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Feminist Pedagogy for Teaching Online

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2 Co-Watching as Feminist Transformative Pedagogy

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Learning spaces have almost always been exclusive and elusive and long been the site of epistemological harm (Morris, 2020). When our experiences and understandings of learning are based on these flawed structures, how can we create or even imagine different ones? What do transformative, inclusive, feminist learning spaces look like, and how do we make one of our own?

This chapter follows the journey of *Filming Sex Work in India* (*FSWI*), an online, opt-in, paid workshop series conducted by Academic-ish, a digital platform focusing on works and issues from the Global South, and Jo, a sex work researcher. Spanning nine[1] weeks, the sessions involved synchronously watching documentary films made on sex(ing)[2] work in India, followed by moderated discussions. We had 20 participants: students, early career researchers, and people from non-academic backgrounds.

Education is not a neutral or an apolitical project, and any attempt to create safe learning spaces without ideological commitment is pointless. We intentionally adopted a decolonial feminist perspective in our pedagogy, based on the beliefs that everybody has something to contribute and that we are self-determined to know what is best about our lives (Thambinathan & Kinsella, 2021). We wanted to draw from the concepts

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of training for transformation (Hope & Timmel, 1984) and critical consciousness (Freire, 2000, 2005) as we designed the workshop. The tenets that we collectively built our course on are challenging privilege through education, intersectional feminism, community-centred and co-produced knowledge, situated knowledge (Haraway, 1988), and counter-representations (as opposed to hegemonic ones) of disenfranchised groups. This is where the importance of dialogic pedagogy (hooks, 1994) comes in. Dialogue is used as a form of meaningful communication, and participants are viewed as co-constructors of knowledge, opening up a space for "polyphonic" (multi-voiced) learning (Bakhtin, 1968). The sign of a good "instructor" is not in persuasion but in the facilitation of co-created knowledge (Freire, 2005) and the free-flowing exchange of ideas, thus breaking down the rigid hierarchies of the traditional classroom.

Using a holistic approach to understanding a "niche" subject, we wanted to create an invested community where participants could share resources, experiences, and insights in a safe and collaborative environment while engaging as strengthened and informed allies.[3] Not limiting our attempts at co-production to just our participants, we invited sex workers, as speakers for a session, to centre their experiences and knowledge. This kind of feminist learning that centred our "locally produced" (Haraway, 1988) lived experiences made the participants accountable to each other and the cause (Tuck & Yang, 2014).

We tried to model our workshop on the ideology that education can be "transformative." We do not mean transformative in terms of Western modernity that envisions a singular universal trajectory—that is colonial, racist, casteist, patriarchal logic. We believe in learning from the South and in rejecting hegemonic ideas of linearity and development (Santos, 2016). Hence, we use transformative in multiple senses—for individuals, their surroundings, and facilitators themselves.

As people resisting a capitalist society, our activism and knowledge-sharing methods fall prey to the inclination to make information quickly consumable at the cost of nuance. The current "service model" (Motta, 2012) of education does not allow for learning spaces where people can take their time, be "called in" (Ross, 2021) and engage critically with their (un)learning. The co-watching model that we employed in *FSWI*

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is our proposed alternative. We conceptualize co-watching as a feminist pedagogical tool that challenges the traditionally masculine and colonial mode of education, as a tool that can be used to engage effectively with audiovisual information in a shared digital space. Co-watching recognizes that knowledge production is reflexive (Letherby, 2002); political, personal, and uncertain (Snitow, 2015); and even dangerous (Ahmed, 2017).

This chapter is a reflective journey as educators who wanted to "continue life as normal" and to try teaching during the COVID-19 pandemic. The chapter discusses the conception of the workshop, our definition of co-watching, ranting as an academic practice, the pedagogy of care in online spaces, and the practice of rooted allyship in the classroom, all the while speaking about the challenges and successes of our work and the need for responsive models such as co-watching in online feminist pedagogical spaces. With our contribution, we also address a gap in the literature on online feminist workshop facilitation, the approaches and logistics involved.

