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**Putting Themselves in the Picture?
Reflecting on the use of diaries in a feminist geography module.**

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Abstract *This paper looks back on the use of reflective diaries as an assessment tool in a feminist geography module over several years. It considers the ways in which reflection on practice and the valuing of the everyday could be seen as a specifically feminist pedagogic practice. It considers the alignment of module content with assessment format. The paper includes discussion of extended examples of student reflective writing and considers the practical and ethical drawbacks of using subjective modes of assessment with undergraduate Geographers.*

KEY WORDS *Reflection, feminism, pedagogy, assessment.*

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Introduction

I have been convenor of an undergraduate feminist geography module for several years now. In the very first meeting each year I've been asking students, initially to some quite blank looks, to reflect on how their experience of gender affects their experience of space. As you will imagine, that first meeting often feels like the longest meeting of the year; my role is to destabilise student expectations, to reassure, encourage and even demand of a group of hesitant undergraduates to put *themselves* in the picture, through their *own* experience, rather than write another set of lecture notes based on mine.

As this module has, perhaps like me, been reaching something like maturity, I've been looking back over this experience of using student reflection as a tool for teaching about - or, more accurately, since it is a student-centred tool, *learning* about - feminist geography. The module, as I discuss below, treads a familiar path for a module of this type, aiming to recollect, recover and celebrate other voices. The departure, for me at least, was that through diaries, this was to include the voices of the students themselves.

The paper looks at some extended examples of work (anonymised for the purposes of the paper) submitted by students and offers some personal reflections on my own experience of teaching and assessing this module over the last six years. The paper originally came to life as a workshop-based presentation for a Women and Geography Study Group of the IBG event (WGSG, 2005) and I am grateful to those who attended that event in London for contributing their experiences.

“Well, someone’s got to teach it...”

My journey began as a temporary one, helping out in a staffing crisis in the department, something that will be familiar to most readers of JGHE. But as I took over the leaderless *Gender Geography* module and moulded it to make it more, well, *me*, in line with my emerging research interests as well as incorporating the important material that students *should*, in my opinion, know, I actually found that I quite liked it. So I kept it, and I made it mine.

I liked the fact that I could consciously speak a little differently (as I do here). I liked the possibilities latent within the fact that – surprisingly for most students, and for some colleagues – a man was teaching this stuff. I liked the fact that students began to wonder if I was straight, or gay. I liked the fact that the teaching of feminist geography made me think much more carefully about the alignment of teaching, learning and assessment methods. For the first time I saw assessment as more than just another barrier, piled high on the desk, between me and the summer research project I had planned.

| On reflection in education

I am not claiming to have invented the wheel, nor even to have *re*-invented it. This all took place in the early to mid-2000s in a UK university teaching environment during a period of more or less sustained debate about the practicalities and possibilities for reflective teaching and learning methods, including a good number of articles submitted to this journal (Moon, 1999a, 1999b; Haigh, 2001; Cook, 2000, Kneale, 2002; Harrison et al, 2003; Park 2003. There has been more recent scholarship in this area, see for example Thompson et al, 2005; Chappell, 2006). Whereas encouraging reflection on practice had long been accepted as a positive and desirable goal in professional life, such ideas were only gradually creeping into the training courses we were now being required to complete as part of our university probation schemes. I decided to go with the flow; out went the two-hour examination (*take that, pedants!*) and in came a multi-instalment reflective diary. To complete my *coup d'état* I formally changed the name to *Gender Geographies*, a stunning victory for the postmodernists over the university establishment.

Having had a solid liberal arts education myself, I (of course) wanted students studying feminist geography to have a place where *their* voices could be heard, if only by themselves, each other and by me as the marking tutor; a place where they could have some ownership of their learning, and at the very least could see what they were learning (and what I was –sometimes – teaching) as broadly relevant to their lives. The teaching of feminist geographies should be about challenging assumptions about the world, accepted ways of doing things, recovering and uncovering lost knowledges and spaces. Like Webb et al (2002), I wanted to offer learners a more participatory relationship with academic staff, celebrating the private and personal as much as the global and political. Oberhauser (2002, 21) offered her experiences of a feminist pedagogy designed to “question the authoritative nature of conventional geographical knowledge and provide alternative perspectives” and I wanted some of that. Like Cook’s (2000, p. 15) adaptation of border pedagogy, I too was searching for a scheme where “masterful overviews are not particularly welcome [where] the birds-eye view [was] grounded”. Haigh told us that he found journals useful for making students “self-conscious of the development of their learning” (2001, p. 168) and how his students were ‘almost forced’ to “contextualise themselves and to construct their own understanding (2001, p. 171). As a new lecturer keen to innovate, the possibilities seemed endless.

