Heart, Head, and Hands: Intercultural, Experiential, and Applied Gender Learning in a Peace Studies Department

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"Gender Day" is an obligatory annual learning event for all first-year undergraduate and masters students in the Department of Peace Studies (University of Bradford, England), designed as a foundational experience for a multicultural student body to develop gender analytical skills. The curriculum uses three carefully sequenced elements. The first session, based on peer-facilitated small-group discussion of participants' lived knowledge of gender norms, engages the "heart"—emotion and personal experience. The second, a lecture on academic concepts around sex, gender and sexuality and their interrelationship, engages the "head." The third, a workshop demonstrating the practical techniques of applying gender analysis to a policy or intellectual problem in politics, international relations, and peace/conflict studies, engages their "hands." This article analyzes why and how Gender Day was devised and argues that its positive gender-mainstreaming impact on students and the department results from the pedagogical philosophy underpinning its three integrated elements and the opportunity offered by a heterogeneous student cohort.

BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT

Gender Day was developed as a core component of the required class Introduction to Peace Studies at a time when gender had been vanishing from our curriculum.[1] An optional MA module, Gender, Conflict and Development, had lapsed and a departmental decision to mainstream gender perspectives into all classes instead had not been implemented. Where gender was addressed, it was in a specific lecture by the class instructor, the norm in politics and international relations (IR) departments (Foster et al. 2013; Cassese, Bos, and Duncan 2012; Evans and Amery, forthcoming).[2] Consequently, students kept receiving the same superficial introduction to gender, without being enabled to apply gender analysis to the topic in hand. Students also held a range of received ideas about gender, which they understood as a descriptive category rather than an analytic construct (cf. Cassese, Bos, and Duncan 2012). They conflated it with associated, but distinctive, ideas such as feminism, leading to heated and yet unproductive debates.

In 2007, our MA students took the initiative to organize two staff–student forums on how to improve our teaching on gender. One used her dissertation to examine the department's intellectual and institutional culture (Cann 2007). Peace Studies has been male-dominated, like most other politics/IR departments, since its foundation in 1973. The first female (and feminist) lecturer was appointed in 1976 by a head who was unsympathetic to both women academics and gender issues. She remained the only woman for 15 years, even after his departure. Although by 2007 women comprised one third of all faculty, some still saw traces of sexism in the department (Cann 2007). Studies of gender and academia demonstrate how the institutional histories and cultures of male-dominated departments can marginalize certain voices and intellectual contributions (Mershon and Walsh 2014). To borrow from feminist political economy, women academics find themselves regarded as inferior bearers of knowledge whilst feminist academics are often regarded as bearers of inferior knowledge (Philips and Taylor 1980). Gender-related teaching was not valued, both because it was advocated by female colleagues and because some colleagues were unfamiliar with the concept, which they associated primarily with women and their oppression (Cann 2007). Intellectual engagement with gender seemed to reflect both personal and political identity, and disciplinary affiliation and preference (ibid.). The sub-disciplines of politics, IR, conflict resolution, and international development have been "gendered" to differing degrees. In some classes on conventional IR and security studies (e.g. peacekeeping and war) instructors had included no material on gender, either "unconvinced" of its relevance, or ignorant of the literature. The challenge, then, was to mainstream gender across the peace studies curriculum by establishing it as a "threshold concept," that is transformational (fundamentally changes how students view the discipline), irreversible in terms of learning, and integrative, by connecting apparently disparate parts of the field (Meyer and Land 2006).

CURRICULUM DESIGN

The idea of a foundational Gender Day emerged from the staff–student forums, and I took forward its design, with the

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backing of colleagues who had participated. I had noticed that undergraduates, who come from around the UK and beyond, attracted by Peace Studies' distinctively inter-disciplinary and applied approach to politics and IR, could not fully absorb abstract explanations of gender analysis when these failed to connect to personal experience. Our MA cohort consists predominantly of non-British students. Many could not define gender, which they also had reduced to "women's issues," even when they had held some practical responsibility in the field for "gender programming" for peace and development organizations. The often religious worldview that impels many to study peace and conflict is also imbued with rigid and unquestioned notions of gender roles in an imagined good society. Hence Gender Day was designed with three integrated components that would engage students emotionally, intellectually, and practically.

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Beyond an outline of the Gender Day's importance and general structure in the course handbook, no details are given and students are discouraged from reading in advance in order to maximise the authenticity of their responses and the impact of the "reveal." Until 2013, Gender Day was taught midway through the first semester, on a single day from 9:30am to 4:30pm for an "immersion" effect. However, since 2014, for scheduling reasons, it has been split into two afternoons, a week apart (see online appendix). Despite my fear that Gender Day would lose some of its intensity, this is less exhausting to organize, and allows students to read and reflect on general gender issues after the first session, and to prepare for the following week's workshop. Material is supplied online on core theory and concepts including men and masculinity, cross-cultural perspectives on gender relations, sexuality and sexual identity, and on the workshop themes.

