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Reimagining Feminist Futures Through Complaint-jar Activity

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Cover Page Footnote

Acknowledgments: I am grateful to my students Katherine Oppenheimer, Abigail King, and Eva M for permitting me to use their comments in my article. Many thanks to Celena Todora for her suggestions on the piece. Thanks to the anonymous peer-reviewers for their suggestions.

Reimagining Feminist Futures through Complaint-Jar Activity

Introduction

In this article, I describe and reflect on my experience developing and implementing a “complaint jar activity” in a writing-intensive, literature general-education class, titled “Women and Literature,” themed on Feminist Futures: Place, Theory, and Method. The activity was inspired by Sara Ahmed’s lecture, “Complaint as Feminist Pedagogy,” based on her recently published book *Complaints*. The book and the blog focus on testimonies of complainants and what each story could teach not only about violence and inequity in the academy but also about the nature of institutions and their complicity in shielding the perpetrators. Reading the testimonies calls for emotional labor. Reflecting on complaints as a discursive site where futures of institutional mechanisms are reimagined requires a different kind of intellectual and affective labor. Such an act recognizes the difficult nature of navigating an already illegible process as well as envisioning the tangible changes that feminist pedagogy can enable in the classroom and beyond. My article follows Ahmed’s invitation to make space for this messy and complex nature of feminist work in the academy while at the same time being attentive to the small transformations that the classroom can bring at a time of increasing anti-intellectualism.

Explanation

A brief description of my complaint jar activity might be helpful. I brought two glass jars to the classroom and kept one at my table and the other at the back of the classroom. Then, I distributed colorful Post-it notes. The primary text that we were reading for the day was Sara Ahmed’s talk, “Complaint as Feminist Pedagogy” uploaded as a blog article on her website *Feminist Killjoy*. Before discussing the assigned reading for the day, I asked my students to take note of the complaint jars placed in the classroom. Then, I invited them to write down their complaints about institutions on the Post-it notes anonymously and put them into the complaint jars. I let them know they could write the complaints and put them into the jars at any point during the class discussion if they were comfortable. I also made it explicit that I would not be reading their complaints and would dispense with them safely after a period of seven days.

The complaint jar activity ran parallel to the class discussion on “Complaint as Feminist Pedagogy.” As the class went on, we talked about the various stories in the blog article and reflected on what would have happened if the complainants were taken seriously, who came in the way of complaints, and our responsibilities as a collective.¹ Students would occasionally stand up, move

¹ I am grateful to Alison Phipps and Mia Lianage for their session on Refusing Reform: Enacting Cultures of Radical Change in Academia in the symposium Silence Will Not Protect Us, Oxford University, 25th May 2022. The questions that I used for the class discussion were adapted from a

across the room, and place a note in the jar. On the next day of the class, we had a debriefing session where the students shared their reflections on the activity, and I shared the pedagogical rationale with them.

Rationale

My intention for doing the activity was three-fold. First, my aim was to communicate the material nature of the complaints. The glass jar allowed my students to see that complaints take up space and have a tangible form. Complaints are not abstractions and, as Sara Ahmed argues, they build up bit by bit, slowly and may have a cumulative impact though the effect might not be immediately visible. I noticed during the class that when one student got up to put in their complaint after almost ten minutes into the discussion of Ahmed's text, slowly other students joined to put their complaints into the jar. My choice for the glass jar was a conscious one because had it been any other material such as a wooden box, the complaints would not have been visible.



Image of the complaint jar placed at the back of the classroom

google doc published by Alison Phipps. [Silence will not protect us - Refusing Reform.docx \(google.com\)](#). Accessed March 2nd, 2022.

Second, my goal was to enable students to introspect on the infrastructure of complaints. The task of filing a complaint might be cumbersome and often requires one to navigate complex web portals and complaint boxes might be located in places that are inaccessible or remote. However, bringing the complaint jars into the classroom and placing them strategically also changed the ways in which students perceived infrastructure and accessibility. For instance, I observed that the complaint jar that was located behind the class filled up faster than the one on my table. In the debriefing session, students shared that the jar at the back of the classroom offered them a sense of privacy and security while the one at my table involved mediating with the authority figure of the teacher (me) to a certain degree. As this activity reveals, the infrastructure of complaints is also linked to the sense of safety and what structures exist to facilitate the filing of complaints without making oneself vulnerable.

