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## An Autoethnography of the Feminist Pedagogical Strategies Used in Teaching and Learning to Promote Inclusive Classrooms.

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### ABSTRACT

Although institutions of higher learning in South Africa have made progress in policies and programming that curb the ideological hegemonic positions inflicted by the Apartheid education system, higher education is still grappling with gender inequalities and inequities in the classroom context. This article reflects on my journey and pedagogical experiences as a student and later a feminist lecturer. Feminist pedagogues are promising approaches for social transformation in institutions of higher learning. I focused on my experiences, exploring the tensions that have shaped my praxis. I employed an auto-ethnographic research approach through an autobiography research method to illustrate my experiences as I transitioned from being a student to a tutor and a feminist lecturer within institutions of higher learning in South Africa. Findings from this paper show that to disrupt normative classrooms, lecturers need to harness classroom strategies that can enhance inclusion, equity, social justice, and equality. These might include but are not limited to reflexive journaling, negotiating, and listening, dialogue, mutual vulnerability to challenge conventional power relations in institutions of higher learning. The article recommends that feminist pedagogy can work towards solving potentially unequal relations and discriminatory learning environments. This can be done by disrupting normative power hierarchies in the classroom by allowing both lecturers and learners to negotiate the process of 'being listened to and 'being heard in the teaching and learning environments and thus creating room for plural voices and more inclusive learning spaces.

**Keywords:** Feminist Pedagogy, Gender, Auto- Ethnography, Higher Education

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### INTRODUCTION

In 2011 the Department of Basic Education in South Africa mentioned the need to infuse social justice and human rights in their teaching and learning by developing an awareness of diversity and challenging the remaining patriarchal power relations in the curriculum and pedagogical practices (Department of Basic Education, 2015). Institutions of higher learning are still grappling with gender equity and disparities therefore, promoting diversity and challenging the dominant curriculum and pedagogical practices are imperative. Furthermore, there are many challenges that

are experienced in institutions of higher learning including a high student-lecturer ratio, high workloads, and unpreparedness of first-year students. Akala and Divala (2016) argue that women suffered from triple marginalization (class, race, and sexism) due to hegemonic and ideological positions that were marred in the apartheid context. Although the South African higher education terrain has been progressive towards policy and programming, there have been silences on gender issues in the transformation agenda (Fraser, 2005). Hill and St. Rose (2010) advance the argument that gender skewing in institutions of higher education has led to gender inequality and

inequity that comes through the classroom interactions and curriculum which further subjugate women. Informal and formal curricula reinforce stereotypical femininity and masculinity roles that are anchored in the patriarchal ideology. The fees must fall movement from April 2015 represented resistance in the university spaces. It zoomed on sexual violence and other forms of gender-based violence which existed in the university context (Matebeni, 2017).

Although the South African government has made progress in increasing enrolment to 1 085 568 in 2018 from approximately 500 000 in 1994 (DHET, 2020;15) black students particularly still experience barriers that inhibit them from accessing education, and those who manage to access education are deterred to perform well. Furthermore, although the country has enacted some progressive policies like the Education White Paper 3 of 1997, some scholars argue that it fails to adequately address hidden gender inequities. Consequently, all disadvantaged students are lumped into one group, and policy and programming fail to not clearly spell out the varying vulnerable groups (Taylor & Yu, 2009). This is exacerbated by minimal or no academic readiness to cope with the university classrooms when first-year students transition from high school to institutions of higher learning (Taylor & Yu, 2009).

Akin to previous citations of Eurocentric traditions, the classroom spaces including the syllabi, instructional strategies, and curricula, privilege and empower hegemonic narratives of dominant groups whilst excluding and oppressing marginalised students (Madden et al., 2016). Hooks (1994) is of the view that classroom spaces operate in what she terms “supremacist capitalists’ patriarchy”, where realities present claims of epistemic authority rather than a pedagogy that builds on transformational and participatory curricula. In the same way, a report by the South African Department of Education

advances the viewpoint that subordinated positions existing in educational discourses and practices are derived from the current group of teachers, teaching the same way they were taught (Department of Basic Education, 2015). There is, therefore, a need for classrooms to progress beyond traditional patriarchal systems by disrupting status quo knowledge constructs (hooks, 1994).

