safe space for someone else” (Jones, 2010, p. 124). Practicing radical honesty, I shared my they/them pronouns in class for the very first time, and my screen name on Zoom invited students to call me “KC,” removing my gender, and power, from the equation. This created “symmetry, connection, and points of possibilities” (Calafell & Chuang, 2018, p. 111) through which we co-created a safe space for each other. Although, in their feedback, students gave me all the credit. We built our community together, through our collective efforts to see each other, even with cameras off; to hear each other, even while on mute. We heard more deeply the “day-to-day soundscapes of living subject in the communities where they live” (Madison, 2007, p. 828).

This year, my university is back in the classroom. While we’ve moved on from Zoom, we still occupy the borderland of Covid where masks replace screens and pose challenges for feminist pedagogy. What will I carry forward from my feminist Zoom pedagogy into the classroom? I will continue to be vulnerable, and to practice radical honesty about my own privilege and
marginalization; I will continue to meet students where they are at and support them. Together, we will continue to co-create radically collective spaces that shift the dialogue from marginalized lives as being powerless to marginalized lives as being capable knowledge producers (Jean-Denis, 2020).
References