But most of all though, I just wanted students to *care* about what they were doing with me each week. I wanted to try reflective diaries because they offered students a way of making sense of the work they were doing on the module in terms of reference that they played a large part in constructing. Sure, I would still have to assess their work and form an academic judgement, but the processes of reflecting and relating to personal experiences might give these students something different to think about and, I was certain, to talk about when I was not present. I hoped the process would present them with fresh perspectives on the potential for feminist and, by extension other, critical epistemologies of the everyday.

Key texts had emerged in teacher education, foregrounding reflection as a means to embed and enhance continuing professional development activities (Boud et al, 1985; Grimmett and Erickson, 1988; Russell and Munby, 1992; Calderhead and Gates, 1993). Cowan's (1998) now classic *On Becoming an Innovative University Teacher: reflection in action* heralded the arrival of reflection in higher education teaching as a legitimate enterprise (which is not, of course, to say it wasn't going on in places already).

In the UK this activity coincided with the emergence of inaugural and properly-funded national agencies to support university teachers such as The Learning and Teaching Support Network (LTSN, now the Higher Education Academy). The very first pedagogic event I attended as a new lecturer was the LTSN-Geography, Earth and Environmental Sciences subject centre conference in February 2002 entitled *Time To Reflect? Promoting Reflection Among Students and Staff*. Inspired, I returned with a head full of ideas and set about designing the new assessment scheme.

That, then, was how the *Gender Geographies* reflective diary was born. I called it a 'reflective diary', but as Park notes (2003, p. 184) the names 'learning journal' or 'learning log', are also used to describe similar things. The diary accounted for 50% of the assessment of the module, the other half would be a conventional essay. The module was open to all, was entirely optional, at honours level and ran in semester one (autumn/winter) each year over 12 teaching weeks. Around 20 students have enrolled for the module each year.

Whilst the essay was conventional, being submitted at the end of the semester, the diary ran throughout the semester with regular submissions of 500 words to a total of 2,500 words. Students are not permitted to amend earlier submissions, but are provided with formative feedback following each submission so that they may improve on the next instalment.

Diarists set out from navigable starting points, beginning with a reflection on their experience of geographical education, where they consider Rose's (1993) critique of 'masculinist' field practices in relation their own experience of fieldwork with us. Students are guided to more recent literature that examines field experiences (Bracken & Mawdsley, 2004; Cupples, 2003; Madge & Bee, 1999; Powell, 2002), but crucially, they are asked to cite examples from their own experiences that conform or counter these arguments. Later instalments remain themed, but are much broader (e.g. "reflect on gender and welfare" or "reflect on gender and mobility") before a final instalment that asks them to look back over the module and identify aspects of the module they particularly struggled with, enjoyed, or simply didn't understand..

Why reflect in feminist geography?

A module in feminist geography is, for me, a module that should encourage critical reflection upon and interpretations of the taken for granted nature of everyday lives (Monk & Hanson 1982; Monk, 1985; McDowell, 1992, 1994; Browne, 2005). Gillian Rose had appealed convincingly throughout *Feminism and Geography* that "the

everyday routines traced by women are never unimportant, because the seemingly banal and trivial events of the everyday are bound into power structures which limit and confine women” (1993, p. 17). Using a diary method offered an opportunity for students to begin to take *their* “banal” and make it interesting, casting new light on old thoughts. I encouraged students to think outside of the usual box, look for gender and geography in unusual places; in the kitchen, in the park, on the bus.

I found that the subjective nature of the assessment item, asking students to constantly search their own lives and experiences mapped well onto more sophisticated arguments about the nature of science and objectivity in western science (Haraway, 1991; Harding 1991). Prior to this, I had struggled to engage students with such content through conventional lecture delivery as part of a geographical research methods module. However, once brought to life by students’ own attempts to retain some semblance of objectivity in what was clearly a subjective narrative gave me the necessary leverage for the introduction of feminist ideas about critiques of scientific objectivity, ‘partial perspective’, and more specifically Rose’s (1993) critique of the dualistic epistemologies of geographical science. Quite a trick for a diverse undergraduate constituency.