Third, considering that the text assigned for that class was difficult and we were reading accounts of violence and what the survivors had to go through in the process of making a complaint, it was necessary to create a safe space in the classroom and cultivate forms of care. The tactility of writing down a note on the paper and moving within the classroom to drop the complaint can keep one grounded. The complaint jar activity was also to encourage students to take a few moments off from the classroom discussion if they would like to by focusing on the tactile and the movement of their body.

Debriefing

The reaction from students to the activity was mixed. A section of students found it powerful that the activity offered them a safe space to complain, especially when the act of complaining often means drawing attention to oneself and being a killjoy. For instance, Eva M shared in her in-class writing from the debriefing conversation, “Seeing everyone go up to the jars is what really was the most impactful for me. Honestly, I did not think that many people would actually go up mid-class and put a complaint in, but seeing almost everyone do it was powerful to me.” Another student, Katherine O (Katie, hereafter) wrote:

There is such a pervasive narrative of women being “nags” and constant complainers. This creates an imperative to diverge from this narrative, which in turn results in the repression and silencing of valid complaints and concerns. Placing the complaint in the jar was a sort of release, where I could take the weight of burden off for a bit.

While other students were deeply attuned to the fact that the activity was only a simulation of what complaints could look like, they knew that I would not be reading their complaints and felt that it replicated the structures of institutions that often do not take complaints seriously. One of my students Abigail K pointed out:

I thought dropping my complaint in the jar would feel freeing-in therapy, we do a lot of mindfulness exercises that place our stressors or laments into a box in our brains. However, I did not feel that way. Even though the jar allowed me to release a complaint, I knew nothing was going to be done about it, and that there were so many other complaints, I could have written instead. So, the activity just made me feel indifferent to complaining.

Katie, who previously reflected on the potential of such an activity makes an important distinction in this context, “There seems to be a delicate balance between venting through which you simply expel emotion ... and active complaint in which you expect a constructive response.” Katie’s response made me realize that yet another goal of mine through this activity was to offer a space where students can come together in complaining because there is value in having that shared space, though it might not immediately lead to any result. More broadly, as reflected at the end of the semester reflection statements, the takeaways of the students from the activity included the realization that complaints were necessary to bring about any transformative change. Simultaneously, a sense of skepticism was pervasive about the indifference of institutions towards complaints and how they are handled.

Assessment

I want to comment on my decision to not read the complaints. My decision was guided by the fact that I wanted to give students a safe space to complain, a place where they could be themselves without having to worry about the possible repercussions and chain of events that a complaint can cause. Not reading the complaints was an act of care on my end, but it had the opposite effect on a section of students, because it reminded them of how uncaring institutions can be, resulting in a sense of skepticism about the possibility of transformation. \This raises a number of important questions about the process of the complaint itself: who gets to read the complaint? Is the person reading the complaint trained to address the complaints? What kind of emotional labor does reading or listening to a complaint call for? What would it have meant for me (an instructor of color) to be doing that labor?

While I do not have an answer to all the questions, the affordance of the complaint jar activity is that it tried to make space for imagining what is possible in an ideal situation, where institutions have a well-thought-out process for registering and addressing complaints. I see the complaint jar activity as an effort to make visible the messy nature of “complaint activism,” the infrastructures that enable complaints, and what acts as a hindrance to complaints (Ahmed, 2021). I am also aware of the limitations of the complaint jar activity. As Ahmed writes, complaints are not a linear process and involve the complainants figuring out the process of even lodging a complaint on their own, negotiating with a bureaucratic

structure that is purposely illegible. On the other hand, the complaint jar activity was a fairly linear process without having to face any practical difficulties in making a complaint. The activity was designed in a way to make space for imagining what a complaint process could look like without the structural barriers of lodging complaints. It was meant to be a pedagogical practice that allowed students to interrogate why and how certain bureaucratic processes are normalized and what could be done to challenge such normalization.

The complaint jar activity was designed to raise more questions than we will have answers to. For instance, I wonder, if I had told my students that I will be reading the complaints, how comfortable would they have felt in complaining? How would that change the content of the complaints themselves? It is with this awareness and humility that I approach the complaint jar activity as a way to make visible the labor behind a complaint, what is still left to do, and how we can get there to imagine a just feminist future.

References

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