

# Critical Pedagogies Symposium: A space for dialogue to challenge intersecting oppressions in academia.

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**Lena Wånggren** and **Maja Milatovic** provide an overview of a recent interdisciplinary symposium aimed at tackling issues of racism, sexism, ableism, classism and numerous other intersecting oppressions in academia. More productive, feminist and antiracist spaces are needed in which to meet, discuss and organise, in order to strategise around and against the marketisation of higher education in an inclusive manner.



Critical pedagogies challenge the notion that knowledge and teaching methods can be value-neutral, instead affirming that our relationships within academia reproduce or negotiate those of society as a whole. In our classrooms and lecture halls we negotiate the same interactions, oppressions, intersections and transformations as in the world beyond academia. The interdisciplinary symposium *Critical Pedagogies: Equality and Diversity in a Changing Institution*, held at the University of Edinburgh on the 6<sup>th</sup> of September 2013, emerged from many frustrated conversations about teaching and learning, and about race and gender equality, within the confines of higher education today.

Inspired by the scholarship on equality, diversity and institutional whiteness by Heidi Safia Mirza and Sara Ahmed, we wanted to gather researchers, teachers, students and activists, to discuss the issues surrounding gender, race, sexuality, ability, class and numerous other intersections in our changing institutions. As **Heidi Safia Mirza states**: 'Universities in the UK are still very much white, male institutions of privilege and self-reproduction'. The symposium, by bringing people together to strategise around the marketisation of universities, would hopefully create a space in which to question how the new neoliberal university impacts individuals' learning, teaching and researching in higher education. Bringing these perspectives together through the notion of critical pedagogy, the symposium aimed to explore, in **bell hooks's words**, the classroom as 'the most radical space of possibility' to tackle issues of racism, sexism, ableism, classism and numerous other intersecting oppressions in academia.



Image credit: Kristie Yates

We were thrilled by the positive response the event received and the support from a wide variety of academics, researchers and teachers, students and activists who attended the event – with over 100 participants, the great interest shows that there is a great need for these kinds of discussions. Many of the conversations during and after the symposium insisted that there should be more time dedicated to these discussions, and more similar events, to strategise around these issues. How do we, as academics, students, activists, teach and learn in an institution that no longer encourages learning for learning's sake, and which does not prioritise learning that is accessible to all? Where do questions of equality and diversity, frequently evoked by higher education institutions, end up in a system which privileges quick and easy answers above a dedication to social justice? In addition to presentations and workshops around these issues, there was also great deal of dialogue, connections and conversations taking place not only within the panels, in the warm-up workshop the day before, or at the final roundtable, but equally during breaks and over dinner.

Our first keynote speaker was Heidi Safia Mirza, Professor of Race, Faith and Culture at Goldsmiths College and one of the first black women professors in Britain. She gave an inspiring lecture entitled 'Decolonising Pedagogies: Black feminist reflections on teaching race, faith and culture in higher education', which motivated those much needed discussions on privileges, language and decolonising methodologies and served as a thought-provoking

Keynote address by Heidi Safia



Mirza. Image credit: Kristie Yates

introduction to the rest of the symposium. The second keynote speaker was Joyce Cnaan, Professor of Sociology at Birmingham City University, whose lecture 'Expanding critical pedagogy's radical potential in and outside the university' highlighted the precarious situation in which numerous students and staff find themselves in higher education, and urged for action, networking and organising, in order to strategise against increasing casualisation and managerialism.

Panels such as 'Resisting Marketisation' and 'Educate, Agitate, Organise' highlighted ways in which we might resist the neoliberal structures of contemporary higher education in the UK and beyond. They included Stephanie Spoto's discussion of teaching and activism, about being an anarchist in a marketised state institution, Camila Camacho's report on the Chilean student movement and the privatisation of the Chilean education system, and papers examining new learning technologies and their use in and against the neoliberal university. Ana Lopes and Indra Dewan presented their research on the experiences of hourly paid workers in higher education, while also questioning the participants about their own experiences of casualisation. In the panel

'Decolonising the University' Aretha Phiri highlighted exclusions in debates around austerity in academic feminisms, a theme which was further explored in the panel 'Inclusions and Exclusions: Breaking Silences' which included papers on student participation, disability and accessibility, and processes of silencing and marginalisation within higher education. The panel 'Theory / Praxis' brought together discussions of critical theory and critical practice, including a workshop on feminist praxis and informal hierarchies, led by Eva Giraud. The final panel 'The Classroom and Beyond' focused on widening participation and the use of queer theory as pedagogy. The engaging presentations and workshops provided a variety of perspectives, emphasising the urgency for an intersectional, feminist and antiracist approach across panels and discussions.

Finally, the day ended with a roundtable on the subject of education, intersectionality and social change with Heidi Safia Mirza, Michelle Keown, Janine Bradbury, Aretha Phiri and Mike Shaw. All participants shared their own experiences and struggles, breaking silences surrounding racism, institutional whiteness and processes of Othering in higher education. One of the most interesting aspects of the roundtable which provoked a great deal of discussion was the (im)possibility of creating a safer space. How can the classroom function as a safer space? Who gets to create that space? Might a symposium such as this one function as a safer space? The day ended with the agreement that we need more dialogic and productive spaces like those generated by the symposium, feminist and antiracist spaces in which to meet, discuss and organise, in order to strategise around and against the marketisation of higher education in an inclusive manner.

An endnote: Organising an accessible academic event represents numerous challenges and self-reflexivity on behalf of the organisers as well as careful planning and consideration. One of the key elements in making this event possible and accessible was the reduced registration cost. Creating connections and discourses at conferences is vital for strategising and sharing personal experiences, but it is frequently made impossible through very high conference registration fees and few initiatives to ensure support for students, unwaged or hourly paid participants (even at events that paradoxically deal with equality, diversity, neoliberalism and precarity). While funding for events is always difficult to secure, there are various ways in which accessibility can be improved and worked on with consideration. Accessibility must also be considered in its physical form: in Edinburgh, famous for its non-accessible buildings and cobbled streets, we struggled (but managed!) to find a space which was fully accessible.

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## About the Authors

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