Co-Watching: A Conceptual Framework

Jo's work on documentary film in India began during the pandemic when Jo had to figure out a way to do their PhD fieldwork since they could not access a physical field. They noticed that most films that had influenced public understanding of sex work—such as Zana Briski's Oscar-winning film *Born into Brothels* (2005) or *Vice*'s *Prostitutes of God* (2010)—further marginalized and pathologized sex workers, their communities, and their struggles for rights. Films created using participatory practices—such as Bishakha Dutta's *In the Flesh* (2002), Kat Mansoor's production with Veshya Anyay Mukti Parishad (VAMP)[4] *Save Us from Saviours* (2010), and Shohini Ghosh's *Tales of the Night Fairies* (2013)—were less known. Being familiar with their work, Jo reached out to Academic-ish in January 2021. Together we intended to understand the contentious politics of visual representations of sex workers through the impacts of documentary films on an urban, middle/upper-class, dominant caste audience. *FSWI* was aimed at our peers rather than marginalized communities already intimate with their knowledge systems and lived experiences, thus building upon one

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of the basic tenets of feminist pedagogy: community building through collective action (Shrewsbury, 1987), in sharp contrast to education that expects a "product" to be "delivered" at the end of each lesson (Chick & Hassel, 2009).

Documentary films when combined with facilitated discussions can be useful in a feminist classroom (Hess & Macomber, 2021). However, there has always been the concern that film watching is a "passive" activity and that students are more likely to engage actively with books than with visual media (Daniels, 2012). This concern is compounded in online pedagogy, in which the challenge lies in facilitating a space where participants can watch something together and engage with it meaningfully. To address this challenge, we conceptualized co-watching as a feminist pedagogical tool that inculcates a sense of community among participants, empowers them as "equal contributors to knowledge construction" (Romero-Hall, 2022, p. 43) and to "act against oppression, both internal and external" (Castro & Brawn, 2017, p. 102), adapts to a variety of needs and capabilities present in the group, and is responsive to the political situation outside the classroom.

Academic-ish had already been running online "Watch with Us" sessions, and we decided to adapt this approach into an educational tool for Jo's proposed workshop. Developed through the months before and during the sessions, co-watching was a work-in-progress, responsive, "DIY feminist" (Shelton, 2019) pedagogical tool. We did not play the "god trick" (Haraway, 1988) of positioning ourselves as experts in the field. Of the three of us, only Jo had anthropological field experience on sex work movements. This stimulated an informal, conversational discussion during sessions and encouraged participants to seek information independently. Thus, co-watching operates on the principle that informal learning that occurs through multiple online interactions is implicit learning (Romero-Hall, 2021).

We define co-watching as a synchronous experience of engaging with audiovisual stimuli in which individuals can engage/add their inputs or share reactions in a variety of ways on the platform. We developed this tool especially in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, like several other educators coming up with creative ways to deal with the pandemic and

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run online classes (see Guyotte et al., 2022; LeBel et al., 2022). However, we believe that co-watching has value beyond this pandemic and can be useful to connect physically separated classrooms and students with varying (dis)abilities. Simply put, co-watching exemplifies that physical presence is not an absolute factor to watch a movie, discuss it, and learn from each other. We used co-watching on Zoom, which had become the most popular platform for people to connect online. The technology that we used was intentional and practical (Bond, 2019); as feminist educators, we were committed to using the available technological features in creative, accessible, and affordable ways. In our workshop, we adopted co-watching as a means of synchronously watching the documentaries on sex work, via a shared screen, and collectively processing the content on the Zoom chat, whether disturbing, infuriating, or joyful (sometimes in all caps).

Our intentional use of the chat pointed to the feminist pedagogical commitment to diverse modes of participation and engagement (Dhala & Johnson, 2021). As feminist educators such as Comeforo (2022, p. 1) have illustrated, a chat can be a "powerful, community-centred knowledge (re)source." In our experience, the Zoom chat enabled the co-production of knowledge by the participants who shared relevant links to articles and videos and provided corrections to subtitle translations that led to a discussion on the politics of subtitling. Additionally, Jo shared behind-the-scenes context and connections among different films. Thus, the chat made participants feel more connected (to each other as well as the documentary film subjects), turned film watching from a "passive" to an "active" activity, and afforded flexibility to those who could not participate through the camera or the microphone.

By actively including the chat as a part of the film-viewing experience, participants could respond in real time to what was shown on the screen, without necessarily invoking the "irritating/disturbing" element that talking during a film usually entails. The reactions brought up in the chat also served as fruitful starting points for the subsequent moderated discussion. The chat was also saved and shared with the participants post-session. Co-watching enabled the participants to exercise a degree of control over their engagement with the films. This was relevant especially in a workshop

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like ours, which dealt with triggering topics such as casteism, misogyny, and state/sexual/ethical violence. In this way, we used co-watching as a tool for "empowering pedagogy" that transforms the role of the instructor from "power as domination to power as creative energy" (Shrewsbury, 1987, p. 11).