Literature also points to hidden forms of gender equality and discrimination against female students as this is also shown through the underrepresentation of female students in science, technology, and engineering programs (DHET, 2019). Discrimination against female students is further experienced by cyber shaming, sexual harassment, and gendered norms which are not seriously considered, and this leads to the lack of gender awareness that consequently affects their classroom experiences (David, 2019). The above-raised issues reflect how unequal the classroom and university contexts are, therefore, the need to consider utilising feminist pedagogy tenets to promote more inclusive, socially just university classrooms. Based on the above, I intend to share my experiences anchored on feminist pedagogical tenets in my attempt to create inclusive classrooms in institutions of higher learning. I consider myself a feminist teacher despite my gender. My teaching practices are committed to creating a supportive classroom that fosters empowerment and critical consciousness adopting a feminist perspective in my teaching (Hooks, 1994). I aim to contribute to the feminist pedagogical research by clearly articulating how tenets of this philosophical underpinning can promote supportive, socially just learning spaces even in contexts where classrooms are dominated by patriarchal systems and curricula. I highlight through my autoethnographic experience how I draw from feminist principles, and teaching

practices that assist me in fostering a democratic learning environment.

My argument for this paper is that due to the patriarchal stereotypes reinforced in university classrooms, there is an urgent need for the adoption of feminist pedagogical strategies to foster inclusive classrooms by adopting the tenets of this philosophical grounding. Drawing from my experiences, I use the autoethnography research method and combine it with the critical feminist theory which both aim to challenge normative university practices (research and teaching) silencing alternative perspectives. This proposed framework allowed me to present a compelling argument advocating for inclusive practices that foster equitable and inclusive learning environments. I shed light through feminist pedagogical tenets including challenging normative practices, negotiating and listening, reducing power relations between me and my students, reflexivity and mutual vulnerability to challenge oppressive structures, and sharing the benefits of the feminist pedagogy in my teaching.

I agree with Yoon (2021) who advances the notion that feminist pedagogy is a philosophy of teaching and a critical praxis focusing on inclusive, affirmative, and student-centered pedagogy. It further provides organizing principles based on feminist thinking values and motivation. This study aligns with its basic tenets borrowed from Allen, Walker, and Webb (2002). The feminist pedagogy,

- Reform the relationship between the student and the lecturer.
- Promotes Empowerment.
- Build a community of learning.
- Privilege voice (especially marginalized)
- Respect the diversity of experience.
- Challenge traditional pedagogical notions

In this paper, I dissect my experiences as a student and a lecturer showing how I use the feminist pedagogical tenets to challenge conventional power relations that characterize teaching and learning in institutions of higher learning. I briefly give a background orientation of the roots of this teaching philosophy. Feminist pedagogies increasingly became popular due to the failure of Paulo Freire's critical pedagogy to integrate feminist values in teaching and learning. I agree with Kiguwa (2017) who advanced the notion that Freire's critical pedagogy mainly focuses on class analysis and does not specifically pay attention to gender thereby warranting liberation. Other identity axes such as race, gender, and sexuality were not captured by Freire's critical pedagogy. Feminist pedagogues have extended his framework by acknowledging that oppressed or oppressor subjects can also be gendered. Though not a toolbox, they provide a basis to question what we teach, how we teach it, what students learn, and how they learn it. Distinctly, feminist pedagogues have received considerable attention due to challenging socio-structural systems that are male-dominated, male-centered, and male-identified in institutions of higher learning (Johnson, 2016).

