“It was never enough”: Queer Collectives and Zine-Making in the Classroom

Katherine Von Wald

University of California, Santa Barbara, Kvonwald@ucsb.edu

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

Part of the Feminist, Gender, and Sexuality Studies Commons

Recommended Citation

Von Wald, Katherine (2023) "“It was never enough”: Queer Collectives and Zine-Making in the Classroom," Feminist Pedagogy. Vol. 4: Iss. 1, Article 17.

Available at: https://digitalcommons.calpoly.edu/feministpedagogy/vol4/iss1/17
“It was never enough”: Queer Collectives and Zine-Making in the Classroom

Cover Page Footnote
I would like to thank my generous students for their continued creativity and collaboration.

This original teaching activity is available in Feminist Pedagogy: https://digitalcommons.calpoly.edu/feministpedagogy/vol4/iss1/17
“It was never enough”: Queer Collectives and Zine-Making in the Classroom

Introduction

I came back into the classroom in the weeks following the Dobbs\(^1\) decision to a profound and stagnating silence. That summer I was teaching Introduction to LGBTQ Studies, focusing on learning queer theory through the arts and aesthetic practices of queer communities. After such a monumentally disappointing decision, it felt hard to continue with what was originally planned in my syllabus. My students and I shared our fears, anxiety, and rage at the new vulnerabilities we faced, and our class shifted to discussions of Roe,\(^2\) abortion, The Supreme Court, reproductive justice, and why students felt queer perspectives on such issues were absent or dismissed but needed. Our class was filled with feeling, information sharing, and reflection. Most importantly and inspired by one student’s comment that Roe “was never enough” our class became a site of dreaming. We imagined what would be enough to secure reproductive justice and autonomy for all people.

This original teaching activity outlines the use of zine-making in fostering student collectivity, creativity, and intellectual activism in and through absence and silence. Feminist classrooms must be responsive and adaptable as they engage with social problems in the present and past. They are also spaces where students are given the opportunity to develop resilient practices they can apply to their communities and movements. I use zine-making in the classroom as a way of empowering students to write their ways out of absence, silence, and political fatigue. I connect our collective-making to a tradition in feminist praxis that uses classrooms to challenge the production and distribution of hegemonic knowledge. This original teaching activity explains how to incorporate zine-making into the classroom and how making zines collectively can form resilient communities that have the potential to expand far beyond the classroom and connect students through difference in ways that help them to imagine new and better worlds. It describes ways of engaging students to articulate imagined futures through crafting and artistic expression. In my experience, these activities encourage queer students to see themselves as makers of transformative meaning. Our work coalesced into publishing our own zine, entitled “Enough: Queer Visions of Reproductive Justice,” and starting a Queer Arts Collective, a club continuing to explore queer politics through art and activism. Thus, I demonstrate how through collaborative, informative, and reflective zine-making the classroom becomes a site for feminist and queer world-building, creating spaces for queer collectives and community in, around, and beyond academia.

Rationale

Zines have been and continue to be important tools for feminist and queer movements. On many different levels, zines represent the confluence of political goals, dilemmas, frameworks, and praxis of movements poised to challenge systemic oppressions. Typically, zines are self-published and self-circulated informative booklets. They are usually produced through whatever means are on hand for the author or organization that best facilitates their accessibility and transference. They are printed and stapled, handwritten and folded, photocopied and bound, and even digital. Zine’s aesthetics and artistic traditions reflect their commitment to counter-

---

1 Landmark Supreme Court decision that on June 24, 2022, reversed Roe (see footnote 2), deeming that abortion was not a constitutional right and leaving the authority to regulate access to abortion up to individual states.

2 Landmark Supreme Court decision that ruled abortion was a constitutionally protected fundamental right decided in 1973.
knowledge systems. Zines usually juxtapose text, graphics, and photographs in ways that challenge order and expectations; ultimately coming “to embody the very disjointedness of contemporary life” (Goulding, 2015, p. 166). In this way, feminist zines have always been critical and self-critical sites of interpretation, analysis, expression, and connection. Zines have historically been mechanisms where authors can “pose critiques of existing power structures and norms” (Goulding, 2015, p. 166).

Because of this imbedded attachment of zines as breaking from “the formal structures that mediate knowledge and culture production” (Boatwright, 2019, p. 384), they offer feminist educators the opportunity to enact and amplify many of the themes that inform our teachings. Regardless of whether they are found in classrooms, zines have always been pedagogical tools because they intend to share information, resources, narratives, and experiences often overlooked by the mainstream. For students, zines, then, offer a medium to incorporate the feminist call that the personal is political by offering a visual and textual site for them to tell their stories. This is particularly important for communities of students that come to our feminist classrooms having experienced intersecting marginalizations and whose knowledge of structures of power are largely devalued throughout the university and society. Boatwright (2019) beautifully describes how zines provide the opportunity for queer youth of color to shape discourse and be part of “public pedagogy”—or sites of learning outside of the classroom—that disrupts their “erasure as cultural producers, historians, and teachers” (p. 387).