Filming Sex Work in India: Behind the Scenes

FSWI was an online, eight-session workshop series in which a group of participants met every Saturday to co-watch a documentary film on sex(ing) work. Each session also had supplementary readings that explored simple questions about what sex work is, conflations with exploitation and violence, as well as complicated conversations about work under capitalism. While designing the logistics of the workshop, we were mindful of Chick and Hassel's (2009, p. 197) position that the principles of feminist pedagogy should be present from the beginning rather than "add-ons at the end." Jo took on the role of the lead facilitator and resource person, with frequent inputs and logistical support provided by Academic-ish. The workshop took place from mid-March to mid-May 2021.

Drawing from Academic-ish's previous experience, we had a limited number of seats (20). This size not only enabled us to create a safe space for the discussion of sensitive topics (Morris, 2020) but also made it easier for us to moderate the discussions so that everyone got the chance to participate. The fee for the entire workshop was Rs. 2,000, and all of the proceeds went to a sex worker–led organization. No academic prerequisites were required for participation. Whoever paid the registration fee was automatically included. We also had partial and full scholarship seats. Whoever needed a scholarship was given one, as has been Academic-ish's practice for all of its events. We did not want to replicate the deeply problematic and unfeminist "oppression matrix" common in many universities, funding organizations, and so-called progressive spaces that require scholarship seekers to quantify and display their traumas and marginalized social locations in order to "qualify" for aid (Kenway & Fahey, 2015).

An unexpected and heart-warming outcome was that people who were interested in the topic but could not attend the event sponsored seats for

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others. The commitment to mutual aid and solidarity, a practice fundamental to feminist pedagogy, was very affirming. In total, we raised Rs. 40,000, of which 30.5% came through sponsored and scholarship seats. Rs. 15,000 was used as honorariums for the five[5] sex workers whom we invited to the interaction, and the rest, Rs. 25,000, was donated to the NNSW fundraiser.[6] For context, Rs. 1,500[7] can feed a sex worker and their family for a month.

"Not Academic Enough": Ranting as Legitimate Academic Practice

Feminist pedagogical practices place relationships between people at the centre of learning, making them an outcome of the course equal to any "formal material" learned (Shrewsbury, 1987). We started every session with a rapport-building check-in activity that enabled our participants to bring their entire selves into the space while also developing their individual voices. This was followed by an introduction to the film(s) by Jo. Then we co-watched the film(s) and participated in a moderated discussion. We also planned a "post-session rant" to give space to speech, knowledge, and expression that did not fall neatly into the lines of "coherent thought." In the world of physical classrooms and conferences, this looks like the discussions that spill outside the class (during a lunch break or in the hallway) or even *chai-nashta*[8] breaks. The post-session rants have been an Academic-ish tradition in which the discussions include political theorizing, personal news, existential musings, and pop culture critiques. This not only helps people to unpack all of their thoughts and relax but also creates a sense of camaraderie and solidarity. Clearly, we needed to replicate this for *FSWI*. There the post-session rants allowed participants to stop "performing" as students—for instance, keeping videos on is generally an exhausting act because of the constant feeling of being watched and needing to "behave" on camera, and this is an especially gendered norm (Kalia, 2021). Not everyone was obligated to stay for the post-session rants, and we held a similar space through our WhatsApp group chat between sessions. A small point of caution is needed here. Keeping multiple spaces of conversation open is emotionally labour intensive and time

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consuming for facilitators. Still, the post-session space is cathartic for both participants and facilitators.

Although the Zoom chat gave the participants a forum in which to vent directly about the films that they were watching, the post-session rants were an unstructured space in which to process their anger about the world in general. We practised "outrage epistemology" (Kulbaga & Spencer, 2022, p. 13), a channelling of "emotional excess in light of injustice" toward constructive action, based on the belief that feminist outrage is a source of knowledge (hooks, 2000) and that venting can be epistemic work (Thorson & Baker, 2019). Whereas Kulbaga and Spencer differentiate ranting from outrage epistemology, since the former might be cathartic but lacks an "orientation to creative action" (2022, p. 13), we argue that the cathartic potential of ranting is a constructive end in itself. This is relevant especially in a context in which we, the facilitators and the participants, come from a politically volatile country where it is not safe to criticize those in power.