Putting themselves in the picture: student reflective narratives

Though I would agree with Haigh’s (2001, p. 173) comments that you “have to be very seriously interested in what is going on in the students’ minds to deploy this learning strategy, or you must have a reasonably small class”, my experience has been that the work submitted for this assessment item over the years has proven itself to be some of the most sophisticated and interesting student work I have ever read. Whilst much of it was, inevitably, pedestrian and resorted to ‘essay style’ as the safest route through a final year module, large numbers of students have demonstrated evidence of capable reflection that clearly results from careful thought about what they have been reading as well as other unexpected takes on the task. What follows are extended examples of student work submitted in these diaries. Other authors (Haigh, 2001) have tabulated responses or offered disembodied snippets of information. I have consciously avoided that approach here, choosing instead to offer fewer in number but more in length of discussion. It is hoped these give the reader a better idea of what the student concerned was thinking and trying to achieve, giving extended space to student thoughts and writing, better reflecting the nature of the assessment. The first examples illustrate the students’ attempts at taking academic argument (‘objective knowledge’) and relating it to their own personal worlds (‘subjective knowledge’) as they toe a line between academic citation and personal reflection to develop their points:

“In addition to being largely overlooked by both the military [...] women, as the wives of army personnel, often find themselves marginalized both spatially and socially. As Cooke & Speirs (2005) document the effect of being what they term a ‘trailing wife’ and having to move every two or three years results in a reduction in women’s chances of finding work and developing their careers. However, in addition to this, army housing,

which is usually situated in rural or semi-rural areas close to bases, often results in army wives, such as my mother, being socially and spatially isolated to small residential areas with poor infrastructures and few employment opportunities” (WT, male student).

“The Welfare State rings alarm bells in my head. “Welfare State- A system, by which the government provides a range of free services to people who need them.” (Wehmeier: 2000) My Mum has brought up four children. She is sixty-one and hasn’t worked since she was nine-teen. I was born when my youngest brother was nine-teen so she was bringing up children for forty- years. Mum got divorced around 1976 and then met my Dad and her and my two brothers went to live with him and his daughter. No problem- I was born ten years later, Dad had his own business Mum would just help out if needed. Problem came when, after being together for 26 years Dad decided to have an affair and left home leaving me and Mum with nothing. Mum and Dad were never married so despite bringing up his two children and her ex-husbands two children she was left with nothing” (LP, female student).

The above are quite typical submissions for this module, insofar as they oscillate between discussion of personal/family biography and academic geography. I am struck by the ways in which wider reading is presented alongside micro-level and highly personal experience. For me, this suggests more than a simple and superficial understanding of what has been challenging the student during the week. They have read something, and made it relevant in terms of their own choosing thinking through how these abstract social and spatial processes have impacted on their lives, if at all.

Other students offered responses that were potentially troubling in ways that suggested the assessment was seen as a liberation of personal experiences, often including hardship of varying degrees brought out from the shadows of the private realm and used to illustrate academic points. Whilst obviously incredibly important to the individuals concerned, such stories had been – despite obvious implications for the quality of their learning experiences – of little prior significance to tutors and I still read them uncomfortably as I write this long after first sight:

“The initial difficulty I encountered when reflecting on my experience of gender in fieldwork was the realisation that my experience of fieldwork is very limited. The not so immediately obvious question was: why? To investigate my lack of fieldwork experience I began to examine my personal position in space, place and time. This inspection highlighted that I encounter significant accessibility restrictions to fieldwork. This discovery has proven uncomfortable for me in that I am positioning my family as a barrier to my mobility. [...] The restrictions I face are highly gendered in that they are reproduced among other females throughout

space and time. [...] As a wife and mother I undertake almost all the domestic work and childcare duties and am also the principal carer for my disabled child. These factors place significant space-time constraints on my mobility [...] Space-time rigidities have twice caused me to turn down the opportunity to participate in a ten day fieldwork experience in [mainland Europe]. Reflections on my experience of gender in fieldwork are thus far those of exclusion and inaccessibility” (SB, female mature student).

“My male partner recently bought a car and found that it was considerably cheaper to put me (a woman) on the insurance than it was for him alone. However although I contributed to half of the said insurance I have restricted access to the car. Ten weeks ago I would have thought little of it, but now I begin to question why insurance is less for women and obviously why do I not have the same right to the car as my partner. [...] Traditionally the home is ‘a woman’s place’ thus enforcing the belief that private and public spaces are heavily gendered. This is evident in my home life where I constantly tidy up after my partner and wash dishes. Recently I have begun arguments explaining that he should be willing to aid me and participate in household tasks” (LB, female student).