## **THEORETICAL GROUNDING**

I utilize the Critical Feminist Theory (CFT) that advances the notion that through action, inclusive classrooms, oppressive systems can be disrupted to attain a socially just learning environment (Weir, 2021). It recognizes systems of inequality are interconnected and impact individual experiences and opportunities within educational contexts. It seeks to challenge dominant ideologies, and power structures that do not challenge oppressive norms. The CFT advocates for a democratic classroom and cultivates environments that prioritize equity and social justice (Collins, 2000). The theoretical grounding has shared objectives and principles with Feminist Pedagogy tenets in terms of

addressing hierarchical power structures, providing platforms for student-centred learning, promoting inclusivity, and empowerment, and challenging canonical ways of knowledge construction. Like Egbert and Sanden (2019), my teaching practices aim to build awareness of these oppressive systems and thus, consequently create emancipatory learning platforms where learners can appreciate diversity, and dialogue, and reflect upon their learning and my teaching. In other words, all learners should be made to understand complexities that exist but not subscribe to the gendered differences that favor only female learners but give all students a voice to contribute to their learning environment. This paper rethinks the hierarchical structure by redistributing power. This is achieved by the continued reflective process that I, through this autoethnography as a research methodology, explore and acknowledge that my learners are active co-constructors of knowledge through reflective inquiry and engage actively with the material, they study to enhance their knowledge. This article subscribes to the goals of critical feminist theory that learning should support all voices in the classroom thereby creating a safe, supportive, and engaged environment. The goal is to change the normative patriarchal classroom settings and invest in pedagogies that are more transformative through the content we teach, and ways that we teach, and how the students learn in the democratic classes.

The purpose of this paper is not to add absolute answers, but I aim to discuss potential ways and challenges of utilizing feminist pedagogues using epistemological humility (Barone, 2008). In other words, my aim is to describe and analyse my experiences, realities, and interpretations of my pedagogical journey whilst simultaneously analysing my positionality and praxis within the feminist pedagogies tenets.

## METHODOLOGY

As Sparkes (1996, p. 467) alludes, “I attempt to take you too as the reader into the intimacies of my world”. Using autoethnography allowed me to reflect and illuminate areas of feminist pedagogies that may well have remained hidden in my teaching. The autobiography is closely related to autoethnography as autobiographies are narratives by researchers focusing on their own memories, life experiences, and personal history whilst autoethnography allows the researcher to combine autobiography with ethnography zooming into the social context whilst self-reflecting on their own experiences (Sparkes, 2000). The autoethnography follows my experiences as both a student and lecturer from 2009 to date and is written in the style of an “auto-ethnographic narrative” (Tillman, 2009, p.95; Fassett & Warren, 2007). Such an approach allowed me to reflect on how I (often unknowingly) promote or inhibit reproducing power structures in classrooms.

I utilized an autoethnographic method because I had the desire to produce accessible and meaningful research grounded in my personal experiences. Applying autoethnographic writing pragmatically assisted me in fostering pedagogical change, as well as considering transformative practices that can be utilized to constitute social action in my classrooms (Holman-Jones, 2005). I reflect on my own experience so that it can have an impact on other educators in institutions of higher learning. This approach challenges canonical research methods by representing the self in politically and socially just ways. I reflected on my teaching practices to sensitize readers on strategies that can inform inclusive classrooms. This methodological approach fills a gap in traditional research where the researcher’s voice is not overly included as part of the research. My integration of autoethnography and feminist pedagogy stems from what Ellis (2011) proposes as

challenging canonical ways of knowledge construction consequently amplifying my voice as the researcher and challenging canonical ways of teaching and learning. By combining the transformative and reflective practices of autoethnography and inclusive and empowering principles of feminist pedagogy, I attempt to create research on teaching and learning that facilitates a more socially just classroom context. This can inspire empathy, and provoke reflection, dialogue, and participation to promote strategies for forging inclusive classrooms.

Whilst acknowledging my position as both the subject and object of this autoethnography, I need to acknowledge that there might be biases in relation to the account of my experiences in the pedagogical journey. To reduce the possibility of bias, I followed up the reflective practice with critical consciousness, action, and transformation as part of the social construction of knowledge as alluded to by Noble and McIlveen (2012). Furthermore, I make use of peer reviews to ensure a nuanced and balanced representation of my pedagogical journey.