These spaces were our attempt to make sure that all of those involved could reach their (different) learning goals from the workshop. Although this seemed to work for most, a participant contacted Jo saying that the sessions were not "academic enough" because they "just felt like ranting." This is often one of the main contentions with academic tools that centre the human emotional voice or encourage vulnerability. Drawing from the rich feminist scholarship on the constructive potential of anger (Ahmed, 2013; Lorde, 1997), we argue that an emotional expression such as ranting can be used as a mode of analysis to transform how we think about power relations and social responsibilities (Zembylas, 2007). As Gould (2009, p. 3) points out, emotions are "fundamental to political life," and thus emotional expression in the classroom is important for learning. Building upon the anti-caste scholarship of B.R. Ambedkar (2004/1943, para. 4), we also argue that emotions and hatred are constructive forces since they are "only the reflex of the love [that we] bear for the causes [that we] believe in."

Although our rants were often humourous, sarcastic, and even passionate, an undercurrent of anger and frustration was always present. We note that anger is not inherently liberatory; rather, the world-making power of anger lies in its ambivalence (Holmes, 2004). Our attempts to

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provide participants with these spaces are grounded in the understanding that feminist knowledge production involves the realization of new and creative means of resisting.

"Feel Free to Text Me": Caring through Co-Watching

As the pandemic raged on, we actively cultivated a pedagogy of care and intimacy outlined extensively in transformative, feminist work (e.g., hooks, 2003; Köseoğlu, 2020; Paradis, 2014; Robinson et al., 2020) in the online classroom by implementing practices responsive to the situational needs of the participants and facilitators. We established basic ground rules and followed guidelines such as videos being on/off depending on comfort and a "digital open door" for people to take a break and return if they were triggered by the scenes/discussions.

Anticipating how complex and triggering the topic was, Jo provided the participants with a synopsis of the film(s) with trigger/content warnings. The struggle to want to learn but be able to show up was exacerbated because of the COVID-19 pandemic since people were already dealing with Zoom fatigue (Fauville et al., 2021). During a particularly difficult week amid the catastrophic second wave in India, we decided democratically whether we would continue the session, and participants had the option to disengage from it. Being available emotionally to talk and hold space was as important as learning since people could connect and wade through the different kinds of pain that we were dealing with outside the class. X,[9] a participant, said that "keeping in mind that most people attending the workshops are not full-time students and may be distant from formal academia, the readings assigned were comprehensible and accessible. The facilitator and organizers were conscious of the heavy topics (police brutality, sexuality, assault, etc.) covered and always made ample space for participants to dissect the complex media presented."

Not wanting to replicate traditional teacher-student relations limited to the classroom, we experimented by opening up a private communication channel with each participant. We hoped to create a dynamic and accessible feedback system, especially for those who might find it difficult to participate in larger groups or online spaces. A week after the first session,

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Jo reached out to each participant privately on WhatsApp to check how they were feeling about the workshop. This was intended as an exercise in trust building and support so that participants could exercise agency over the classroom and for us, as facilitators, to tune our discussions according to the needs of this particular group.

Although creating such a channel was useful, it was a labourious experience. In the backdrop of working from home during the pandemic, boundaries (work-home, personal-professional) were blurred and difficult to negotiate, especially for gender minorities disproportionately expected to perform this invisible labour of care (Lokot & Bhatia, 2020). Since the spaces for learning and personal conversation overlapped, and the participants could access Jo at any point, what was intended to be a feedback system occasionally ended up eroding Jo's personal boundaries.

As facilitators, we took special care to look after our mental health by creating a "virtual staff room" on WhatsApp. In it, we discussed the next session, shared frustrations, and planned asynchronously and synchronously during the session. Our virtual staff room worked as what Datta and Lund (2018) term an "inspiring space" infused with care, solidarity, and friendship that underscored the value of co-producing knowledge. In retrospect, this was our attempt to tackle the disembodiment that we were feeling after being made to shift fully to virtual pedagogical spaces during the pandemic. The virtual staff room can be a foundational part of teaching online. We recommend creating multiple channels of communication with careful understanding of one's abilities, boundaries, and needs.

Rooting Our Allyship: A Call for Transformative Learning Practices

The core reason for the inception of our workshop was to create a space in which to engage in honest conversations that lead to a deeper sense of allyship and solidarity, through co-watching and dialogic pedagogy. Throughout the workshop, several conversations revolved around allyship—Jo's allyship as a PhD scholar working with the community and people beginning their journeys into understanding how to be allies to a community so misunderstood, misrepresented, and hurt.

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Y, one of the participants, started reading Nalini Jameela's *Oru Lymgikathozhilaliyude Atmakatha*[10] concurrently with the workshop. To popularize Jameela's work, they started posting Instagram videos reading the book aloud. As Y mentioned, "I really loved the book when I read it for the first time. People started getting in touch with me and asked me about the book, but after our workshop I started reconsidering whether I should be the one reading the book aloud and felt that my responsibility as an ally is in transferring my skills and knowledge to the community so that they can say their stories."

