Power, Voice and Democratization: Feminist Pedagogy and Assessment in CMC

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ABSTRACT
Academic Technologies for Learning at the University of Alberta regularly conducts a faculty survey related to the use of, and attitudes towards, the use of learning technologies in both face-to-face and distributed learning environments. The 1999-2000 survey revealed some significant differences in the ways that female and male faculty approached the use of technology in teaching. Subsequently, the authors pursued these trends through a project of action research in which over 40 female faculty participated.

The literature on critical feminist teaching in academia provided a context for this study. Learning design preferences revealed by the female faculty who participated tended to reflect relational values common to the design of learner-centred approaches that place a high value on interactions with students, such as computer-mediated communications (CMC).

While many faculty who used CMC grieved the reduction, or loss, of face-to-face contact they also appreciated the increased intimacy of, and democratization inherent in, online conversation. However, this attribute highlighted conflictual feelings about the assessment of these conversations, as the culture of the institution is based on an uneven “power balance” in the classroom. This raised the question of how a feminist teacher understands and accommodates the requirements of learner assessment in environments like CMC, that encourage the construction of knowledge through collaborative conversation.

This paper attempts to address this “problem of practice” for female faculty by reviewing and synthesizing the literature on critical pedagogy, feminist teaching, and the assessment of student learning in feminist classrooms. We discuss the assessment approaches used in CMC that are reflected in the stories of seven female faculty. Six issues are identified: necessary coercion, relocating authority, taken-for-granted assumptions, safety, and process as product, and addressing equity.

Key words
Feminist pedagogy, Learner assessment, Computer-mediated conferencing

Introduction
The Academic Technologies for Learning unit (ATL) at the University of Alberta conducts research in the use of learning technologies in higher education. The research takes many forms and has many purposes: evaluating the effectiveness of learning designs, assessing student and faculty attitudes, exploring the contribution of technology to institutional transformation, and developing models of faculty evaluation and support. Since 1996, we have conducted institutional surveys investigating faculty attitudes towards, and use of, learning technologies in distributed learning environments. The 1997-1998 Faculty Survey revealed some significant differences or trends in the ways male and female faculty approached and used learning technologies. These differences were again identified in the survey conducted in 1999-2000. Clark’s (1994) framework of instructional vs. delivery technology provided one way to interpret this data.

Clark (1994) provides a theoretical framework for categorising instructional technology into two parts, delivery technology, and instructional technology. Clark defines delivery technology as the technology used to distribute the instruction to the student, while instructional technology comprises the underlying instructional methods that are used. When new instructional technologies are used, both the delivery methods and the instructional methods may be different from conventional instruction.

An individual focusing on the instructional methods may be more inclined to choose the delivery method with this in mind. That is, he/she is less concerned with the specific delivery technology, as long as it facilitates the
chosen method. The delivery technology will be selected because it facilitates a collaborative group discussion, for example, or increases access to other resources or may potentially redefine the role of the instructor/facilitator.

Based on the data from this survey, we concluded that female faculty were more inclined to first pick the instructional method of interest, then the delivery technology that supported the approach; while male respondents seemed relatively more likely than their female colleagues to pick the delivery technology without first considering the instructional methodology. These findings are supported in the literature (c.f. Nawratil, 1999; Robin & Harris, 1998) and discussed in more depth in Campbell and Varnhagen, (in press).

To better understand female faculty’s personal experiences with technology, the authors conducted a two-year, voluntary study on the interaction of gender issues with technology. Participants were solicited by email, telephone, and through lists and regular mail. As a result the study, currently in the analysis stage, involved over forty female faculty members from every Faculty across the University, in a project of "pedagogical activism", or participatory/emancipatory action research (c.f. Feldman, 2000; McTaggart, 1997) whose ultimate goal is transformation of practice. For a breakdown of participation by discipline and academic status, see Table 1. Female Faculty Participation by Discipline and Status.

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Table 1: Female Faculty Participation by Discipline and Status

“Collaborative conversations”, through focus groups (three in total) and semi-structured interviews, resulted in a rich set of data, the analysis of which was based on a grounded theory approach. One intended outcome is a growing and connected community of practice which may lead to alternative models of instructional support and more critical and profound instructional practice with technology, including the assessment of students engaging in online activities such computer-mediated conferencing (CMC).

