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**Creating feminized critical spaces and co-caring communities of practice  
outside patriarchal managerial landscapes.**

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## **Abstract**

The experiences of five female lecturers working in higher education in the UK are explored as they engage in the search for a feminized critical space as a refuge from the masculinized culture of performativity in which they feel constrained and devalued. Email exchanges were used as a form of narrative enquiry that provided opportunity and space to negotiate identities and make meaning from experiences. The exchanges provided a critical space, characterised by trust, honesty and care for the self and for each other, that enabled a sharing of authentic voices and a reaffirming of identities that were made vulnerable through the exposing of the self as an emotional, politicised subject. Drawing on existing theoretical understandings of critical feminised spaces enabled us to create a pedagogical framework for work with students in further developing caring and co-caring communities of practice that are not alternative to, but are outside the performativity landscape of education.

**Keywords:** critical space; authentic voice, co-caring communities; performativity.

## **Introduction**

This paper considers how teacher educationalists and social scientists working in higher education could develop critical engagements with students by simultaneously developing a community of practice to maintain 'authentic voices'. By this, we mean that we are able to question, to debate, and to respond critically to the circumstances in which we find ourselves, our students and our colleagues, in an honest and moral way which is reflective of our 'ethical ideals and ethical selves (Noddings 1994, 49; 1996, 37). We argue that gendered discourses and masculinized cultures of performativity permeating higher education can close down critical questioning and debate. Immersed in such a culture, we searched for and found a feminized critical space – an alter space - in which to share our authentic voices and reaffirm identities that were made vulnerable through a variety of neo-

liberal working practices variously experienced as marginalising, silencing and alienating. This space was created via a series of email conversations and discussion over a period of time, where we shared our theorised experiences of higher education cultures. At the time of communicating with each other we were not aware of this critical space; awareness emerged retrospectively, following further conversations, joint analysis of our emails and reflection that signified to us that we had established a caring community of practice that felt safe and non-threatening and engendered a sense of support. The reassurance and hope that resulted from the emergence of this critical space can be transferred and shared with our students, in what we came to regard as a co-caring community of practice that, drawing on Duckworth (2014), and on Nodding's (1984) notion of circles and chains, is feminised and outside of the masculinised culture of performativity.

In the next section we review a variety of literature from a number of diverse epistemic fields, including those concerning the traditional patriarchal hegemony dominant in many higher education institutions (Noddings 1984; Griffiths 2006) and those concerning new public management and its effects in education. Criticality, a significant feature of education, is in danger of being submerged by a culture of performativity (Ball and Olmedo 2011; Duckworth 2013, Ade-Ojo and Duckworth 2015) that marginalizes and silences voices that question or critique the ominous move to 'drive things forward' in a way that commodifies the individual. The concept of 'critical space' (Rikowski and Rikowski 2003) is then explored to help clarify our terms of reference and we suggest such spaces are becoming more confined in the current higher education context. We then outline our positioning and working understanding of critical feminism before explaining our auto-ethnographic research approach. The latter part of the paper presents analysis around the themes of co-caring communities and transgression.

### **The landscape of education**

Apple (2011) suggests that it is raining in education and that two of the umbrellas which are being offered for shelter are those held out by the neoliberal and the neoconservative groups and other factions that have an interest in education. Since the 1980s universities have been pressed to embrace commercial models of

knowledge, skills, curriculum, finance, and management organization. The issue of the accountability of higher education to its societal stakeholders and financiers is now an undisputed part of pre and post-92 higher education policy principles within a knowledge society framework. Within this neoliberal ideology, universities must increase their own productivity in order to survive. Therefore, more than simply generating more income, higher education has become a territory for marketization agendas, with a drive to warrant state funding and to protect itself from competitive threats. Higher education has become a commercial transaction, with the lecturer as commodity producer and the student as consumer, and knowledge is increasingly valued in monetary terms (Naidoo and Jamieson, 2005:29). Neoliberal strategies turn us all into fragments of a business plan, with stakeholders, competitors, partners and customers and so on.

