

April 2023

## Reproductive Politics in the Classroom: Feminist Approaches to Teaching about Abortion and Reproductive Justice

Kimberly Kelly  
*Mississippi State University, Kkelly@soc.msstate.edu*

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.calpoly.edu/feministpedagogy>

---

### Recommended Citation

Kelly, Kimberly (2023) "Reproductive Politics in the Classroom: Feminist Approaches to Teaching about Abortion and Reproductive Justice," *Feminist Pedagogy*. Vol. 3: Iss. 2, Article 15.  
Available at: <https://digitalcommons.calpoly.edu/feministpedagogy/vol3/iss2/15>

This Introduction to Special Issue is brought to you for free and open access by the Journals at DigitalCommons@CalPoly. It has been accepted for inclusion in Feminist Pedagogy by an authorized editor of DigitalCommons@CalPoly. For more information, please contact [digitalcommons@calpoly.edu](mailto:digitalcommons@calpoly.edu).

## **Introduction to Special Issue: Reproductive Politics in the Classroom: Feminist Approaches to Teaching about Abortion and Reproductive Justice**

Few of us will ever forget where we were on June 24, 2022 when we learned *Roe v. Wade* had been overturned by *Dobbs v. Jackson Women's Health Organization*, a case out of Mississippi. Despite the leak of Justice Samuel Alito's draft opinion the month before, the finality of the moment was nonetheless raw and painful. Amidst the fear, grief, and anger brought down by *Dobbs*, feminist teachers looked for ways to talk about the significance of what had happened and who would pay the price, to expand knowledge about abortion and reproductive health, and spur on deeper understandings of reproductive justice. Editors Emily Ryalls and Rachel E. Silverman recognized this collective need to *do* something, and this special issue is devoted to that effort. It is my honor to serve as guest editor, meeting my own need to do something while living in the ground-zero state of Mississippi.

I have studied abortion politics for roughly 20 years, covering the crisis pregnancy center movement, 'post abortion syndrome' as social movement strategy, and the intersections of race, religion, and reproductive politics. Most recently, I have turned to studying abortion activism, race, and Christian nationalism in my home state of Mississippi. Living in Mississippi for the past 14 years has provided me with a front row seat to what happens when access to abortion is severely restricted, and when primarily white men policymakers openly rely on personal religious beliefs that reflect deeply rooted sexism, racism, and a disregard for the ravages of poverty in America's poorest state. In *Dobbs*, Mississippi took a drastic step towards reshaping the nation in its image.

Fighting back against these changes requires we equip our students with knowledge about the dynamic reproductive landscape in the U.S. and beyond, and ensure they understand the central tenets of reproductive justice go beyond abortion and 'choice' to consider access and bodily/reproductive autonomy as a human right (Ross and Solinger 2017).

Original teaching activities in this special issue emphasize practical exercises instructors may undertake in the classroom to expand empirical knowledge of reproductive inequities and to consider these through the lens of reproductive justice.

Molly Broscoe, Elaina Johns-Wolfe, and Michelle McGowan use ArcGIS mapping software and publicly available data to show students how TRAP laws and state policies led to the decline of abortion access over time by mapping the location of abortion providers over a multi-year period, and prompt students to consider how the end of *Roe v. Wade* will further erode access in abortion-hostile states.

Carrie Murawski decenters white conservative Christian perspectives as 'the' religious stance on abortion, guiding students through textual exploration of the variations among diverse religions perspectives. Students learn that one may support abortion access because of their religious beliefs, not despite them, and religious perspectives vary significantly in their teachings about sex, pregnancy, when life begins, and abortion.

Cassia Roth also challenges taken-for-granted assumptions by historicizing abortion, using the case of Brazil to demonstrate how definitions of what comprises an ‘abortion’ have changed over time and across cultures and languages. Importantly, this exercise can be adapted to many national and cultural contexts.

Emily Ryalls’ teaching activity demonstrates how public policy restricts some bodies and not others, driving the point home by having students craft mock legislative bills restricting cisgender men’s bodies, modeled after bills and laws targeting women, trans, and nonbinary bodies. By exploring existing policies before writing their own bills, students become aware of the lopsided nature of state control over bodies and reproduction across varied groups.

Derek Siegel considers the question of how many trans people get abortions, tapping into the debate over whether to use terms like ‘pregnant person’ in lieu of ‘pregnant woman’ and emphasizing the challenges, risks, and politics of data collection and analysis focused upon trans people and crafting policy.

Jillian A. Tullis presents the shockingly high rates of Black maternal mortality and the history and revival of midwifery in the U.S. to guide students to a more complete understanding of reproductive justice, intersectionality, and health disparities. Students come to understand that medical practices are not necessarily guided by evidence or best practices, and instead may be determined by racist and misogynist ideologies that do great harm.

Critical commentaries in this special issue consider how to reframe what we know about reproductive justice and politics and how we may present these new ideas and strategies to our students, by rethinking and refining how we teach and what lenses we present.

Chris Barcelos draws upon a feminist public health framework stressing that restricting abortion access objectively harms the overall health of the population. Acknowledging that students may have beliefs and values that oppose abortion, Barcelos discusses the value of creating a space for those emotions while still maintaining a rigorous discussion of the realities of restricting abortion based in data and research.

Lena R. Hann addresses the challenges of teaching about reproduction justice in an abortion desert, using an immersive model of texts, films, guest speakers, written exercises and discussion with the goal of empowering students to apply the reproductive justice framework to topics such as abortion, surrogacy, and the choice not to have children.

Rebecca Howes-Mischel considers how reading ethnographic studies can prompt students to adopt an empathetic lens contextualizing the decisions people make about their reproductive health. Students move beyond an abstract sense of ‘rights’ to an intersectional perspective examining how race, gender, and politics shape reproductive experiences.

Tiwadeye Lawal, Miriam Singer, and Deborah Bartz consider how to incorporate reproductive justice frameworks in undergraduate medical courses. Students examine how medical and non-medical institutions affect the practice of medicine and patient experiences within these systems through a series of community partnerships designed to reorient their understanding of reproductive health practice as a cornerstone of reproductive justice.

In the aftermath of *Dobbs*, Ophra Leyser-Whalen and Adelle D. Montebianco argue that it is more important than ever to teach about and for reproductive justice, pointing to concrete strategies to integrate reproductive justice and frames into existing curricula or create special topics courses, making the case for repeated exposures to reproductive justice materials across the curricula.

Jaya Prakash and Deborah Bartz consider the harms of misinformation and disinformation about abortion and the gap it creates between public understandings of abortion and actual lived experience. Identifying distorted storytelling, the co-optation of progressive language, and media echo chambers as the sources of the problem, Prakash and Bartz consider why and how dis/misinformation requires interventions in medical education.

Finally, Caitlin Jarvis offers a media review of *On the Divide*, picking up themes similar to those covered by Murawski's teaching activity. The author notes the tensions between religious identity and reproductive equity work among activists in the border town of McAllen, Texas. Jarvis notes that religion can both conflict with abortion rights as well as provide a foundation for supporting abortion access, describing the nuances in activists' positions as portrayed in the film. The author also fruitfully identifies ways in which the film can be used to teach standpoint theory.

Much about the new realities confronting us are disheartening and dystopic. Yet the classroom, however beleaguered by state politics, remains a place of hope, a space for expanded, empathetic worldviews, and builds the nascent roots of future action. And in providing these things to our students in our roles as feminist educators, we can all *do* something.

Works cited:

Ross, Loretta, and Rickie Solinger. *Reproductive justice: An introduction*. University of California Press, 2017.