A substantial research base (dating from the early 80’s) reveals the impact on girls’ experiences with technology-enhanced educational settings. However, as Spotts, Bowman and Mertz (1997) have observed, that while most studies have investigated “possible gender differences in education, computer use, attitudes towards computers, math and sciences…only a few have addressed potential gender differences related to faculty use of and attitudes toward instructional technology in higher education” (p. 425, emphasis is ours). We were interested in pursuing the thinking and decisions made by the female faculty in the survey because there we thought we might contribute usefully to the literature base in this area. We also continue to explore these issues from an all-faculty perspective (i.e. male and female) in other projects. For example, in one study we are exploring the transformational effects, on pedagogical practice, of integrating learning technology in face-to-face classrooms. The findings described here focus on the experiences of female faculty only and are not meant to be comparative.

The literature on critical feminist teaching in academia provided one context for this study (c.f. Hensel, 1991; Kulis, 1997; Ramsden & Martin, 1996; Elliott & Woloshyn, 1997). The learning design preferences revealed in our collaborative conversations tended to reflect relational values common to this tradition. Park (1996) locates these designs in learner-centred approaches that place a high value on interactions with students such as class discussion, cooperative learning, experiential learning, fieldwork, group projects, student-developed activities, and a broader range of evaluation techniques such as peer assessment. Middleton (1993) characterizes the context in which women faculty may prefer to study and teach as focusing on the “relation of actual daily experience to larger social or moral patterns” and “the value of nurturance and caring in themselves and their work” (p. 114).

We are not suggesting that all female faculty who embody the principles described by this framework would describe themselves as feminist pedagogues; their decisions related to instructional technology use reflect
elements of the learning environments and their underlying value systems described by the literature on feminist pedagogy. Critical feminist pedagogy therefore, provides a useful framework in which to understand instructional decisions made by these female faculty.

Learning environments described by social constructivist (c.f. Britain & Liber, 1999; McLellan, 1997; Oliver, Omari, & Herrington, 1997) often include methods (such as CMC) and technologies (such as asynchronous discussion boards) that increase opportunities for interaction among a learning community that involves peers, instructors and outside “experts” as legitimate and equitable sources of knowledge. Many of our participants were very thoughtful about the culture of their own learning and research communities and sought ways to reflect that in their choices of instructional and delivery technologies. For example, although those who used CMC grieved the reduction or loss of face-to-face contact they also appreciated the increased intimacy and democratization of online conversation. However, this attribute highlighted conflictual feelings about the assessment of these conversations, as the culture of the institution is based on an uneven “power balance” in the classroom. This raises the question of how a feminist teacher understands and accommodates the requirements of learner assessment in environments designed for equity, and values the construction of knowledge through collaborative conversation.

This paper attempts to address this “problem of practice” for female faculty by reviewing and synthesizing the literature on critical pedagogy, feminist teaching, and the assessment of student learning in feminist classrooms; and by discussing the assessment approaches used in computer-mediated conferences described by the female faculty in their stories from the study outlined above. Burge (1994), among others, urges the development of conceptual frameworks and culturally inclusive criteria (of which gender is one element) for assessing the use and effectiveness of these environments.

Critical theory

The term critical itself implies “to find or look for fault” and the “need or necessity” to question why this fault exists, and the need and the method of transformation. This is accomplished through awareness of one’s own role in the social and political power structures, awareness of the stakeholders within these structures, and an acknowledgement that one cannot escape from these but must exist within. These structures are built up on the basis of culture, economics, and politics. For example, what has long been perceived as the accepted and preferred value structure may not be true for every culture: knowledge and practice are socially constructed. Critical theorists support the notion that all knowledge is value laden and embedded within relations of power (Torres, 1999). They view education as a political playground in which teaching, curriculum development, assessment and educational policy formation are value-laden political acts that operate with historically constructed relations of power. But, critical theorists are concerned with emancipatory forms of power.

Critical theorists and pedagogues recognize the dual nature of education, both as an agent that reinforces the values of the dominant class but also as an agent of possible social transformation. Critical pedagogues strive to embody democratic values within their classroom practices, recognizing the need for debate, placing emphasis on student and teacher voice, and recognizing the political nature of schooling. The relationship of power and voice is critical to problematizing learning assessment in online environments.