Under pressure from the Research Assessment Exercise, many university departments shifted resources from teaching to research, while seeking more research funds from industry; now with a UK Government proposal for a Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF) the positioning of teaching may be raised from the confines of what Rowland (2003, 15) calls an 'atheoretical perspective. However, on the other hand, the potential is that the TEF will encourage the separation of research and teaching. On an institutional level this threatens to create a dichotomy between universities, possibly already separated by higher and lower fees, into either 'teaching' or 'research' institutions.

The culture of performativity and accountability is, we would suggest, masculinized and this masculinization emanates partly from the fact that career structures within education are as skewed by gender, as they are in relation to sexuality, race and disability (see Doherty and Manfredi 2006, for a discussion of the implications of this for women in higher education). Further, although there is a plethora of policy and legislation which purports to facilitate 'equality' for oppressed groups (including women), such policy and legislation is, in the main, developed from a centrist, normative perspective (Atkins 2014). Individuals who 'know better than the oppressed masses about whom they theorise' (Halberstam 2011, 127) contribute to a status quo in which privilege and power remain located within what Halberstam

(1998, 2) describes as 'dominant masculinity', which can be appropriated by both males and females. This is supported by the fact that senior management positions in schools, colleges and universities are disproportionately male. As Griffiths (2006) points out, the effect of this may be that what is seen as competence, good practice or as 'expertise' by trainees and students, as well as by 'outsiders' to the education system, is strongly influenced by gender, and tends towards masculinity. School managers have power over economic and administrative capital to be able to influence practices within their schools and to shape the developing culture and the direction of change within practice. Perhaps even more critically, this gendered influence affects not only the practice of teaching in schools and universities, but also the ideas, feeling and beliefs of trainees and students about learning. In the teacher education sector, this masculinization and patriarchal hegemony may have a very immediate and direct effect on the practices of teaching which are promulgated and perpetuate in schools, colleges and universities.

The growth of the new managerialist as a burgeoning element, indeed class, within society also has an effect on education and, consequently, on communities and society. The motto appears to be: 'if it moves, then measure it; if it doesn't move, then measure it in case it moves later on'. This, along with 'performance measurement'; 'professional accountability' and responsabilisation imperatives, permeate the ethos and culture of educational institutions. The neoliberal culture of managerialism has resulted in a rise in what we experience as 'administrative capital' that is a form of cultural capital to do with an emphasis on measurement, accountability and performativity. The new managerialist invests heavily in this form of capital and deploys a recognizable discourse and practice to steer much of the change, if not development, in education, in neoliberal ways. Ball and Olmedo (2013, 90) suggest that performativity introduces a routine of constant reporting and recording and 'installs a set of informational structures and performance indicators that become the principle of intelligibility of social relations'. When the social becomes a performance, adhering to some kind of script; the self becomes inauthentic and unethical (Noddings 1984, 49), and it may be argued that the institution itself contributes to what Noddings (1984, 116) refers to as 'the diminution of the ethical ideal'. Thus, when we are interpellated or called to 'remake selves in

the image of the market' (Ball and Olmedo 2013, 91) it becomes difficult for us to do our work in a critical way in education. In this context, new managerialism may be seen as a technology put into place that is a dividing practice. Failure to subscribe to it, or to challenge it, can turn the individual into a problematic outsider subject to a disciplinary gaze.

A concomitant development, supporting and facilitating the development of the new managerialism and the culture of performativity, is an increase in the use of new technologies. E-mail, e-learning and e-collaboration are increasingly common in teaching and academia (Ingle and Duckworth 2013). Whilst we acknowledge the uses and strengths of these developments in technology (indeed, our paper has been written largely through the use of email, word-processing, review and referencing software), we also acknowledge the potentially isolating effect of this technology. It is increasingly more common for electronic communication to be multi-channel and synchronous, but still relatively rare and the immediacy and interactivity of discourse generation is missing. Not only is this potentially isolating, it also encourages the use of a more permanent vocabulary and 'recognisable' set of discourses, in a similar way that higher education managerial-speak board meetings have recognizable discursive repertoires. The ephemeral nature of spoken language, where the actual words spoken are often lost but the gist and sense of meaning remain, is gone. Instead, the use of email, websites and blogs for communication and collaboration, means that an individual's thoughts, ideas and concerns are maintained for posterity. This implies the possibility that they may engage in a more formal, less authentic (Patrick-Weber 2012) and less open form of communication.