For data collection, I used self-observation data, self-reflective data from journaling practices, and incidences in my teaching that promote inclusive classrooms. I chronologically listed major events that took place in the 10-year period. This assisted me in describing the circumstances and explaining why they were pertinent to strategies that I used to promote inclusive classrooms. I organized the data in chronological order for further analysis. I used descriptive coding to describe my experience in my own words and descriptions and data were presented in themes.

## RESULTS

In the following section, I show how I align my teaching practices with the Feminist pedagogies.

### *Challenging normative educational practices*

Educational systems reinforce hierarchical structures and systems through curricula, teaching, and learning practices (Bursuc, 2013). My journey in teaching and learning officially started about a decade ago as a tutor (undergraduate facilitator) at a South African university. As a lecturer, I facilitated my sessions the same way my mentors taught me. In a way, the assessment and curriculum structure were hierarchical, characterized by oppressive ideological norms that held me back thus, making me fail to empower both the tutees and me. Most of the tests and assignments placed significant weight on the student's performance on standardized tests. The tests and examinations I used reduced the complexity of students' critical understanding of the content to numerical scores only, thus framing power relations between me and the students. This fostered the students' reliance on my knowledge as the tutor, robbing them of the opportunity and responsibility to benefit from their personal experience. I must acknowledge the difficulty of the current university systems where grades are evaluated and ranked therefore promoting competition instead of a community of learning. I am acutely aware of the contestations of challenging normative classes, in line with feminist pedagogy and autoethnography. By incorporating feminist pedagogy and autoethnography, I utilise reflexivity to acknowledge my biases I find myself in "liminality" a social construct created by Turner (2017) transitioning from a place of not knowing and getting to know. One of the feminist pedagogy tenets also gives me the opportunity to challenge my previous traditional canon classrooms and aim to promote inclusive classes.

Historically, classroom instruction was designed to retain traditional constructions of the academy (Leithwood & Hed, 2009, p. 436). My classroom instruction has evolved from direct instruction which promotes information processing and is teacher-centered to a combination of social interaction and independent instruction which promotes student-centered teaching and learning strategies. The latter promotes teaching and learning methods like critical thinking, peer learning, dialogues, and reflexivity amongst many inclusive practices.

### ***Challenging Sociological normative in the module I teach***

My teaching style is more aligned with Feminist pedagogy as I incorporate an approach that takes into cognisance the scrutiny of content (what is taught), how it is taught (teaching practices), and relationships within the learning environment. In the Gender studies module I teach, the content challenges the Western and patriarchal ideologies which elevate the position that men have been given in classical sociology. Of importance, the material advances the argument that writings on women, sex, and gender in the classical era were only accredited to the “fathers” of sociology (Comte, Marx, Durkheim & Weber). Women were either almost completely ignored or briefly discussed and dismissed despite their contributions. In the early 20th Century, several writers such as Hamilton, Gilman, and Mill challenged the confinement of women in the domestic sphere, but their ideas did not find their way into mainstream sociology. Furthermore, one of the strongest academic criticisms of ‘Western’ feminism has been that its application to African contexts does not consider some of the gender relations characteristic of African matrilineal contexts. If women in such traditional cultures had a measure of power, then any (early) version of feminism that sees men as always dominant, as in

patriarchy, cannot be appropriate for all contexts. At the heart of this Gender studies module, is a political challenge to notions and structures of knowledge and power (Barr,1999 p.113, 115, 123).