Feminist Pedagogy

Feminist pedagogues describe their classrooms as collaborative, process-based, experiential, egalitarian, interactive, empowering, connected and relational, and affective as well as rational (Davis, 1999; Gunter, 1995; Maher, 1987; Nawratil, 1999; Tisdell, 2000; Weiler, 1998). Learners and faculty are encouraged to “seek connections between course content and their own lives, (see) their lives in a larger social perspective…and (and) employ experiential activities” (Kimmel, 1999, p. 67).

Some approaches to feminist pedagogy encourage cooperative learning environments in an attempt to create emancipatory, participatory, experiential, inclusive environments, where discussion seminars and small-group activities are emphasized, and where active learners become resources to one another (Nawratil, 1999). Supporting Nawratil’s conceptualization of the feminist classroom, Hugo (2000) describes the feminist educator: committed to the effective delivery of content, modeling ways of being and self-efficacy, cultivating ways of
thinking, and encouraging social activism through learning (p. 193). Recently, feminist educators have explored the potential of the online classroom to embody these values through learning designs (Nawratil, 1999).

Whether teaching economics, composition, or women’s studies, a feminist pedagogue attempts to “decenter” authority and to remain a learner in the classroom (Stanley-Spaeth, 2000). Bauer (1990) notes that, as feminist rhetoricians in the classroom, we achieve “a mastery that is not oppressive . . . an authoritative voice that is not the only authority” (p. 395). The National Women’s Studies Association (1991), in *Liberal Learning and the Women’s Studies Major: A Report to the Profession*, described such pedagogy as “collaborative, interactive and participatory; (striving) to foster the individual voice in the classroom” (p. 9). However, the feminist teacher must exist within the “social and political power structures” of the university. They struggle to find their own voices as well as struggling to design learning environments where students may also find theirs. The online environment has been explored by most of the female faculty in this study as a way to construct communities of discourse “as teachers and students voices interact with, influence, and construct each other” (Middleton, 1993, p 159).

**Feminist Pedagogy and Instructional Technology**

Beardon and Worden (1995) note that issues of knowledge—location and representation are part of the feminist account that stresses the socially constructed nature of technology. In this view, technology is not seen as a set of neutral artifacts, “so the effects of society on technology as well as the effects of technology on society need examination” (p. 64). Critical theorists have been suspicious of the values communicated by technology, as characterized by the “techno-apocalyptic literature” (Winkelman, 1997, p 21). However, if culture is socially negotiated rather than imposed, CMC can be used as a critical pedagogy; or agent of change in the real world.

There is no doubt that epistemologically isolated groups have been alienated by technology through social, political, and cultural factors (take, for example, the issue of access), but in computer-mediated conferences we may find a learning environment that *distributes* “authority to bring everyone into an educational process extending beyond time and physical space and sociopolitical boundaries” (Slatin, 1992, p 50). CMC has the potential to go beyond a technological tool to provide a pedagogical framework that can encourage active learning in a context of "constant collaborative conversation" (Hollingsworth, in Elliot & Woloshyn, 1997).

In its role in sustaining relationships with others, Bruffee (1993) characterizes conversation as connected knowing and the site for constructing knowledge. This aspect of conversation reflects its centrality in the constructivist environment, because dialogue is a cognitive process in which students work together to decenter, moving beyond personally held views to construct new and expanded representations (Fosnot, 1996), and transforming classroom relationships (Slatin, 1992, p.30). However, teachers may have trouble re-conceptualizing their roles in these active, participatory, and democratic environments (Ewing, Dowling & Coutts, 1998, p 6).

In the virtual classroom CMC provides both a pedagogical framework and a strategy for collaborative knowing. Pedagogically, CMC emphasizes extensive and sustained interaction that is more student-centered, than teacher-controlled (Kearsley, Lynch, & Wizer, 1994). Much has been written, and expected of, the virtual community of CMC as social barriers of sex, age, race, physical appearance, and facility in face-to-face, real-time discourse are apparently eliminated (or at least mediated). CMC provides an opportunity to solve the problem of inequitable distribution of dialogue space, although the space must be designed and facilitated to address these inequities.

Embedded in critical theory, feminist pedagogy emphasizes the value of a classroom environment that is relational (emphasizing relationships between teacher and students and among students themselves), experiential (focused on personal experience rather than abstract knowledge), and non-hierarchical (centered on students rather than the teacher). A thoughtful use of instructional technology can be employed to facilitate feminist techniques of collaborative and active learning. Stanley-Spaeth (2000) points to web-based environments that make use of such technologies as forums, message boards, and electronic mailing lists as supporting the notion of learning as constructed by our culture and our interactions with others, rather than characterized by the learner as passive receiver of knowledge. In other words, these “democratic” environments may empower both teachers and learners to find their voices.