There is an interaction and synergy between patriarchal performativity and technology which means that the culture in some educational institutions can be uncomfortable for some individuals. A sense of this disquiet has permeated our professional lives as educators. We have a very real desire to work with our students in an openly democratic way, to encourage 'a feel' for being critical educators, and yet we ourselves feel constrained and sometimes discouraged by the very system within which we work.

That we feel constrained by this system is somewhat paradoxical as we work in post-92 universities that have, or did have, more of an emphasis on widening participation and the provision of non-traditional entry routes into higher education (Reay et al, 2009). These organizations are ideally placed to provide opportunities for Frierian (1996) conscientization for their students because they are more teaching and student-centred and less focused on research. The paradox is that staff in these institutions report anecdotally that they are in fact more constrained and not afforded the same privileges and opportunities for conscientization as their students. New or post-92 institutions are in a period of transition with many seeking to establish a more focused research profile and identity. The impact of this (and of the Research Excellence Framework<sup>1</sup>) is that new and indeed established (women) academics entering these spaces may find themselves in a complex and contradictory terrain loaded with expectations about feminine capital and the possibilities for student support, but simultaneously outsiders in traditionalist and masculinist research terms.

## **Critical Space**

Critical voices have been marginalized and silenced by a (self) surveillance culture in higher education that cultivates fear, suspicion and fabrication. This culture creates and enables particular modes of stress and anxiety that may satisfy the needs and expectations of particular forms of governance (Gill 2010). The effects of the surveillance and managerialist culture are that it can ostracise those who attempt to question it or to do otherwise. Professional trust, collegiality and open-ness are in danger of erosion as a stress imperative and accompanying incivility becomes a norm. Gill (2010, 217) suggests that the neoliberal self is individual, not social: and 'its agility is for continued survival as an economic entity and not for any sense of community'. The version of humanity associated with this culture and way of being is an anathema for us, and it propelled and intensified our mutual support via more social, open spaces.

According to Rikowski and Rikowski (2003), 'critical space' consists of those social places and spaces where critique is possible: where a dialogic space is developing a

critical space. Lefebvre (1976, 1991) relates the notion of critical space to social justice, arguing that justice and injustice become visible via the use and production of social spaces and the ways in which they influence social relations. In the context of these arguments, 'critical space' concerns the potential and actuality for the critique of existing society and the search for alternatives: for example, on how the core processes and phenomena of capitalist society, such as value, capital and labour, generate contradictions and tension in 'everyday life' for individuals, groups, classes and societies. 'Effective' critical spaces are those social places and spaces where such critique *actually occurs*. We posit that although there are effective critical spaces in higher education, these spaces are gendered and constraining, and reduce the potential for change arising from such spaces.

Over a decade ago, Rikowski and Rikowski (2003) argued that critical space was being *compressed* in education with fewer opportunities for engaging with critiques of society and education within formal education. This compression has continued throughout the neoliberal neoconservative era (starting with UK's 'New Labour' through the Coalition to the present Conservative Government) and education in the UK, as it is internationally, is becoming increasingly capitalized through processes of marketization, commodification and performativity (Apple 2012; Connell 2013).

Examples of the compression of critical space may be related to the escalated marketization of universities, the Research Excellence Framework (REF) and the pervasiveness of the National Student Survey as a tool for auditing staff performance within discourses of student 'support' and 'employability'. It has been acknowledged that the REF is problematic (Olssen 2011) creating potential for conservatism, tedium and caution in research. Criticality is replaced by compliance that adheres to a particular way of looking at the world, based on creating academics as forces of commodification and enterprise which align with neoliberalism. Moreover, as Furedi and Attwood (2012) maintain, the NSS puts pressure on lecturers to provide 'enhanced' experiences whilst corroding academic integrity as university staff, (particularly post-1992 institutions) internalise the notion that 'you live and die by the NSS'.