Lastly, there is something embodied in zine making that has the potential to inform collaborations and community beyond classrooms. Throughout my teaching, I continue to come back to bell hooks’ transformative pedagogical writings in *Teaching to Transgress: Education as The Practice of Freedom*, where she explains the importance of theory in directing liberatory and revolutionary ends. hooks (1994) writes:

> I came to theory because I was hurting—the pain within me was so intense that I could not go on living. I came to theory desperate, wanting to comprehend—to grasp what was happening around and within me. Most importantly, I wanted to make the hurt go away. I saw in theory then a location for healing. (p. 59)

Through the act of zine-making, students are encouraged to reroute their hurt, transform it, share in it, and theorize from it. Zines themselves are tactile in their making and in their distribution. Much of their pleasure comes from the “bodily interaction” (Goulding, 2015, p. 166) that a zine fosters between author and reader. In this way, through its aesthetic, interpretive, and expressive qualities, zines allow for moments of imaginative world-making. What José Estaban Muñoz (2009) has described as the “anticipatory illumination” (p. 7) of objects of art. These are the ways that through our current crafting we contour the very shapes of the future. Zines are, then, not only a means of articulating critique but a way of building towards feminist and queer future worlds. If we are to understand feminist classrooms as not only spaces where we talk about social justice but where we enact social justice, then zines and zine-making provide students with the praxis of transforming their individual knowledge for collective organizing.

**Learning Objectives**

The learning objectives for this assignment are:

1. Practice in-depth research to provide context for one specific facet of the week’s overall theme.
2. Interpret and connect personal lived experience to research pursuits and interests.
3. Creatively display course work using zine-making skills.
Explanation

For this assignment to fulfill its potentiality, it is important to contextualize the history of zines and zine-making in feminist and other social justice movements. What I have condensed above is only a start to what is a larger generative conversation of zines as resistant knowledge. For my class, this meant looking to our local campus resources in the UCSB zine library and a guest lecture with a zine librarian whose activism and support of zines has lead efforts for digitizing collections, archiving, and even producing Zinefest events. This allowed students to understand not only the pedagogical impact of zines but the very real political impact of them in challenging mainstream, hegemonic, and corporate knowledge production and publishing. It lays the foundation for encouraging them to develop their stories, and to emphasize that their experience is knowledge, their perspective is valuable, and that they can speak on the ways power shapes hierarchies from their lived experiences. For my students, most of whom self-identified as queer, this was one of the first opportunities where they were given free rein to embrace the value of queer life and make materials that impact their communities.

With this context, students then dive into the theoretical frameworks and materials of the week. For my class, this was an in-depth and intersectional examination of reproductive justice. Students read, for example, Black feminists Angela Davis and Dorothy Roberts to understand the impact of gender simultaneously with sexuality, race, and class on reproductive autonomy and liberation. They investigated the history of the reproductive rights movements and its connections to white feminisms, birth control, and eugenics movements in order to question the framing of reproductive discourses throughout the U.S. Lastly, they were offered a queering of reproductive justice in order to expand who we think reproductive justice stands for and expand their gendered analysis of reproduction to those often overlooked, like trans masculine and nonbinary subjects.

Keeping the week’s discussions in mind, students were then asked to pick a facet of our overall week’s theme and develop a single-page zine display aesthetically depicting the connections between their research, lived experience, queer theory and politics, and the reproductive justice movements. Thus, their zine page became a way for students to not only demonstrate their knowledge of the week’s materials but to transform and translate it through their own perspectives and voice. Students were given the option to choose between three types of displays:

1. An informative display (students were encouraged to choose a topic, research, and then concisely disseminate resources in the form of a public service announcement)
2. A reflective display (a narrative and/or poem that explained their personal implication in the struggle for reproductive justice)
3. A creative display (an artistic representation of a reproductive justice issues through painting, drawing, collaging, etc.)

Students were given the opportunity to make their pages either materially or digitally (using websites like Canva, Google slides, or Powerpoint.) Once submitted, students were asked to briefly present their page to the class, explain their topic and why they chose to depict it the way they did, and how they see it directly relating to queer life.

Assessment
Because this assignment itself questions the hegemonic structures of knowledge production and publication, students were assessed on participation and not necessarily on skill. If students demonstrated an intentional commitment to following through and engaging with zines as a tool for interpreting the week’s information as they related to their own lived experience, then they received full credit. This, of course, looks vastly different depending on each individual student, and any assessment of their work should account for that.

**Debriefing**

What was particularly transformative about this assignment was that in providing students the space to present their work and see their classmates’ contribution, I was able to guide them through more collaborations. In this sense, debriefing initiated more collective zine work. Although this was the assignment for one unit for our six-week-long class, seeing that students had more to say on this topic, I offered students the opportunity to develop their zine further for their final projects. This resulted in a small number of students working together as an advisory/editorial board (outside of class time), where they developed a collective statement, contributed cover art, formatted, and eventually published their zine for distribution. Students expressed their gratitude (towards each other) over being able to work through their various and complicated feelings surrounding the *Dobbs* decision by working on and directing their efforts towards their zine. I think this is best described in what ended up being the front and back covers of our zine. The front depicting the ensuing rage and rebellion felt after hearing of the ruling and the back imagining what they want to see in the world.\(^3\) By adapting and continuing to engage students, our weekly debriefing shifted into the founding of a Queer Arts Collective. Students who identify as queer can come together through art to talk about activism, politics, and visions of the future they want. Thus, I see zines as a type of activity that spans the vastness of feminist pedagogy, pulling students in and potentially holding spaces for their growth as feminist activists, collaborators, and educators.

---

\(^3\) Front and Back Cover Art done by Destiny Gong
Conclusion

Zines have an important and dynamic history within feminist movements, collectives, and classrooms. Incorporating zine-making into the classroom amplifies feminist pedagogical commitments while providing students with practical resources and tools to stage their own transformations. Zines and zine-making have the potential to connect students outside of the confines of the classroom and utilizing them as pedagogical tools highlights the necessity of imagining, making, and doing for the future despite current absences, silences, and violences.
References