Current feminist pedagogical work problematizes the idea of power of teachers over students, arguing that these power relations can and may be broken or reduced (Sattler, 1997, p. 165). Power and authority are complicated issues for the feminist teacher because of contradictory locations: the institutionally sanctioned authority of a
teacher’s position, the disempowerment they can experience, their political struggles to survive in an often hostile domain, and the attempt to even out power hierarchies when they are expected to grade the “voice” of learners (cf. Luke and Gore, 1992; Orner, 1992).

The Politics of Assessment

The democratic online classroom, framed above, reflects a community of learners and includes flexible teacher-student and student-teacher roles, egalitarian power relationships, and awareness of issues of power reflected and promoted by language and systems (Kimmel, 1999). Methods include inviting students to participate in decisions about the content and process of the class, asking for feedback about the class and teaching methods throughout the course, and co-teaching the course. In this environment, how can the teacher share power, empower students, value the skills of personal reflection, and the ability to think critically and transformatively about the very basis of the disciplines which they are studying, and still be accountable to the institution for creating the syllabi, student assessment, and support for awards (Kimmel, 1999; Stanley-Spaeth, 2000, p.66)?

Assessment is a site of institutional power, where we tell students what we really value in learning, and where students must fulfill the requirements of understanding, knowledge and skill in a form that grants them formal recognition and validates their knowing (Clifford, Nicholas, & Lousberg). George (1990) captures the moral conflict of the feminist teacher, in an online account of her virtual teaching experience, when she asserts that “I am the one who, according to some theories of feminist pedagogy, is to carry out my charge not by mimicking the role of the authoritarian patriarch, dictating norms of behavior, or intimidating students into meeting standards, but rather by adopting the role of the resource person/facilitator/nurturing mother figure while acknowledging “that if we are to change student attitudes toward themselves, ourselves, and the workings of society as a whole, we must claim the authority to use all of our powers in the classroom”.

The themes presented in this section reflect the concerns of seven female faculty from the health sciences, social sciences, and humanities, and are representative of the issues identified by many of the participants. Marcia Baxter Magolda’s (1992) work on patterns of knowing and reasoning in post-secondary learners provides a useful framework for analyzing the learning expectations of students and faculty, and the implications for assessing learning in online environments.

Issues in Evaluating Knowing in CMC

In Knowledge and reasoning in College: Gender-related patterns in students’ intellectual development (1992), Magolda describes a continuum of four socially constructed, somewhat fluid developmental patterns of student knowing in college: absolute knowing, in which knowledge is certain and obtained only from experts; transitional knowing, in which discrepancies among authorities are viewed as a result of answers being unknown; independent knowing, in which authorities are no longer the only source of knowledge and there is an emerging ability to create one’s own perspectives; and contextual knowing, where learning changes from thinking independently to thinking through problems and integrating and applying knowledge in context. In each of these patterns students expect different learning experiences, and evaluative approaches, moving from demonstration of content mastery to a two-way (or more, in CMC communities) process of interaction and assessment.

Magolda maintains that most junior undergraduates fall into the absolute knowing pattern, where they expect to listen and record in class rather than interact with the instructor, see their peers as sources of support or as partners in argument, but not as valid sources of knowledge, appeal to authority to resolve differences in knowledge claims, and value instructor-driven evaluation that lets them demonstrate mastery, (p. 38).

On the other end of the continuum, by contrast, contextual knowers expect instructors to foster equitable learning environments that promote critical thinking and application of knowledge in a context and value evaluation as a process in which students and instructor work together toward a goal and measure progress together (p. 69). These patterns are usually not evident until the senior undergraduate and graduate years. The stories related in this paper reflect some of these differences in learner expectations and their implications for assessment of learning. The six issues which emerged from the study are discussed below.
Issue 1: Necessary coercion

The transformation from dependent to interdependent learner is reflected in the development and emergence of voice, changing relationship with authority, and evolving relationships with peers (Magolda, 1992). Some female faculty who preferred online, threaded discussion as an instructional technology tended to both value and encourage contextual reasoning but, after Magolda, found that their students didn’t value personal experience or interactions with peers and others as legitimate knowledge-building activities. In particular, this was a common issue in introductory, junior undergraduate courses. As a result, these instructors found that giving credit for presence online was a successful way to encourage interaction.

