

---

## The struggle to imagine higher education otherwise: The transformative potential of diverse gender knowledges

Jennifer Fraser\*

This piece takes up Flora Renz’s challenge to think about education at the intersections of feminism, gender and changing understandings of equalities provisions to try to imagine what questions we need to ask in higher education to make universities and classrooms spaces that embrace gender diversity and see it as a catalyst for changing institutions themselves. Many of us who have dedicated our working and activist lives to enacting change in higher education dream of different futures, futures in which students and teachers learn together in classrooms that are able to recognise and grapple with their imperialist, ableist, cisheterosexist roots while striving towards new understandings of our individual and collective selves, as well as our disciplines. Gender and awareness of a multiplicity of genders (within and beyond binary genders) is an important axis along which we do this work.

As bell hooks reminds us:

Feminist education – the feminist classroom – is and should be a place where there is a sense of struggle, where there is visible acknowledgement of the union of theory and practice, where we work together as teachers and students to overcome the estrangement and alienation that have become so much the norm in the contemporary university. Most importantly, feminist pedagogy should engage students in a learning process that makes the world “more rather than less real”. (hooks, 2015 [1989]: 51)

---

\* Principal Lecturer, Social Sciences, University of Westminster, UK. Email: [j.fraser@westminster.ac.uk](mailto:j.fraser@westminster.ac.uk) Thank you to Raf Benato, Avi Boukli and Francis Ray White who are friends and colleagues on the NBinHE project and whose support and encouragement made this writing possible.

---

The type of feminist education that hooks argues for recognises the effort required to build learning communities, to come to know ourselves and the world in new ways. It also challenges us to ensure that the world outside the classroom is also inside the classroom and that our engagement with it is concrete and meaningful. This process is particularly important for students and staff whose gender is lived on the trans and non-binary spectrum and for whom there is often on-going work to do to bring together life inside and outside of the classroom.

hooks's vision for feminist pedagogy involves working together as teachers and students, which, in a very practical sense, invokes similar understandings of community to that used by the participants in Renz's interviews. This is not to reify ideas of community. Education, like most other public sector or activist spaces, is full of tensions and disagreements. One of the challenges of feminist and other pedagogies then is to centre relational processes. As Yahlnaaw insists in her call for decolonising the relationships of higher education: 'Research is not just about stuffing a jar full of knowledge for the sake of keeping it on a shelf in your basement; research is about putting yourself and your relationships into your work because they are your work' (2019: 8). Building educational communities that centre relationship in feminist and decolonial ways is a complex, messy and necessary part of any work that we do toward opening ourselves and our institutions to the transformative potential of diverse gender knowledges.

A significant issue that higher education institutions face is that of scale. Renz's piece provides an example of a Head Teacher who is able to work pastorally with every student, to know them as individuals and to consider their relationship to the community that is formed in their school (Renz, this issue). While there are still administrative issues that they struggle to resolve for trans and non-binary students, there appears to be space for senior staff to engage relationally with students. Universities, such as the one that I work at, have over 20,000 students spread over four London campuses and two international campuses. It is literally impossible for the head of a university, such as the Vice-Chancellor who is ultimately responsible for the whole

---

institution, to know every student. Instead, students have multiple sites of interaction with universities: academic (learning & teaching, libraries etc.), social (Student Union, housing etc.) and administrative (registry, finance etc.). This makes it a challenge to ensure the type of holistic experience that a student might have during their secondary education continues when they come to university. A sense of community needs to be established in much smaller scales, such as in a classroom or at a course level. The differences between secondary and university education can lead to experiences of alienation and disengagement for all students, but especially for trans and non-binary students when they bump up against institutional frameworks and processes that do not recognise their genders. This can also take the form of microaggressions from other students and staff, the cumulative effect of which is disengagement from learning. While the scale of higher education seems to mean that universities, unlike the participants that Renz interviewed, prioritise policies that aim to create a standardised experience, there is an urgent need to understand how trans and non-binary students actually experience higher education and importantly how they can thrive academically and socially in these spaces.