I also opted for vertical learning, teaching students from different levels together. This was pragmatic but also acknowledges that an 18-year-old's *lived* knowledge of gender was just as valid as that of someone further on in his or her studies and career. Finally, multiple break-out sessions resulted in horizontal peer learning, which diffuses ownership of Gender Day through the department. The group discussion facilitators are volunteers, and include my colleagues, MA students with some gender-related academic or professional background, and students who have completed Gender Day. They work in pairs, following training (see online appendix).

COMPONENTS OF GENDER DAY

Introduction

As the lead instructor on Gender Day, I start the first afternoon preparing the entire cohort for the ensuing group discussion session. I outline the principles of intercultural dialogue,[3] and highlight our department's diversity in terms of student nationality, ethnicity, religion, and social background as a remarkable learning opportunity.[4] As gender roles and relations tend to become naturalized, the first session is designed to offer students a structured encounter with differing cultural perspectives. This enables them to experience estrangement, see how other people live, and become an "anthropologist of the self" and a conscious and critical interpreter of gender norms. To encourage candor, I remind students of the principle of "unconditional positive regard" developed by the humanistic psychologist Carl Rogers, key in Peace Studies' approaches to inter-personal relations. Participants must assume that, whatever opinions their peers expresses, they are open-minded and willing to hear other life experiences and viewpoints. I urge them to listen, explore and engage in empathy and dialogue, instead of arguing, judging, or closing down, even if this is uncomfortable. For example, gay students may hear openly homophobic views, given the cultural or religious backgrounds of many of our students who may never have knowingly met an LGBTI individual before. Peace Studies students, motivated to work in applied conflict fields, recognize readily that the skills of dialogue, radical disagreement, and emotional reflexivity are valuable core learning, as indeed they should be in many disciplines.

"Heart": Making Gender Personal

The group discussion, "heart," session is the pedagogical cornerstone, as it aims to get students to understand gender relations on three nested levels: lived gendered experience, lived gendered expectations, and observed gendered expectations (in other societies). Participants proceed to break-out rooms, in groups of 15–20, mixed by sex, ethnic or national background, and level of study. After an icebreaker, they embark on Activity A (see online appendix), which addresses lived gendered experience. In pairs, they respond spontaneously to a set of prompt statements, borrowed from a transgender organization (Gendered Intelligence) consulted in the design phase. Phrased in the first person, these statements encourage students to speak about their *own* experiences, the gendered social expectations they felt growing up, and how they conformed to, or resisted, them. They prompt lively and often personal conversations, that continue long after the class, about sexual/physical characteristics, socialized gendered behavior, gendered performance through dress and presentation of one's body, and the gendered expression of emotion. Speaking with someone from a different background that they likely do not know actually facilitates candor. "Personal resonance" (Sjoberg 2007, 336), "everyday experience" (Foster et al. 2013, 579), and the sharing of life narratives (Combellick-Bidney 2015) activate deeper inductive learning, and connection to an emotional level opens up

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students to later theoretical and applied understanding of gender analysis.

The participants' responses uncover cross-cultural, and intra-cultural, differences around gender norms, as groups expand and complicate these statements to see them as contingent and political. "I could become pregnant" (see sample expansion in the online appendix) can lead from initial reactions that pregnancy is a *physical* function, exclusive to women, to recognition of parenting as a diverse *social* one that includes men. Moreover, it is regulated by state and social institutions (medical, religious, legal, familial) and their gender regimes. Discussion about women's *individual* reproductive choice can turn to wider *social* pressures and values, and *macro-political* contexts of reproduction such as pro- or anti-natalist nationalist state policies. Similarly, "I can grow a beard" connects men's bodies to politically contested visions of society. One Middle Eastern student revealed he had to go home clean-shaven, as a beard now signified "terrorist" to his country's security forces, whilst another felt obliged to grow one to avoid the attentions of radical Islamists. These connections exemplify the feminist insight that "the personal is political" and vice versa, and are explored further in the following lecture session.

The next two exercises explore lived gendered *expectations*. Activity B (see method in online appendix) asks new pairs of students to identify dominant social norms for men and women in their own society in order to interrogate dominant gender-binary thinking. Students debate the social consequences of non-conformity to these norms, opening up ideas about hegemonic and subaltern local versions of masculinity and femininity. Activity C asks students to consider the (re)production of gendered social norms, as they discuss *how* they learn about these through the gender regimes of social institutions.