I require the students to post in an online community, about whatever the course topic is…in class…only a few students usually participate, so what this does is that everybody has to say something about every topic…They get credit…They’re expected to do one post on each chapter and that post has to be a combination of personal experience…but tied into the academic topic…They then also read each other’s and respond to each other’s… (K.H., Introductory Psychology).

Students in this course were not as likely as their instructors to see the intrinsic value in building or participating in a learning community and interacted with their peers for “points”. Faculty were somewhat resigned to this “necessary coercion”, although they personally resisted a culture in which students had come to rely on external markers as evidence of their own learning. C.D. found this to be true in a senior undergraduate course in qualitative methodology, as well. She had experimented with initially giving, then phasing out credit for postings as the conversation proceeded. To her disappointment, this strategy was only marginally effective at keeping students engaged.

D.W., who teaches large undergraduate psychology classes of 100-500 students, developed “online focus group classes” of 5-7 students each, as a way to encourage them to connect to the content and practice of psychology (to “think psychology”) through discussions with the instructor and each other. Initially, she “made some mistakes”, one of which was to bestow participation credits for each individual point they made in the discussion. But, “the more points they made, the more points they got and…students would break up one idea into several points…so they would answer one question in one post, they’d answer another question in another post, they’d respond to someone else’s response in another post” until one question might receive 500 posts in response. Realizing that their pedagogical intention of connectedness had been subverted, D.W. and her colleagues adjusted the criteria from number of points made per thread to the substantive quality of the point, which they are now struggling to both frame and measure. This story exemplifies the tension these faculty experience in reconciling a personal, critical value of encouraging voice with a learning and institutional culture that quantifies engagement.

H.V. (Introductory Linguistics), who is working with peer groups of faculty exploring the scholarship of teaching, and who has encouraged these faculty to participate in their own online communities, noted that in some cases faculty themselves were not entirely comfortable outside those quantifiable structures, “Faculty might not be so used to student on-line discussions. Students aren’t either, but if they’re motivated because of marks, they will engage in them.”

Issue 2: Relocating Authority in the Community

Evidently, students described by Magolda’s earlier patterns expect faculty to maintain their role as intellectual authority, a stance contrary to feminist pedagogical practice. As they mature socially and cognitively, however, and begin to locate authority in themselves and others, they accept that they can be assessed legitimately by their peers and themselves. As expectations for the learning environment changed, then, these female faculty were able to negotiate both individual and group assessment criteria and approaches.

In one case, the instructor in a graduate nursing course “really changed the assignments” based on the increasing frequency and quality of intragroup interaction. D.F. saw that the groups were developing authoritative knowledge through their conversations and could both regulate participation through increasing accountability within their groups, and evaluate their own progress.

I think that the conversation stimulates them to go back and look at their readings again, and say ‘well I don’t know why they were talking about that during the chat, I didn’t get that out of it’.

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Now I would say that we’ve only got two or three or four of them that probably aren’t doing that (and) that are still just really reading a posting.

In these groups peers who are not meeting high group expectations feel that they are jeopardizing the group process. Self-imposing stricter standards. D.F. noted that partway through the course she could “hear the kind of chatter that tells me they’re (now) meeting fairly regularly.” Similarly, K.H. expected that her students to “…read each other’s (posts) and they’ll respond to each other’s, as one of the ways in which they can do these posts.” The sensitivity to, and quality of, the responses to each other contribute to a final grade in her course.

Similarly, D.W. expected her students to learn to value learning from each other as they acculturated both to the professional psychology discourse and to the process of asynchronous communication. This learning outcome was met at an appropriate developmental level in the second term of this junior undergraduate course as students matured from the “first term (where) they only wanted to answer the questions, yet…wouldn’t get full marks (for that)” to the second term of university, in which “they don’t want to answer the questions, they want to have a cool discussion and be marked on that. So what happened is they’re growing up a little bit”.

As W.C., who teaches a graduate ethics course, “got a little bit more used to the conferencing” she and her teaching partner shared leadership of the course with each other, and modeled collaborative theory development as participants’ voices gained strength. W.C. learned to identify when it was appropriate to enter the conversation, and when “to allow the students to do their own thing”. After offering the course twice, she devolved much of her evaluative power.