The NSS and student successes are strongly linked to the socialisation and competency aspects of 'vocationalism', which is increasingly becoming a watchword in higher education, despite extensive critiques of it in further education over several decades (Bates et al, 1984; Avis et al 1996). Functional skills, work experience, 'placements' and the process of rewriting academic courses to make them more 'relevant' and 'career oriented' are emphasised, thus eroding the idea that academics, or those wishing to engage in research, are critical 'public intellectuals' (Goodson 1999). Institutional status and ranking, alongside the quest for research funding, have almost silenced critical academic enquiry and open intellectual debate. As a result, education research is being channelled into technicist and uncritical areas and the space for critical studies in education is squeezed (Rikowski and Rikowski 2003). It seems that the soul of educational research is being crushed, and voices of criticality are marginalised, ridiculed or silenced. We propose that critical voices have to make themselves heard through the fog of careerism, mainstream rejection and side-lining, and, as we show in this paper, what we identify as feminized co-caring communities can potentially create and foster such spaces.

Before we move to discuss the notion of feminization, it becomes necessary to clarify how we understand the term 'community'. The concept of learning communities draws on a wide body of theory related to learning and sociology. They relate to a constructivist approach to learning that recognises the key importance of exchanges with others, and the role of social interactions in the construction of values and identity. For example, the sharing of values in a community includes sharing more critical approaches and thereby encourages people to reclaim their own learning processes by building their learning from their own experiences. In using the term community, we do not imply some primordial culture-sharing entity. We assume that members have different interests, make diverse contributions to activity, and hold varied viewpoints. In our view, participation at multiple levels is entailed in a community of practice. Nor does the term 'community' imply co-presence, a well-defined, identifiable group, or socially visible boundaries. It does imply participation in an activity system about which participants share understandings concerning what they are doing and what this means in their lives and for their communities (Lave 1991).

## **Feminisation**

In many ways teaching is construed as a feminized profession, but perhaps only at a 'non-managerial' level. Feminising teaching may imply a devaluing of the profession; a gender differential in pay, and a feeling that teaching is 'women's work'. This is a term that is often used in a derogatory way (Grimshaw and Rubery 2007) and implies work, often associated with emotion and / or domesticity (Colley 2006; Atkins 2009) which is commonly undervalued in one or more ways. However, Griffiths (2006) suggests that the concept of teaching being feminized may not be quite what it seems. The situation is complex, and there is a need for relational analysis in understanding what is going on. There are different and competing understandings of 'feminization' as referring either to the (absolute or proportional) numbers of women in teaching or to a culture associated with women. In this paper, we refer to both the culture and to the disproportion. As Griffiths (2006) suggests, there are a range, or continua, of masculinities and femininities. However, significantly, there is a hegemonic form of masculinity, associated with neo-liberal cultures of performativity. These oppressive forms of masculinity may not be identified with by all men, but as Halberstam (1998) argues, masculinities (and femininities) can be appropriated by both males and females in different ways. There are indications that pressures of central government policies, internationally, are intensifying a culture of hegemonic masculinity in schools, whether or not they have a majority of women teachers (Haywood and Mac an Ghail 2013).

Griffiths (2006) discusses how feminist philosophers and theorists have explored ways of understanding the discourses which underlie such attempts at excluding women and the female perspective. For instance, she shows how Lloyd (1993) traces the changing meaning of "reason" in Western philosophy — while noting that however the definition changed, it was always deemed to be male, and how Michele Le Doeuff argues that history of philosophy shows that women are allocated the things that men do not value — their "castoffs," so to speak — such as intuition rather than reason, and bearing knowledge rather than producing it (Le Doeuff 2003). In this way, according to Griffiths (2006), men can and do suggest that their