The question of what we need to do to make higher education a place not just to survive but to thrive is fundamental to the research and teaching that many of us as trans and non-binary academic staff do. As a member of the *Non-Binary Genders in Higher Education: Lived Experiences, Imagined Futures* project (<https://nbinhe.com>) I am particularly invested in understanding not just our current realities by paying attention to the lived experiences of non-binary people as we navigate institutional life, learning, teaching and research, but also the futures that we can collectively imagine and enact. The survey that the project conducted in the early part of 2019 made clear the tensions that currently exist for non-binary people in higher education. We surveyed higher education students at all levels as well as staff who teach across the UK. 78.4% (284 of 362) survey respondents answered on a five-point Likert scale that it was either very important (43.9%; N=159) or somewhat important (34.5%; N=125) that people at the university

---

know their gender and treat them accordingly. Nonetheless, 40.7% of students, 33.3% of PhD students and 34% of teaching staff reported that they had not been able or would not have been able to do basic life administration, such as indicate their preferred name or pronoun, or have an appropriate gender marker on their record, at their university. Furthermore, 41% of students reported that they are not able to be open with their teachers about their gender. So, while significant numbers of our survey respondents clearly would like universities to know their gender both in terms of infrastructure and teaching environments, something is happening that does not make this possible. One of the most troubling findings of our research is that it confirms that many non-binary students and staff expend a great deal of mental, physical and emotional energy attempting to achieve a base level of administrative consistency and recognition. So, one of the challenges that higher education faces is to ensure that the basic infrastructure that non-binary people need is in place so that they can focus on learning, teaching and research, which are ostensibly the reasons why many students and staff are at university. Beyond this, we also need to create opportunities to dream different futures, futures in which non-binary genders are not just incorporated into university life but in which they are actively challenging, shaping and transforming it.

While our study focusses specifically on non-binary people, others such as Lawrence and Mckendry (2019) have researched the experiences of trans and non-binary people in Scottish higher education and have also made calls for change as a result. Their excellent guide offers practical advice to institutions on how to make themselves accessible and welcoming to trans and non-binary students and staff. Other organisations such as Stonewall and the National Union of Students also regularly issue guidance and support documents on inclusion in education. So, the information, support and guidance is available to higher education institutions if they wish to engage with it. Much of what is available though focusses on the more social and

---

administrative aspects of student journeys through university. Beyond this I believe that we need to be asking a different set of questions:

1. What do these challenges mean for establishing an educational ethos, especially in higher education? How can a diversity of gender knowledges and experiences transform universities, especially our approaches to learning and teaching, as well as disciplinary knowledges?
2. How do we ensure that trans and non-binary students are full members of learning communities across their educational journeys and not just in primary and secondary education?
3. How do we move beyond the freedom of speech vs. non-discrimination binary that paralyses so much discussion at the moment? In other words: How do we create an environment in which we can challenge persistent discrimination and oppression on the basis of gender while at the same time creating spaces where students and staff are not subjected to microaggressions and structural oppressions around their gender (and additional) identities and can instead focus on learning, teaching and research?
4. How do we undertake all of this work from intersectional, decolonising and liberatory positions?

To return to Renz's article and the questions it poses, we need to consider the spaces of learning and what they offer in terms of being (or not being) gendered. Specifically, we need to consider what feminist and decolonising teaching looks and feels like, what the relationships that emerge between students and teachers there might hold for transforming learning and, especially, how trans and non-binary genders can transform educational spaces themselves. For classrooms hold disruptive and transformative potential:

The academy is not paradise. But learning is a place where paradise can be created. The classroom, with all its limitations, remains a location of possibility. In that field of possibility we have the opportunity to labor for freedom, to demand of ourselves and our comrades, an openness of mind and heart that allows us to face reality even as we collectively imagine ways to move beyond boundaries, to transgress. This is education as the practice of freedom. (hooks, 1994: 207)

It is an urgent task for us in higher education to embrace education as the practice of freedom, to imagine it otherwise and to collaboratively create spaces for diverse gender knowledges to transform us.

### References

hooks, b. (1994) *Teaching to Transgress: Education as the Practice of Freedom*, New York: Routledge.

hooks, b. (2015 [1989]) *talking back: thinking feminist, thinking black*, New York: Routledge.

Lawrence, M. and S. Mckendry (2019) *Supporting Transgender and Non-Binary Students and Staff in Further and Higher Education: Practical Advice for Colleges and Universities*, London: Jessica Kingsley Publishers.

Yahlnaaw (2019) T'aats'üigang: Stuffing a jar full. *International Journal for Students as Partners* 3(2): 6-10.