I think the other thing is that the evaluation is so different in some ways because in a seminar class you’ve had this sort of ongoing thing and then you end up with paper perhaps and maybe the presentation…So we…tried to use their own evaluation or their own reflection on their postings as an evaluation.

**Issue 3: Challenging Taken-for-Granted Assumptions in a New Culture**

New learning communities require the participants to adopt new expectations for their own learning while faculty also question their taken-for-granted assumptions about evaluation. In W.C.’s course the emotional and intellectual depth of the interaction prompted her to reassess her former role as judge of learning, “…what happened to me then when I was reading this…I had to pause and say ‘ok, what’s teaching about? And what’s the impact for students and what are we doing all of this for?’”. She realized that an online community was a different learning culture requiring different sets of both teaching and learning skills, and that these skills would need to be assessed in ways outside of her usual repertoire. For example, when she taught the same course in a face-to-face setting she assessed learning based on a final paper. But in the online version she realized that the analysis and synthesis skills she looked for in a paper were evident as they unfolded almost transparently in the textual discussion, so that “…we’re losing evaluative opportunities by sort of saying ‘ok, this is the class and then we’re going to evaluate you on something else rather than that’. So…I don’t even know if a final paper is a necessary part of it.”

In the timeline of educational innovation, online communities are a relatively new and unknown venture for faculty. None of the female faculty in this study described themselves as expert users of the new pedagogical environment and most were as anxious about their own, best role as they were about student learning. Feminist pedagogues are aware that authority is a problematic concept in HE, as it tends to be gender and discipline-based. At the same time as they work to find ways to even out or eliminate destructive power hierarchies, they must be wary of undermining their legitimate intellectual and emotional authority.

While teaching an online writing class through CMC, Sulgit (http://www.english.uiuc.edu/english382/big.htm) discovered that, instead of being an authoritative judge of a student's writing, she became more of a facilitator, helping the student to express ideas in the best ways possible. She writes that she “was relieved, too, that I was no longer simply an evaluator of student papers. I had to read them as works in progress, to comment on them as potential products rather than actual products. I now saw my job as helping students transform their initial attempts into essays that had meaning for others.” In the stories shared in this paper, the faculty acknowledge that they are struggling with this role online. One faculty member, who is very active and has a teacher-directed style in her face-to-face classroom, worked at finding ways to be active but facilitative online. She accomplished this in her mixed-mode course by setting up the parameters of the community, and setting up initial question threads, which they don’t have to follow (but usually do).
I’ll post questions. And then I read them all when they hand them in and I give them very specific feedback. I write lots on the papers... I think when I’ve done it best... is when I’ve read some of the posts and then the next day come in and said ‘oh...and this happened and people were talking about this’, and I’ve offered, encouraged and supported cross-talk from the electronic environment to the classroom environment (K.H.).

Another felt that her role, initially, was keeping her contextual learners “contingent” and hoped to withdraw her active direction in the conversation.

What I’d like to see is a long thread going, where N.B. and I are only in there once or twice or three times....You can say ‘what do you think about Anna’s comment?’ and they’ll start to get some of that. So I think that’s a role that N. and I can play is to look at that pattern and say ‘Anna’s made some really good comments, let’s see if we can facilitate some contingency’ because there is a kind of default tendency to just post, post, post (D.F.).

**Issue 4: Safety and Assessment**

Absolute knowers expect authorities to have all the knowledge and absolute power to assess the understanding of others (Magolda, 1992, p.55). These learners will need to feel “safe” before accepting that their own voices have power in the community. H.V. had her linguistics students develop questions for written assessment anonymously, within a group. As topics in psychology can be dangerously personal (for example, suicide), K.H. evaluated postings that were printed off and submitted to her so that learners could maintain anonymity in the community, “while letting each of them tell their own stories”.

As her community was entirely online, W.C. worried that she would completely miss cues to learners’ needs for clarification

... in a regular class when you say ‘this is how it's going to be evaluated’ and students have questions they can ask you or you can notice that they're puzzled so you can deal with it right away. When you put it out, you think ‘now I've covered all the bases’...I hadn't thought through how to evaluate as well as I needed to perhaps. And it wasn't easy to pick up the concerns.