Y's experience of navigating their allyship was not a "neat" experience. Their ideas on caring for a community were informed by their understanding of their social world, which they shared with the rest of the learners. Allyship and solidarity cannot be performed to a perfect standard. We do not need a few perfect allies; what we need is many people practising their allyship imperfectly and continuously (Bonneau, 2021).

The interaction with sex workers was planned keeping in mind that people dehumanize and pathologize sex workers. The learning, questioning, and background work that the participants had done for the weeks before the last session prepared them to engage with the sex workers empathetically and responsibly. This ensured that our learning together was complex and highly engaged with the outside world (Samson, 2015), pointing toward what we call rooted allyship—doing the work and grounding the knowledge within a community's movement for social change. And, unlike performative allyship, rooting our allyship meant listening, involving community voices, keeping their interests at the forefront, learning, unlearning, and relearning messily and with love.

Conclusion

In this chapter, we have addressed how knowledge in the classroom should be decolonized through feminist methods and co-produced "polyphonically." We take these ideas of knowledge making and propose co-watching as a feminist pedagogical tool for transformative learning. We combine co-watching with a logistical design that is inclusive and framed

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by dialogic practices of participation strengthened by a culture of care for each other and the communities with which we engage. We provide space for engagement that goes beyond "formal" modes of learning by recognizing how ranting as critiquing is a legitimate academic practice. In this way, we root our allyship and become powerful agents of social change. By writing this chapter over Zoom in three countries, our online feminist friendship (Lugones & Rosezelle, 1995) cemented our values of collaboration and love—the core of social change (hooks, 2018).

Our positionality as feminist educators led us to create a flexible, inclusive space in which we would have liked to learn. X, one of our participants, reflected on this flexibility: "By setting up a non-traditional learning space where peer education was encouraged, this workshop seemed ideal for people committed to expanding their understanding of the world without the institutionalized pressures of orthodox academia, like myself. Given the time at which the workshops were being conducted, everyone involved was very understanding of people who could not attend sessions due to personal circumstances and did a thorough job in providing catch-up material."

In this chapter, we have provided insights into what we did so that it can be adapted effectively to bring more groups of learners together. In doing this, we have joined all of those facilitating knowledge exchange in complex crises, such as the pandemic. There is much potential in using tools such as co-watching that centre care and community, focus on human connection in learning, and locate pedagogical practices that keep rooted allyship as their goal.

Key Takeaways

- In conversation with the global call to decolonize education, co-watching is introduced as a method to engage with audiovisual information in a shared digital space and conceptualized as a feminist pedagogical tool that challenges the traditionally masculine and colonial mode of education.
- The online workshop discussed in this chapter was designed according to principles of feminist pedagogy, in which co-watching

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was combined with an inclusive logistical design, framed by dialogic practices of participation, and strengthened by a culture of care in a Global South context.
- Carefully curated and responsive learning environments legitimize emotional expressions (e.g., ranting) as academic practice, which can be used as a mode of analysis to transform how we think about power relations and social responsibilities.
- Community-led approaches that employ methods such as co-watching encourage complex learning highly engaged with the outside world, resulting in a sense of rooted allyship.

Notes

1 Seven sessions of watching films, one interactive panel with sex workers from India, and one mental health break week in response to the pandemic in which participants could choose to engage/disengage.
2 We use "sexing" to include work adjacent to sex work (e.g., entertainment work, performance) that is as criminalized/stigmatized as sex work.
3 The sex workers' movement is tied to the feminist, labour, queer, trans, and anti-caste movements in India.
4 Veshya Anyay Mukti Parishad is translated as Collective for Injustice against Sex Workers, based in Sangli, Maharashtra, India.
5 There were five sex workers from the states of Andhra Pradesh and Maharashtra and translators from the National Network of Sex Workers (NNSW), India.
6 The NNSW) fundraiser Support Sex Workers in Dealing with COVID-19 and Its Aftermath. NNSW is a network of 12 sex worker–led collectives and eight NGOs in eight states of India with 150,000 members. It is the only national network that brings together people in sex work across genders and sex worker rights activists and allies (NNSW, n.d.).
7 Based on internal research and scales by the NNSW.
8 A colloquial Hindi term that literally means "tea and snacks" but also connotes informal chats/meets.
9 We include responses from two participants. Their names have been anonymized to X and Y.
10 Jameela is a Malayalam-language author whose first book, *The Autobiography of a Sex Worker*, was the first candid account in the language to be released in India.

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