Such small scale but individually significant ‘discoveries’ could be the staple of a useful and valuable social science. Certainly, if we consider the purpose of transformative social science (Wellens et al, 2006) perhaps assessment tasks *should* force individuals to ask difficult questions of those around them - even, following feminist pedagogy, questioning the authority of those who tutor them. I confess to more than a little unease at this proposition, unhappy about being too implicated in an individual student’s evolving life choices, then just walking away at the end of the class. This is fraught with ethical dilemmas for staff. As Bondi (2004, 177) reminds us, we are not equals with our students as we have the authority to judge their work and actions, something that can have multiple and unpredictable outcomes. I reassure myself that such thoughts relate to only a very small part of the modern undergraduate’s life anyway and my assessment task only a very small part of just a single semester of study for the students in my class. However, my experience of using diaries might endorse Wellens’ et al’s (2006, p. 119) position that “the geography classroom should be a site of political engagement and highlight the importance of students examining the meaning of social justice and equity in their own lives”.

Beyond such politics, other students offered impressive and unexpected creative responses to my requests for regular responses to particular themes. Traditional geography and geographers have little experience of more creative forms of expression to put a point across. However, freed from the usual demands to craft arguments in a neutral, objective and disembodied fashion some students submitted work that would not be out of place in a creative writing class, whilst still remaining faithful to critiques of so-called neutral social worlds:

Nothing to worry about, I tell myself. Ticket in hand, rucksack firmly strapped to my back. It is rush hour but as I look around and consider my position I am not fazed by the blockade of people hurtling towards me as I head for the ticket barrier. Success! Through the barrier, no problems at all, even the rucksack made it through despite the lack of room to manoeuvre. The escalator approaches and again I am left to consider my position. "Stand to the right" I am told, as what feels like hundreds of suits rush past in an attempt to make headway to the next tube. It is dark, crowded and oversubscribed as an efficient means of travelling. Distracted, I begin to consider the evening ahead and the prospect of having to repeat this again. And then it happens. "S***." I swear to myself, everyone around me, and the escalator that stole my shoe.

Escalators clearly were not designed for women wearing stiletto shoes. This was my first experience of the London Underground. A woman's mobility is facilitated by public transport but also restricted by the underprovision of services (Greed, 1994, p.103). [...] I fear that it is a prime example of the facilitation of male mobility where architecture has been developed primarily as an expression of *their* practical needs, permitting the public role (McDowell & Sharp, 1999, p.222-223). In my experience this gendered architecture of mobility isolated me, as a woman, within the public realm (Pain, 1997, p.233). (RW, female student)

Compared to earlier instalments from the same student, this example demonstrates the way in which students often grow in confidence as the diary evolves. Despite initial hesitation, students seemed relatively comfortable with the assessment format by the end of the semester. Regular end of module quantitative surveys show student satisfaction with the assessment scheme for this module ran an 80%+ rating of "excellent or very good" from its inception – a rate varying between 10-20% higher than the programme average. More tellingly, final entries in the diaries provide some subjective commentary on what the module has meant to them and how their study of feminist geography – temporarily at least - has become part of their lives:

Having completed the assessment I'm now able to understand and appreciate the significance and appropriateness of reflective diaries in a gender module. An opportunity not often given to combine distant, academic, authoritative theories with personal, individual practices. [...] I was pleasantly surprised that when I was questioned by my uncle, who asks me this exact question every time I see him 'whether I can make chapattis yet' I didn't just smile tolerably but started questioning him and voiced my very loud opinion! (DR, female student)

Gender Geographies has left me feeling scattered. I used to think that everything that went wrong did so because I made the wrong choices and I could always just make the right ones. I do not want to be part of the caring network (Graham, 1985) or work the 'doubleshift' (Abbot, 2006), I want to be the bread winner -

and I just can. I'm not so sure now, that it is as simple as that. [...] I do not wholly believe that I am doomed to a constricted life because I am female, but I am afraid to admit I have found the module almost confirming of fears that whispered deep within me from an early age, that my movement through society is disturbingly hindered by an invisible constraint that I imagine tied between me and the unspoken responsibility of reproduction (SS, female student)

Conclusions: reflecting on my experience

I found running reflective diaries to be an effective means of engaging students in discussions and debates about topics they were otherwise indifferent or openly hostile toward. The nature of feminist scholarship and critique made this form of assessment highly compatible with the content of the module and that reassured initially sceptical students. Feminist geography, with its concerns to recover lost histories and spaces and a healthy internal debate about science and subjective experience presented an excellent opportunity for and compatibility with reflective practice - but it won't be appropriate everywhere.