own discourse, agendas and perspectives are rational, neutral and universal. They claim the mainstream discourses as neutral. Thus, mainstream discourses and policy agendas in education are created and operate within a false assumption of neutrality; and this pseudo-neutrality masks a patriarchal hegemony. Women managers may 'gain success' by appropriating themselves within the neoliberal agenda, which potentially alienates possibilities for non-managerial staff to act otherwise (Hey 2011). As feminists working in education, we are concerned about the power of patriarchal hegemony associated with performativity discourses and practices and of the work of the academic 'hyperprofessional' (Gornall and Salisbury 2012). We want to move outside of them; to facilitate discourses that may question, re-direct or refuse what we regard as a damaging discursive flow. If discourse is practice (Foucault 1972), then changing, disturbing or refusing recognizable managerial language provides us with a beginning. It is not our intention to pathologise masculinity or men, or to essentialise women. However, we *are* keen to use feminist or feminized discourse to trouble the masculine hegemony within which we work, and we align ourselves with feminized notions of co-caring communities of practice. Our drive came from the knowledge that education can be truly life enhancing and transforming if appropriate mechanisms are put into place to push open spaces that create meaningful enquiry.

## **Research approach**

If there is a duty to explain positionality in doing narrative forms of research (Sikes in Bathmaker 2010), we acknowledge that we share allegiance with feminist and post-feminist perspectives, although we do not fully situate ourselves in any singular perspective, as we believe this can be restrictive and can essentialise gender. Our methodology is perhaps informed by various feminisms and is positioned between feminist and poststructuralist feminist research.

We position ourselves on the margins in terms of identity studies and related theoretical standpoints, imposed forms of subjectivity; and also in terms of our workplace situations. We all work in universities as either lecturers and / or researchers and we all work, or have worked for some years, in the field of

education, which is a female-dominated discipline. Our shared epistemology is grounded in anti-essentialist foundations of 'feminist', feminism and difference.

We were concerned with the lived realities of our lives as women, teachers and researchers on the margins of a performativity culture, and took a semi auto-ethnographic approach to critically examine and interrogate each other's narratives and experiences of working in higher education. Auto-ethnography, as an approach to research and writing, seeks to describe and systematically analyse personal experience in order to understand cultural experience (Ellis et al 2011, Duckworth 2013) and is both process and product. The methodological focus is on our 'subjugated' voices (Foucault 1980, 81) and the ways in which we articulate and share our particular experiences of potential ideological subjugation, under neoliberal forms of governance.

Our methods may be characterised as discursive but also epistolary, as our discussions about our personal experiences, lives as educators in higher education and our interpretations of engaging with and applying theory to our daily practice were in the main conducted via email over a period of approximately one year. It is worth noting that the email extracts described and discussed in this paper were generated at a time when there was no explicit plan to write a collaborative paper. These one to one (not group) exchanges were simply a mechanism of support and reflection. Nevertheless, we used our email exchanges as a form of narrative enquiry that provided opportunity and space to negotiate our identities and make meaning from our experiences (Bathmaker and Harnett 2010). Narrative research creates a rich archive for understanding how realities are being constructed and is a form or way of 'speaking truth to power' (Bathmaker and Harnett 2010, 5). Our archived email exchanges, conversations and diaries were seen as a bricolage of recorded practices of self-representation that revealed various and significant processes in the constitution of the female self. We understand identities are constructed in the context of particular social structures and material conditions that can lock people into various forms of subjectivity. Writing emails to each other and sharing our thoughts and experiences over a one year period, was one way of expressing and

holding together the multiple selves and subjectivities that we live with in making sense of our experiences.

Analysis was done thematically using an iterative methodology based on the work of Braun and Clarke (2006). The first stage was to become familiar with the data generated through the email exchanges. This process was pivotal in gaining an understanding of us as 'real people' engaging in both a reflective and a reflexive fashion in work which mattered to us. The next stage of the analysis was an initial search for themes. Themes were derived from patterns such as 'conversation topics, vocabulary, recurring activities, meanings, [or] feelings' (Taylor and Bogdan 1984, 131). The themes that emerged were synthesised to form a picture of our joint experiences as teachers and researchers in education. Thematic analysis has been subject to the criticisms occasionally levelled at all qualitative methods: typically being that it is very vague (Antaki et al 2002). Hence, we used criteria framed by Owen (1984) for the origination of the themes we chose. Owen (1984) emphasises that the form of narrative and how a story is told is as key as the content; in its own creation, narrative creates aspects of identity.