"Head": Gender Theory

The next session, an hour-long lecture, engages the "head" by providing a conceptual vocabulary for their experiential insights. I distinguish between men and women as social categories, male and female as a set of biological markers, and masculine and feminine socialized behaviors and discourses and argue that is the prior existence of the former that compels people to discipline their bodies (including sexuality) and behavior. This enables students to both question essentialist ideas that biological bodies cause gendered behavior and make sense of problems in the IR field, for example, how and why sexual violence is used in conflict. I cite anthropological examples from societies with non-binary or fluid gender roles—Bugi Muslims (Indonesia), *hijras* (India), "sworn virgins" (Albania), and *bacha posh* (Afghanistan)—to demonstrate that gender relations are plural and located in time and space. I also show how gender acts discursively and abstractly, attaching to *objects* (such as weapons) and to *institutions* and *practices* (political, military, educational).

Students often ask whether "gender" is a Western construction and imposition on other societies, yet they have just seen that gender norms and relations are universally present, but not universally the same. Acquiring a "gender lens" as an analytical tool is a precursor to later normative discussions about substantive equality issues. Gender Day therefore attempts to connect these two elements consciously and critically.

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"Hands": Applied Workshops

In order to apply practically and intellectually their newly acquired gender lens, for the final session participants select a workshop. These workshops, which all involve small group work and applied tasks, are given by staff, doctoral and postdoctoral researchers in Peace Studies and sister departments, former students, and guest instructors from other universities or NGOs. Topics (list in appendix) range widely from mainstream IR and politics concerns (inter-and intra-state conflict, military and security threats, representation), to the more discursive, symbolic and sociological aspects of political culture and violence. This session is the final stage in "making sense" of gender analysis, and students choose workshops for a variety of reasons: to understand gender analysis in a field they already know, to challenge their preconceptions; to acquire a professional expertise; or to help them engage academically with the issue.

OUTCOMES

The validity of the pedagogy employed during the Day is best evaluated in terms of its impact on students, evidenced in the 800 student 1,500-word reflective reports written by seven cohorts between 2008 and 2015. These require students to consider their personal reaction to the Day, and conduct academic research on some gender-related interest prompted by any aspect of the Day. They confirm that the "heart" session engages them emotionally, validates personally acquired knowledge as a starting point for further enquiry,[5] and the intercultural exchange enables them to see their own experiences as relative and situated. It also gives permission—particularly to men—to break taboos around speaking about gender issues. Making Gender Day obligatory prevents opting out by men and those who think they already "know" about gender or that it is irrelevant to their discipline (Ackerly and Mügge 2016). In terms of emotional responses, students speak of feeling "scared," "skeptical," "intrigued," "apprehensive," or "uninterested" before the Day. Some—both from Western secular societies and more culturally conservative

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or religious backgrounds—admit they feared that it would be a tool for "advocating feminism" and even "homosexual demands," yet report that the Day was "eye-opening," "enjoyable," "challenging," "fascinating," "transformational," and a highlight of their entire program.[6] It shatters their preconceptions, and often affects them on a deeply personal as well as intellectual level.

In terms of the "deep structure" of the department's gender culture, the picture is mixed. Gender Day has helped to mainstream gender analysis into the peace studies curriculum organically and incrementally through student *demand*. Now, in other classes students question when gender analysis is absent or uninformed. Nearly all faculty have added more gender-related readings and assessments to their syllabi, and a third more students, including men, now take the optional MA class, revived in 2008. The research component of the reflective report sparks interest for future dissertation topics. However, the coordination of Gender Day still relies on me and one colleague. Therefore, the next stage is to ensure that the department collectively owns the expertise with which to maintain gender analysis as a foundational element and threshold concept in our teaching of politics and IR. In terms of replicability, the effective three-part pedagogy of "heart, head, and hands" should be transferable even to groups that are far more homogeneous. However, in the absence of direct intercultural encounter, supplementary tools would need to be devised to enable students to develop a gender lens for both their own lives and those of others as the first building block towards effective, political gender analysis.

SUPPLEMENTARY MATERIAL

To view supplementary material for this article, please visit http://dx.doi.org/S1049096516001001. ■

NOTES

1. A module of this name is taught to both the first year undergraduates and our masters students. The content of the two modules is somewhat different and appropriate to the level of study. Gender Day is the one element that is identical and that they have in common.
2. They tally only these "weeks on gender," and specialized, optional, modules in "elite" politics/IR departments, not foundational teaching on gender.
3. The cohort is normally roughly 50/50 male and female, and there are slightly more masters students than undergraduates.
4. In the 2015 cohort of 120 students, there were 27 East Asian, 20 African, seven from Asia and the Middle East. Some 14 were British nationals or residents, with mixed heritage (typically from Africa and Pakistan, whether recent or second-generation immigrants or settled asylum-seekers).
5. It follows the epistemological principles developed by Paulo Freire (1970) that assume that we all hold immense amounts of knowledge about our own lives, but often lack the space, permission, or tools/language by which to express that knowledge.
6. I use the anonymous evaluation sheet to get feedback on their perceptions of the effectiveness of different components of the Day, and the facilitation of their group or workshop. They are aware that this is entirely separate from their reflection on their own learning in the reports.

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