### ***Promoting student participation and dialogue in teaching and learning***

As a student in 2009, I was invited to an “*incoko*” an IsiXhosa word meaning dialogue to discuss curriculum transformation. This team comprised academics, community members, and representatives of public and private sectors in a South African university I was enrolled. The roundtable discussions were centered on creating a socially just curriculum in a proposed compulsory first-year module. This was the first experience for me as a learner to be involved in a platform where traditional practices were being disrupted giving way to a transformative curriculum. At this point in my academic journey, there was a destabilization of traditional norms of teaching and learning, a process of unlearning dominant hegemonic spaces in education. Prior to this invitation, I was never afforded the opportunity and the platform to be seen or heard in my own learning process. That moment illuminated a stage in my academic journey, the point where pedagogy, power, and politics of knowledge were deconstructed. This is in line with one of the feminist pedagogy tenets advanced by Hooks (1994) on empowerment and agency. Students are given a platform to acknowledge their own voices, knowledge, and skills in acting for social justice. The act of being listened to and hearing others was achieved through several techniques that included problem-solving, collective brainstorming, and critical engagements in transforming curricula. The *incoko* (dialogue) gave me the platform with other selected students, community, and staff members to co-create multidisciplinary knowledge offered through the proposed compulsory module.

In this process of decolonizing the curriculum, I was part of a group that contributed ideas on material and assessments on module content including but not limited to indigenous knowledge systems, poverty and inequality, and HIV/AIDS. This fostered in me and other students critical thinking skills, dialogue, and a platform for meaningful participation in higher education.

I have realised a pattern whereby during the first few weeks, most female students enrolled in the module participate in class. The low enrolment of male students showed how the Gender studies module is an exclusively female terrain therefore, contributing to the reluctance of male students to take gender studies and thus, creating polarised learning spaces by gender in higher education. The male students slowly take part in the engagements from a point of defensiveness on the premise of normative cultural aspects of domination within the private and public institutions that they were socialized in. This indicates ways in which systems an individual is embodied into (sex, race, gender, sexual orientation) affect the way they (both lecturers and students) view phenomena and the meanings that they attach to gender studies.

There is a need to listen to what students say and how they say it because the learning environment needs to facilitate the process of what works, what is beneficial, and what needs to be addressed to improve the learning process (Author, 2014). Put differently, reflection group journaling has the potential to harness student experiences as an entry point for inquiry and to engage students as active participants in the learning process. With such an experience, I concur with Schoeman (2015) who shows that when challenging hegemonic paradigms, learners become epistemic agents with power shared between themselves and instructors as well as amongst learners themselves. These notions

become fundamentals to create a forum of democratic education.

***Utilising my personal experiences in the classroom contexts***

My position as a young black woman is premised on transformation and inclusivity. I am teaching a predominantly black African group with more female than male students. I utilize my personal experiences to explain theories, and the praxis of gender, race as well as sexuality, thus my students know more about me, and this enables a relational teaching and learning context. I concur with Stern (2018, p. 108) who suggests that there is a need to “co-create space with our students to reframe dominant narratives”. I further encourage learners to use examples, which premise on their personal experiences and positionalities, thereby promoting critical consciousness. This process decentres the power in classrooms by acknowledging various voices in a socially just manner.

***How I use Reflexive Journaling in my classrooms to promote Inclusivity.***

For the modules I facilitate as a lecturer, students need to join reflective journaling groups at the beginning of the semester. These groups should be of mixed sex, gender, age, and race to allow the students to negotiate and renegotiate their positionality of oppression and privilege through the celebration of difference. Journaling defies traditional academic ways of writing due to its personal rather than scientific nature and its expressive rather than analytical form (Barnhardt et al., 2003, p.10). It assists both lecturers and learners to reflect and explore meaning through a non-threatening environment that promotes critical thinking skills and builds communities of learning if done in groups.

Each member must get a chance to coordinate the weekly task; thereby, group members share the roles of knowledge experts and decision-makers. The journal reflection entries count as part of their

semester grades, and they are not based on the content but merely on submission. I utilise reflexive journaling as a way of challenging structured classrooms. The first group journal entry is always to discuss and write down their expectations of the module in that semester. This creates module planning which takes into cognisance the students' contributions through their group reflections. Although some students complain about the difficulty of coordinating the group work process, they reported that they felt empowered to take part in the module experience. From my personal reflections on the activities meant for the journals, I give them weekly guiding activities. Upon reflection, there is a need for more autonomy that is where these activities are guided solely by the students to allow them to independently reflect on the feminist agenda. As indicated in my writing, student participation is when they have a platform to be heard and an opportunity to impact discussions and decisions during knowledge creation.

