

*'I can be powerful as an individual agent - the course helped me understand that':*  
 Experiences of recently homeless women in an enabling program & the intersections of gender and social class in higher education

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**Project Objectives + Research Question**

We investigate our own teaching through an action research project, specifically interested in how enabling education empowers/liberates women who enrolled in a global sociology intensive course at UniSA College and have recently been homeless. A key part of this investigation is finding out if social science epistemologies offer the participants a sense of agency and hope.

Our project provides a poststructuralist account of gender and class in engaging with discourses of Higher Education. We show how utilising critical teaching approaches and careful pedagogy fosters liberation and empowerment for the women involved in the project.



As conscious human beings, we can discover *how* we are conditioned by the dominant ideology. We can gain distance on our moment of existence... We can struggle to become free precisely because we can know we are not free! That is why we can think of transformation. (Shor 1992: 22-23).

**Conceptual Tools**

Our study provides a thematic analysis of qualitative data by applying conceptual tools related to 'critical teaching' (Shor 1992) careful pedagogies (Motta & Bennett 2018) and feminist pedagogies (Burke, Crozier & Misiaszek 2017). We also adopt tools of feminist poststructuralist theory (Weedon 1987) to help analyse the subject position of the students as they have experienced obstacles related to gender and class.

An initial survey was given to the 12 students at the beginning of the course identifying their motivations for enrolling in the course. We then conducted a follow-up 1 hour open ended semi-structured interview that was recorded with ethics approval. Of the 12 participants, 4 agreed to an interview to evaluate the course and teaching.

**Interview Questions:**

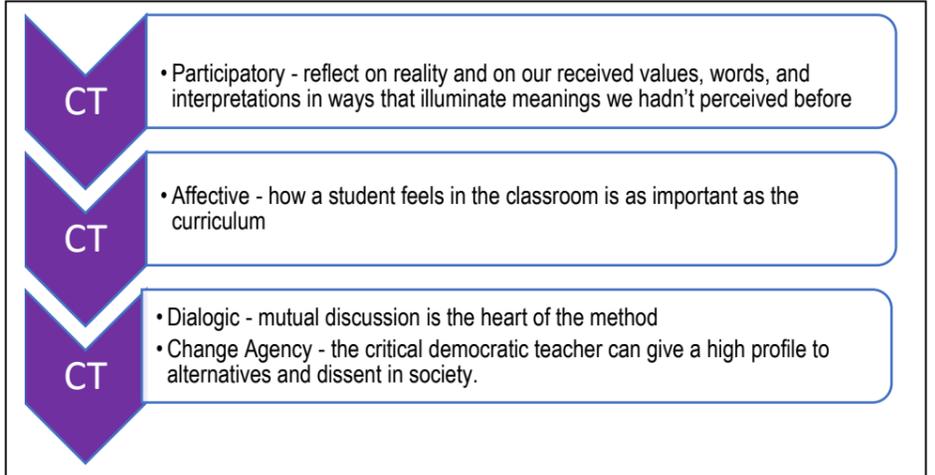
- Do you feel you adjusted easily to becoming a student?
- Were there any aspects of your university experience in this course that felt strange/alien to you?
- Did you feel your learning was supported by the teaching staff?
  - Have you changed since starting the course?
  - Have your beliefs or values changed in any way?
- Do you feel you have more or less power over your life on completion of the course?

**What do we teach?**

We introduce students to the area of sociology and 'critical teaching' (Shor, 1992) by exploring the interconnectedness of structure and agency, and how seemingly individual problems are public issues. We looked at a variety of socio-political inequalities and issues: identifying and challenging global examples of patriarchy; ethnocentrism/racism; capitalism; neo-liberalism.



**Ira Shor's 'Critical Teaching' Approach (1992)**



**Thematic findings within the research**

**'Democratic dialogic' made students feel heard:**  
 An empowering teacher does not talk knowledge *at* students but talks *with* them (Shor 1992: 85)  
 Teacher was very patient with us – it's a global problem and people can't listen. I appreciate it that the teachers were so patient. **(Olivia)**  
 I had too many opportunities to speak – ratchet myself back. Felt comfortable giving my opinion. **(Monique)**

**Social Science Epistemology= agentic**  
 I can't change that in the grand scheme but I can at a local level so I can do my part and every little bit counts and understanding that is powerful. At first when I found out – rich and poor divide – that is stupid and disheartened by the social injustice but understanding that I can be powerful as an individual agent and the course helped me understand that and I can have conversations with my friends about or donate to organizations that help the poverty areas and buy fair trade products – think globally and act locally. The course helped me do that. **(Teresa)**

**Enabling pedagogy + Sociology = empowerment + future education pathways**  
 The course encourages sense of empowerment, every step I take, keeps reminding me that people have the right to be heard, no matter who they are. The course teaches equity and open perspective. Reinforced place in the world. Entrenched in equity every day, promotes idealism, pushes me towards someone who thinks more, peaks my interest. **(Monique)**

**Pedagogies of care contributed to feelings of support:**  
 The teachers were amazingly understanding and cooperative – if we didn't get it done, if we didn't understand, there was no disappointment or no rules, or stipulations compassion was shown. **(Teresa)**

**Normative assumptions about belonging in HE:**  
 The issue about who belongs (and who does not) came through in the interviews. For one of the students, 'the idea of going to uni seemed far-fetched' **(Isla)** and she questioned her own capability.

I have become more brave, continue my curiosity, critical, sociological imagination, look everything with big attention, and different perspectives...I would definitely pursue further education. **(Olivia)**

**References** Burke, P. J. Crozier G. & Misiaszek L. I. (2017) *Changing Pedagogical Spaces in Higher Education: Inequality, Diversity and Misrecognition*, Routledge. SRHE Book Series  
 Motta, S & Bennett, A (2018) Pedagogies of care, care-full epistemological practice and 'other' caring subjectivities in enabling education, *Teaching in Higher Education*, Vol, 25, Issue 5, pp. 631-646.  
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