The next stage of the analysis was to review the themes which were identified from the transcripts. Braun and Clarke (2006) suggest using respondent checking to do this. Although we may not, as researcher-participants, have had 'privileged status' as commentators on our own actions, the themes did resonate with us. Our subsequent reflections and discussions as we completed the thematic analysis could perhaps also be seen as another source of data and insight (Fielding and Fielding 1986).

## **Discussion**

### ***Caring and Co-Caring***

A central feature of the email exchanges was an acknowledgement of each other as researchers who were simultaneously coping with the complex realities of our lives in other, and multiple, roles as teachers, researchers, mothers, wives, friends, partners,

carers and so on. Bateson's (1989 8) work emphasises how discontinuities in women's lives can be challenging, and how many women are 'burdened by the assumptions of continuity'. Bateson (1989) introduces the idea that women have to 'improvise' their lives by combining familiar and unfamiliar concepts in response to new situations and this resonated powerfully with us. An email exchange that occurred early on in this process reveals the complex ways in which different practices – family, gender, research, teaching and professional – intersect and inform one another rather than existing separately. Often, this interaction would provoke difficult reflections and illuminate glaring contradictions in how we understood ourselves as authentic and empowered. The email exchanges provided a co-caring space for reflecting on these contradictions and for dialogic support and meaning-making. It became a natural caring (Noddings 1984) space for us.

Caring and co-caring involves both the self and others. Email exchanges provided a safe space for difficult reflections to be aired and allowed for the kind of motivational bolstering of one another that is not characteristic of higher education cultures. Congratulatory messages, even for the smallest of 'juggling' acts, were essential in fostering a sense of care and in bringing to light the complexities of balancing and shifting between roles and identities.

The institutional context became an important feature of our supportive exchanges. For one member of our network, moving between a post-1992 setting and an older and more research-led university had a significant impact upon the ways in which everyday professional practice was approached. This reflection revealed the various constraints and feelings of surveillance in different institutional contexts and the ways in which academic freedom was embraced or closed down depending on the environment. This inspired an exchange based upon the types of emotional labour involved in our work as lecturers, researchers and professional academics. When staff conceal the personal effects of pressure from management and maintain a happy appearance to reassure the students, this operates as a form of 'emotional labour', which can be defined as 'the effort which is required to display that which are perceived to be the expected emotions' (Ogbonna and Harris 2004, 1189). Often the emotional labour which teachers and other educators invest in their job can be

draining (Avis and Bathmaker 2004). This labour often includes 'underground working' (Gleeson 2006) such as supporting learners' needs in unaccounted time slots such as breaks and lunchtimes. The time, energy and commitment of a working week based on extra hours, compounded by work environments where job security is unstable due to redundancies and restructuring, often leaves practitioners fearful of their job security, exhausted and ever more reluctant to challenge the hegemony which is ever present in a curriculum based on quantifiable outcomes.

Critical autonomy and deep forms of intrinsic motivation were essential in sustaining our communications. We were supportive and co-caring before and throughout the writing process, and through shared teaching and academic ventures with which we were involved. At a fundamental level, we were careful to acknowledge each other's contributions and provide a safe space in which insecurities and vulnerabilities could be recognised and made sense of in the context of managerial, neoliberalist higher education settings. Crucially, over time, we became aware of how our own need to suppress these vulnerabilities, and the shame we often felt for our own shortcomings, was at odds with the kinds of advice and support we routinely offered to our students.