### **Mutual Vulnerability and discomfort**

Warren (2008) and Daniels (2014) consider vulnerability as pertinent in pedagogical praxis. As a lecturer, I always struggled with the notion of vulnerability. I embody my positionality as reflexive and consider the teaching and learning context as a site of struggle. I agree with Stern (2006) who defines emotional authenticity as a state that allows educators to self-critique, acknowledge, and self-reflect in assessing their own pedagogical practices. Using the autoethnographic method allowed me to use my personal experiences to self-reflect and critique my teaching practices. Transformative and socially just pedagogy gives room for critical thought and action by disrupting dominant cultural and societal frameworks, and one such way is by creating mutual vulnerability and discomfort (Vindevghel, 2016).

In self-reflecting on my pedagogical approach to an online

assessment, I was frustrated with some flaws I picked up in my instruction that led to some students not performing well. As a lecturer, I used to give out learning activities without the rubrics or without clearly explaining my expectations from the written work. After attending a staff training session on the importance of rubrics in creating an inclusive learning environment, I went through a self-reflection process. Self-reflection typifies an element of evaluating practice and performance. It opens the courage to be vulnerable by working to ease feelings of vulnerability associated with individual teaching practices to the world. This can potentially benefit student learning (Zinn et al., 2009).

In another incident during my class where a student was applying one of the feminist approaches using their personal experience, two students were whispering and exchanging notes in my class; one was female and the other was male. As their lecturer, I politely asked them to assist us by being scribes. Unfortunately, the male student was resistant, and it dawned upon me that it was an issue of gendered power relations. I consulted my peers regarding this episode, and they advised me to critically reflect on it and engage the student, outside of class. I acknowledge that classrooms are political spaces where individual needs, desires, and interests are derived from either a source of privilege or oppression (Orr, 1997). One might argue that as a lecturer I condoned his behaviour of revealing his masculine attributes, but after engaging with him privately the student realized and acknowledged that his positionality as a male student perpetuates male privilege. Barnhardt et al. (2003) mention that mutual vulnerability requires that students be made aware that a classroom based on feminist principles should promote connection and collaboration rather than hierarchies of competition and vulnerability that often silence female voices. In other words, the

process of mutual vulnerability and discomfort in feminist classes should lead to transformative and socially just learning spaces (Zinn et. al, 2009).

When confronted with sexism or sexist ideas as a lecturer, I allow the learners to voice out their guilt and sometimes anger without losing my temper. This brings us to the most vulnerable space where privileged vulnerability fosters growth and empowerment from an apolitical, marketplace feminist pedagogy. Our positionalities of privilege and oppression as lecturers create narratives that challenge dominant hegemonic identities and institutions to shape our educational experiences. One of the strategies to ensure such a safe but critically conscious environment is to have ground rules that guide inclusive learning to be constructed by the learners themselves. These must incorporate all voices in the critical discourse, without the lecturer or any other student interrupting or dominating the discussions to ensure continued explorations. In such instances, the way I coordinate these engagements as a lecturer will also lead to the decentralization of power between the lecturer and the students or amongst the students themselves, helping to dismantle power hierarchies defined by social position and status, gender, or race within higher education.

### **How I reform the relationship between me and my students**

Feminist pedagogy aims to create a more democratic, participatory, and empowering educational experience that challenges traditional power dynamics and promotes social justice. Although as a lecturer I sometimes regard myself as a tough grader, I allow students to negotiate and in return, I listen. I have learned to listen more and allow the negotiation process to take place. In feminist pedagogies, the voice is the currency of the academy. Students are given the platform to bring questions, comments, and