I found that the ways in which students were (almost always) happy to relate their personal, subjective experiences to the academic work they were discussing with me and each other thoroughly refreshing. This was especially so for the less confident (most often female) students, who produced work of remarkable clarity and originality but who otherwise said very little in these (or other) classes. Almost all students read far, far more for the reflective diary than any other piece of assessment I have worked with them on throughout the programme. This would also include, proportionately of course, the dissertation. It was not untypical to find a 500 word diary entry supported by ten or even fifteen references to classic and current literature in the subject.

However, there are myriad attendant problems with this form of assessment. Students learn to 'play the game', just like any other assessment item. Many students operate in purely utilitarian or instrumental ways, figuring out what they think I am after, rather what they feel or what they want to say. Diaries do not uniquely suffer this vulnerability, of course, but neither do they go any way to solving this problem. More seriously, an item of continual assessment requires marking tutors to know the identities of the authors of the work they are assessing in order to measure and comment upon progression. In a system that has near universal anonymous marking, this is a quality issue for which I offer no solution. The anonymous marking system protects tutors as much as students; using incremental diaries (at least in this way) removes this protection for both parties. Indeed, there are potentially serious ethical issues in us asking (even requiring) students to tell us all about their personal lives ... confidentially of course ... but do *please* speak up. Do we reward those who confide/confess/convince the most thoroughly? It could be construed, as Bondi (2004) cautions, as an abuse of 'institutional power' invested in university teachers. Perhaps those suffering domestic abuse, or debt problems, or who happen to be working out their sexualities right now, would rather I didn't ask them to let me have a quick look into their lives, confidentially or otherwise. This is not to say that

this has ever been raised as an issue by a single student – but then they wouldn't, would they?

Finally, there has been the suggestion that this form of assessment favours female students, perhaps best suited to feminist practice because it is modelled on a way of speaking that women in western culture are more familiar with than most men. Haigh (2001, p. 169) in his review, cites work that variously suggest that “the learning journal approach is more sympathetic to current understandings of ‘women’s ways of knowing’” whilst on the other hand other work portrays the ‘reflexive self’ as a masculine agent, self-conscious and initiating change. His female students were in fact gaining a higher proportion of their final grade from their learning journals than the other forms of assessment he required of them (2001, p. 185). Kneale, in her research on student experiences of Personal Development Plans (a key area for the use of reflective writing) found that “there was a clear bias in usage: generally female and mature students expressed the more positive views” about the benefits of reflection in the curriculum (2002, p. 87), although her survey also suggested that her colleagues felt that the male students, whilst not explicitly valuing the exercise, still knew exactly how to do the work - it was more a case that they did not value the discipline required to keep the diaries up to date. The performance data for students who took Gender Geographies between 2003/4 and 2006/7 are equally mixed (table 1).

Table 1: aggregate results on Gender Geographies 2003/4-2006/7

Mean results	Diaries	Essays	Format Difference
All	61.11	57.76	+3.35
Male	59.34	54.39	+4.95
Female	61.90	59.25	+2.65
Gender Difference	+2.56	+4.86	

Both male and female students received higher grades for the diaries than the conventional essays they also produce (higher mean by 3.35%). Here, women did indeed receive slightly higher grades than men for their diaries (2.56%), but contrary to Haigh’s experience, it was the men who were making the greatest proportion of their overall credit from the diaries with nearly 5% more credit – half a UK degree classification - earned by men in the diaries compared to the 2.65% difference between items for women. Women were in fact most convincingly outperforming men in their essay writing, not in their diaries.

So, to conclude this personal reflection of working with students on and *with* feminist geography, I found an excellent alignment of teaching, learning and assessment methods that has produced some of the most dynamic classroom exchanges I have yet to experience. The diary format discussed here has proven immensely valuable in engaging students personally and meaningfully in ways that make sense to the individual student

themselves. That is, from my experience in this time and in this place, the most valuable contribution feminist geography and feminist scholarship has made to the teaching and learning experience.

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