Co-caring is a central feature in our approach to students and the people with whom we collaborate and work. The following detailed exchange reveals not only that co-caring is an attribute of our work but also that, oftentimes, it is in danger of being eroded and undermined by structures and by those who appropriated themselves within those structures. The exchange illuminates the challenges and complexities that can arise as a result of caring for staff and students whilst also remaining true to our principles and illustrates the tensions between our values and beliefs and those of the dominant culture:

Not too sure how this links but I know it does somehow.....remember when I told you about getting a warning for 'allowing' my staff to moderate work? The woman who gave me the warning hid behind the structures of administration and a quality framework. She used the situation and her position to 'inflict' symbolic violence [in reference to Bourdieu's (2002) relations of power and mechanisms of domination which do not involve physical force] and I connived in this by accepting the warning and subsequently dealing with the intolerable situation (of which this was just

an example, there were many more) by moving institutions. I was a child, she was a controlling parent. I always thought she betrayed the sisterhood (not a term I usually use but you know what I mean I hope) in a number of ways I could not articulate, but now I see how she did this through the patriarchal structures with which she engaged.

Yes she appropriated herself within rather than challenge the dominant structures. You did the right thing - yet she could not step outside of her dominance.

Wish I had seen it at the time. But of course I was also constrained, as a senior manager, by the system, and my fear of losing my job.

Yes and this is how they hold workers by fear - we need to put bread on the table - they know it.

As a single parent this was a very real fear... also fuelled by my own lack of consciousness and of critical space where I could reflect on such things. ...even though I was teaching sociology at the time

Yes...and a feeling of isolation and questioning of our authentic selves. When we are entrenched it's hard to empower ourselves, though we try to empower others. That whole cycle of nurturing...which in many cases we pay the price for....within the cycle of symbolic violence.

I was more concerned with emancipation and empowering the young women with whom I was working ...and by not letting the ridiculousness of the admin system 'get' to and affect them, than I was with myself....or perhaps with my staff, although I protected them more than I did myself.

This narrative exchange highlights how co-caring - for ourselves, each other and our students - can become difficult in managerial cultures and how, in 'protecting' students from the underlying system and its associated non-collegiality, lecturers are positioned as a buffer which is part of emotionally labour. In higher education higher managerial positions are overwhelmingly occupied by men, whilst middle management is more the domain of women and the emotional and intellectual labour of women is tied to maintaining the efficiency of the institution. Women teachers and researchers suffer under these conditions as relationships are undermined and competition intensified, and women managers are put in the front line as (often reluctant) agents of this process (Hey 2011). There is a dichotomy between the administrative-system-as-education and that of the co-caring lecturer who perhaps came into the field of education by way of 'vocation', and a will or desire to care for

others, rather than in pursuit of a managerial, administrative driven 'career' trajectory. We are convinced that the power to create and transform, even when thwarted in concrete situations, tends to be reborn (Freire 1998). It is through our co-caring, and building relationships with ourselves and each other, that we have formed a common understandings and language to interrogate neo-liberal ideologies, emotional empowerment and in doing so created new forms of nurturing spaces.

### ***Finding spaces***

Although perhaps not aware of it initially, through our email communications and the practices of co-caring that developed within these, we were seeking out feminized intellectual spaces and particularly feminized modes of support. As we reflected on the emails and the conversations that ensued, we realized that we were in fact coming to terms with an increasing awareness and inexplicable fear that we were being suppressed and frustrated by our own 'invisible voices':

I'm just putting my thoughts down - as opposed to thinking and wondering how you will interpret them - it's great to be open and honest. We need to create space for this...

It's just difficult to remain authentic when we work in a culture where discussion and critique is sometimes shut down. I realise paperwork has to be done and I don't mind doing it - it's the lack of confidence when the paperwork is all that's measured and the space for anything else is non-existent. There are nice people though and I tend to share my intellectual space with people like us - that's empowering, that keeps me going.

It appears to us that there is an 'us' and 'them' dichotomy between administrative managerialist professional and co-caring community educationalist mentalities. By writing about it and positioning ourselves as co-caring educationalists we were somehow reinforcing and recreating this distinction; but doing so was liberating and empowering in a way that cannot be easily described. It reassured us that being open, honest and trusting of each other allowed a sharing of values, beliefs and

understandings about 'education' that was outside the powerful discourse and practices of managerialism. Ball and Olmedo (2013, 89) suggest that:

The rationality of performativity is presented as the new common sense, as something logical and desirable. Indeed, performativity works best when we come to want for ourselves what is wanted from us, when our moral sense of our desires and ourselves are aligned with its pleasures.