contributions to the curricula, assessment, and pedagogical practices without the instructor being offended. Belenky et al., (1986,p.112) are of the viewpoint that connected knowers use empathy, collaborative and careful listening where they hear the “others” voice. I have therefore learned to create a loving, caring yet critical platform with the freedom to resolve the traditional student relationship hierarchy. This does not necessarily render equality of power in the classrooms, but it is an indication of movement towards a socially just democratic space. I concur with Bright (1993, p.130), who is of the opinion that “regardless of the extent to which a teacher tries to minimize his or her power, it cannot be given away. When institutional power of the lecturer is not acknowledged, the situation is mystified; abuse of power may be obscured rendering students’ incapable of naming their experience accurately”. Put differently, the instructor redefines their power as a grader to a democratic process that allows the activation of multiple perspectives. The authority, therefore, shifts when feedback is incorporated for students, and they ask questions and interact to create a democratic assessment process. In an article I co-authored with Mahlangu, we advanced the notion that students’ voices challenge the dominant ways of learning and provide a critical framework and experience for building a diverse intellectual community as a basis for curriculum renewal (Author, 2014). In the same vein, Hooks also argues that “a classroom should be a place where the difference could be acknowledged, where we could finally understand, accept and affirm our ways of knowing which are forged in history and relations of power” (Hooks, 1994, p.30).

At the beginning of the semester, we (the learners and myself as their lecturer) discuss the grading of their assessments. By communicating and discussing the mark assessment plan, I reduce the power

imbalance between the students and myself. In addition, as their lecturer, I allow feedback on the marking rubrics beforehand, and this gives room for students to take part in the assessment processes. My feminist concern for sharing power and caring in the assessment process is at times compromised by the obsession students have with grades. Students put more emphasis on grades rather than fostering critical consciousness in knowledge acquisition. Quite recently, I had a student who would email me out of concern for her grades rather than learning the skills to become a more critically engaged scholar. After several emails explaining and responding to her concerns, I sent her an email requesting that we go through the submitted work and evaluate the sections that required improvement. She did not revert as most students would and I realised that it was an issue of self-imposed unrealistic high standards measured through grades. This is drawn from a system that grades and labels students with 'distinctions, pass and fails amongst other marks. It is an unfortunate context, and I must keep in mind how I can persuade and invite students into the knowledge we embody. This practice empowers students with both the knowledge and the skills, thus leading toward a more humanised engaged, critical pedagogy that places more emphasis on the process rather than the result.

On my part as a lecturer, I work towards adjusting my assessment practices that give feedback that is more detailed on the submitted assessment. This type of feedback might be time-consuming. If done properly, it allows tracking down students' performance and progress and develops democratic relationships that assist them to gain confidence. As a lecturer, I attempt to give respectful, encouraging rather than negative feedback, that undermines students. Baring my most vulnerable self as a product of the system that I have been part of, initially comes with feelings of

discomfort and resistance that feminist pedagogues theorise as part of the learning process.

## DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Findings from this study show that although the institutional contexts remain patriarchal through the context, the content offering emanates from the historical background of the South African education system, I have made efforts as indicated in the findings to create a socially just teaching and learning environment. Practices from the findings which include classroom instruction like reflexive journaling, encouraging dialogue, creating a platform where I and my learners exhibit mutual vulnerability and discomfort, inclusive assessment strategies, and peer learning acknowledge that students are not passive human beings but bring their prior knowledge to the classroom. Furthermore, a popular notion that runs through the chapter of the need to promote student engagement and inclusion be, is one of the cornerstones of feminist pedagogy. This study reveals that using a feminist pedagogical approach may bring positive educational changes through the instructors' negotiation of their own context and praxis. This process is achieved by giving students a voice without perpetuating discourses. Furthermore, creating mutually vulnerable classrooms disrupt the normative hierarchical educational systems. In addition, assessment practices should not be regarded as a one size fits all approach; just as there are varying feminist philosophies, a number of factors like positionality, the sociocultural systems and policies, might also affect the outcomes of incorporating a feminist pedagogy. As Wrigley et al. (2011, p.5) argue, "...just because schools can't do everything doesn't mean they cannot achieve something, schools can make a difference but not all the difference". I consequently harness available opportunities that destabilize the

deeply entrenched patriarchal norms and values in my classrooms to promote a socially just learning environment.

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## An Autoethnography of the Feminist Pedagogical Strategies

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