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Teaching Through Absence: Using an Absence Lens as a Feminist Pedagogical Tool

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Editor's Introduction to Special Issue: Teaching Through Absence: How We Teach Absence and What Absence Teaches Us

Teaching Through Absence: Using an Absence Lens as a Feminist Pedagogical Tool

The inspiration for this special came from my and others' experiences of absence in scholarship and in the feminist classroom. A significant number of teaching resources and materials fail to account for important viewpoints and identities. These viewpoints and identities may then become misrepresented, excluded from the classroom, or ignored by the instructor. In response to this absence, pedagogues may utilize an absence lens to focus on what is not present in materials rather than what is.

This issue of absence is by no means new—especially in academia—and some scholars have already been having conversations about it. For example, Macherey (1978, as cited in Spivak, 1993) notes:

What is important in a work is what it does not say. This is not the same as the careless notation 'what it refuses to say', although that would in itself be interesting: a method might be built on it, with the task of *measuring silences*, whether acknowledged or unacknowledged. But rather this, what the work *cannot* say is important. (p. 81)

I and others often find ourselves in these spaces of silence—of what the work cannot say or even refuses to say. We must “listen for ‘the inexplicable presence of the thing not named,’” (Cathy, 1922, as cited in Somerville, 2000, p. 6) and be “attuned to the [different] presences and implications in texts that do not otherwise name them” (Somerville, 2000, p. 6). Such an approach helps instructors teach their students about important identities, issues, and viewpoints, even if they are missing from the course materials. An absence lens allows instructors and students to shift how they critically think and read from “What marginalized standpoints are present?” to “What marginalized standpoints are absent?” While consuming information, they may start to consider, “What identities does this piece not take into account?,” “What is absent from this viewpoint/lesson?,” and “How might someone with a different marginalized identity/experience feel about this?” These “techniques of queer reading” (Somerville, 2000), or what I refer to as an absence lens, is the basis of this special issue.

As the next generation of feminist teachers, graduate students have unique and vital insight into this absence framework, as the research they do often focuses on the current developments in their academic disciplines. How do we, as graduate students, teach a class with course materials that do not account for absent viewpoints and identities? How do we teach a topic that is not represented in the materials provided? What conversations are missing, and how do we include them in the classroom? What does it mean to teach through what is not there rather than what is? What does this absence teach us, and how does it shape our pedagogy? What future visions can we have through our experiences of teaching absence?

This special issue seeks to address how we can better teach viewpoints, identities, and issues often absent from scholarship and course materials. It further aims to address how graduate student instructors are currently using an absence lens in their classrooms and ways other feminist pedagogues can adopt this approach in their teaching.

For the first Original Teaching Activity, Milad Mohebbali and Elmira Jangjou highlight the role silences play in the classroom—silence in class discussions, the absence of students'

voices, the silence(ing) of marginalized voices—and how students can learn from and critically think about the meaning of these silences. Extending this conversation of silence, Tamara Soukotta discusses how to challenge the colonial discourses in International Relations that position the knowledge production and invisibilize the experiences of people from the Global South. Rose Singh explores the absence of disability and disability justice in social work education and provides some strategies for centering the voices of the disabled community. Through zine-making, Katie Von Wald discusses ways of facilitating queer collectives and communities, and creating a feminist classroom that is responsive to students' concerns and voices. Finally, Kody Muncaster highlights the importance of acknowledging the bodies of our students in queer classrooms and provides meditation strategies as a pedagogy of compassion. These teaching activities explore what it means to teach through the absence in various curricula and offer feminist teachers insightful teaching practices they can implement in their own classrooms.

Diving deeper into the theory element of feminist praxis, various scholars offer their critiques and insights in the form of Critical Commentaries. First, Sheema Khawar interrogates the postcolonial classroom and discusses the absence of Pakistani scholarship and experiences, as well as issues of academic gatekeeping. Alessandra Jungs de Almeida and Jocieli Decol dive deeper into the absence of gender in International Relations and the white supremacist patriarchal ideologies permeating the field. Building off of this anti-racist pedagogy, Brittney Miles examines the presence and absence of tears in the classroom and what they can tell us about racial empathy in the feminist classroom. Finally, Canton Winer wraps up the Critical Commentaries by highlighting the importance of instructors teaching asexuality in the classroom to undo the invisibilization of asexuality and broaden students' understandings of sexuality and queerness.

This special issue on “Teaching Through Absence” concludes with reviews of books that highlight this theme of absence. From interrogating understandings of ability and disability in schools, the importance of centering the voices of women of color and decolonial perspectives in ecofeminist movements, to the significance of positioning aces of color and other marginalized aces at the center of discussions about asexuality and using asexuality as a framework to help better understand compulsory sexuality, the books reviewed in this issue are ones I am sure you will want to bring into your classrooms.

There are many people I need to thank for helping make this special issue possible. Thank you to Editors-in-Chief Dr. Emily D. Ryalls and Dr. Rachel E. Silverman for their mentorship and support during my internship with the journal and the amazing opportunity to create a special issue that speaks to so many people. I am grateful for the guidance from our Book and Media Reviews editor Dr. Aubrey Huber, and the social media presence of this special issue from our Editorial Assistant Mac Clark. Of course, I extend my gratitude to the rest of the Editorial Board at *Feminist Pedagogy* for their continued dedication and hard work, which makes this special issue and this journal possible.

I owe a huge thank you to the individuals who volunteered their valuable time, energy, and passion to this special issue. I am incredibly thankful for Dr. Adrienne Byrt and Kerstin Vaughn for your important insight and feedback. Last, and most certainly not least, I am immensely grateful for my wonderful colleague and guest book review editor for this special issue Dominik Drabent. Thank you for being a major source of encouragement and support, acting as a sounding board during the development of this issue, and sharing your invaluable time, feedback, and dedication.

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