At one point she included synchronous communications so that she “could at least hear the concerns even if they didn't say it in so many words”. She could “feel the angst...that you don't feel unless they say something.” And she realized that these learners, older women uncomfortable with technology, “could ask for more clarification, but usually it doesn't come out as 'What's this assignment about anyway? I can't really understand it'.

D.F. was deliberate in setting up written criteria for assessment that they all discussed thoroughly. Even so, she can see “some people are posting because they know they have to post. Sometimes you're not always sure why they're posting. So we're getting to the point now where we'll start to talk to people about how they're feeling”. She and her partner learned to “give them a for instance, 'it has this and this in it'” of what is considered a “high quality posting”, although they encouraged participants to set “their own expectations and for most of them they're pretty high”. Because it’s “particularly hard to motivate yourself when you're not necessarily with the group” D.F. consistently checks that the groups are supporting their members. T.H. (undergraduate teacher education) is another teacher who invites her students to participate in setting criteria through designed rubrics for critical thinking.

In a face-to-face classroom with its visual cues, faculty are experienced in assessing levels of engagement and understanding. In online environments these cues are absent. One faculty member was concerned to not assume that silence meant lack of engagement when it could, in fact, signal the power to withhold voice (c.f. Lennie, 2000). Realizing this, W.C. decided not to assign credit for number of postings, although trusting that learning was occurring in the absence of voice was unnerving, “…it is different than speaking it all along and...to sort of know how to be fair on the evaluation because I think they engage more (online)...”. She has now spent a year reflecting and writing about her online experience and plans to “facilitate more engagement between people, less focused on me and the student...I think there's (sic) stronger ways for me to engage them and maybe engage students that aren't speaking up in class”.
Issue 5: Evaluating Process as Learning Product

A hallmark of feminist pedagogy relates to the substance of assessment, i.e. process is generally valued over content; content mastery comes through process. Process includes interpersonal and intrapersonal intelligence (Gardner, 1993) the development of relationships that support and encourage the voices of others. The intimacy of an online learning community, however, can lead to unexpected levels of disclosure for which the instructor can be emotionally unprepared.

I think the times that I've felt badly in the course were when I've felt that I wasn't consistent...things happen so fast... for me, sort of anticipating the issues that might come up. For example, we had... one or two situations where there was quite a bit of very personal sharing that happened... and I think it took some people... a bit... not shock, but just sort of wondering ‘is this level good?’(W.C.).

Yet, a degree of uneasiness can lead to personal and academic growth for instructors and learners. W.C. told the story of a student who was initially opposed to online learning but who later admitted that “it was a very important course for her in terms of her own thinking and development of her ideas”. The ‘important thing was “not so much the content, but what she was learning about herself and her own sense of what practice was”’. Another faculty member had to learn how to “push on thinking” in the absence of direct verbal contact.

In your classroom, you can get someone’s undivided attention and you can shift around from student to student... push them through a series of thinking processes... I haven’t got the hang of that (online) entirely yet. I guess what you’d have to do is say ‘let’s stop and pursue this’ and because it takes longer... it clearly works more easily in a seminar. And some of what you want to push them is that kind of a process.

M.T. “didn’t evaluate for a mark.” She modelled a learning experience in which “the student would read the objectives and... then see what the learning resources were. Then the student was expected to... self test and to see... where they could learn a little bit.” This process occurred both individually and through group projects. D.F. spent more time “in the beginning on some of the... structured process stuff. Because you do see problems with it and I think we can facilitate that more.” She felt that the “teacher’s role in this is to... thread stuff and come back to stuff and pull stuff through, rather than give them content”. As all take responsibility for weaving understandings through the conversation, “they’re gradually getting a handle on content... so they’re having different responses than I’m used to. And they’re more esoteric”. Ultimately, valuing the hard work of being in community with others “pays off” in personal professional confidence.

They’ll say ‘you know I didn’t think I was learning anything but I was in a faculty meeting the other day where we were talking about something related, and I realized that I do think about it differently now’. So I want them to get that experience because then they start to get confidence in themselves. Being able to do doctoral work and being able to... play in the academic place...”.

Finally, creative thinking is valued. Students in these classrooms were encouraged to demonstrate evidence of learning through self-determined formats and mediums, often negotiating performance expectations in advance. For example, online presentations included facilitated discussions based on shared research, the collaborative framing of research projects, a children’s story, a multimedia presentation of a play, and the creation of assessment rubrics.

Issue 6: Addressing Equity in Online Assessment

The learners in these stories are at different development stages cognitively, socially, emotionally, and professionally. They differ in age, educational and work experience, discipline, expectations for learning and evaluation, and in access to and comfort with online learning. Given this wide diversity, faculty are aware of potential inequities in the ways they structure assessment. They acknowledge that, while democratizing the learning space for many, CMC silences others. In reality, however, feminist teachers share parallel concerns in face-to-face classrooms. The current intense scrutiny of all aspects of the online environment is ironic in that, for many of us, the delivery technology has become the catalyst for an overdue examination of the taken-for-granted traditional environment, when it is in the instructional technology that issues of inequitable institutional power lie.
H.V. reflected that she had never before interacted directly with many of her students, not only because class sizes have increased, but also because there are those who will rarely engage with their teachers in class or outside of it during office hours. She had struggled with how to create an ethos of care and safety where all who wished to challenge her, could. In the last several face-to-face classes she taught she wanted to encourage students to ask questions about the assignment “…so I thought they should email me…a question, then I would broadcast the questions to the rest of the class so that the rest of the class knew what my answer would be…(so) those people who would never ask a question, like me, would get their questions answered”.

D.F. found that an online conversation was extended. Accustomed to the once-a-week seminar in which interactions occur in a structured and finite time and space, she initially found online seminars “wasteful of energy”. But, upon reflection she realized “not all students are able to (come)” to a physical class, which is inequitable; and that not all students do equally well in written and verbal interaction, which is inequitable; and that those who shine in class may do less well online and vice versa; so “it should be possible to offer a wide enough range of things that you would do a better as opposed to worse job, at making it more equitable”. D.F., among others, cautions the online teacher to be clear about the value she assigns to various forms of interaction “some of them know they get graded on seminar participation, so some of them clearly do do their reading, make their notes, sit down and make ten quick postings for the week…Whereas others are more interactive, they’re really trying to be thoughtful about responding to comments, in an intelligent way…” However, D.F. and her partner reflect the values communicated by their colleagues and in the literature when they discourage quantity as a measure of substance, focusing instead on evidence of critical engagement in the ideas of others.

Other concerns include inequalities in the time it takes for some participants to develop new learning (and teaching) strategies and to become familiar with the technical landscape, “just to get a student to understand how to reply to a message, how to get into a chat room, how to just check different chat rooms, if the first place you go isn’t where people are…” and inequities in access related to income levels, family and work contexts, and geopolitical location (for example, one learner lived in Pakistan).

Transforming Relationships

This paper related the stories of seven female faculty who reflect the values and practices inherent in critical (feminist) pedagogy: Critical pedagogues strive to design learning environments in which practice reflects democratic values arrived at through intellectual challenges to the taken-for-granted, emphasis is placed on the development of student and teacher voice, and knowledge is constructed in relationship with others. The faculty in this study told stories of teaching and learning in which these values were embodied in online conversations. The challenge for these women lay in confronting and reconciling their own values and practices, associated with teaching and assessment, with those of the patriarchal institution and with the expectations of learners who are acculturated to the implied power structures.

The faculty voices reflected in the chosen stories are sometimes conflicted, often tentative, and always critically reflective. They challenge their various roles – evaluator, judge, facilitator; learning partner. They are willing to engage in the “dialogue of authority” (Romer and Whipple, 1991), to silence or temporarily suspend their own authority to solicit and absorb that of students (p. 276). For many, suspending hard-won authority in technological environments feels dangerous, yet they encourage students to enter into the power discourse of assessment. D.F. reflects this anxiety when she admits that she “was probably as anxious as the student were about how much I posted and was it enough and was it smart enough and all this stuff instead of trying to facilitate more”.

How do feminist pedagogues retain legitimate moral power, while empowering others in online classrooms? The women represented here have explored a number of approaches including creating communities, using peer feedback and support as part of the evaluation process, negotiating student-specific criteria, and valuing process as learning product. They have learned new assessment methods such as critical thinking rubrics, and have invented ways to make an environment, in which every encounter is exposed, feel safe.

Mostly, however, they exemplify a process of self-transformation by continually challenging their agency in the classroom.
I think I'm not a teacher who knows a lot...I don't even know if the word teacher is really good for me because...I ask questions and because I don't know...I think what it does is it allows students to find out what they do know...I mean I know what I don't know, I don't always know what I know, but,... maybe in the silence are some of the voices...(W.C.)

References