We see this as a tangible phenomenon in our everyday practice and collectively resist desires to comply with performativity pleasures. Our conscious (self) alienation from this culture created a space that became our own form of asylum (Masschelein and Verstraete 2012). The email response, below, further illuminates how the tensions we experienced, between beliefs, values and the dominant culture within higher education, took shape and influenced our identities and practice. We noted that an authentic, caring pedagogy is continually undermined:

The question is - how can we, or our students, be our authentic selves (in many cases as women) when the attributes we have, such as kindness and care for others, are almost infantilised - that is the word. Do we become more ruthless to 'succeed' or to be heard?! Unkindness and incivility appear to be valourised attributes just now; it's a very strange power / knowledge situation....like the Emperor's New Clothes.

You lose your authentic self - you lose your integrity, but perhaps save yourself from being eroded away by those who would attack any vulnerabilities as a weakness rather than a strength of self-awareness.

Out of this, and our experiences of this substantial tension between being who we are and the neoliberal systemic allure to become something we could not or want to be, came a sub-theme of subversion and refusal:

It's just so strange; I can't imagine ever communicating with a colleague in such a way as to devalue and deny their knowledge, perspective, whatever. It is so blatant. There's a level of arrogance, sure, but also disrespect for the job you and [others] have taken time to undertake. The fact that it's emailed suggests this way of addressing one another is entirely normal and part of the culture.

The opening up to each other as women creates a powerful counter-hegemony maybe? Can be quite subversive and I have seen that alliance in other women (and men, too, of course, but not where it is based on emotion but on other forms of capital) both used and misused. Interesting; what I like about us is that the energy it creates is being used in a positive way for the paper with some genuinely useful recommendations and insights.

I have read the start of our paper it's a great start - I'm attaching some comments – let's move with this. I don't think it's us having a rant - that's how we're made to feel - like question ourselves... 'it must be us?' Well it's not us - and the consciousness raising and critical space is a way to rupture the symbolic violence - just sharing my story with you makes it valid - rather than hidden away for fear of being stigmatized or ridiculed.

We see in our exchanges a search for an effective feminized critical space, a social and socio-political space we were ourselves *producing* (Lefebvre, 1991), which would empower us as well as resolve the dissonance which we were experiencing as lecturers. The narratives emerging from our different positions and experiences are dedicated to the production of new ways of making meaning and being / becoming critical and are generated through, and with, solidarity. Recognizing and validating issues that engage us in a productive process of meaning making (including analyzing self and the culture we find ourselves in) is, in itself, a powerful tool for working through resolutions.

## **Conclusion**

Our response to managerialistic cultures has been to search for our own critical or alter spaces through the kind of alliances, and support systems, which have inspired this paper. We seek to encourage critical thinking on education and society, but we sometimes have to do this in ways that transgress the dominant culture. Through sharing our experiences and dialogues, we have learned that once things that are seemingly fixed and certain become more intelligible through a sharing of experiences; boundaries and grids of intelligibility of the 'way things are' can be questioned, disrupted and transgressed.

Our shared teaching and learning approach with our students is within the bounds of Freireian (1996) critical pedagogy. We ground pedagogy in our students' lives so

they can start to question dominant values that are prevalent in many discourses and practices of education. We encourage students to create communities of practice (Lave 1991; Wenger 1998) in their studies and in their workplaces, and to become part of a group of intellectuals concerned to create an alternative hegemony, even if they would not see it in these terms. In encouraging students to become critically conscious, we try to facilitate conscientization, thinking and learning in such a way that students can access and attain an in-depth understanding of the world that includes a questioning of the social order of things and their role within it. By engaging in questioning and a valuing of alternative viewpoints, and not on the transmission of (units of) knowledge itself, we may open up possibilities for a questioning of the taken for granted and normalising procedures and boundaries in which actions are enclosed. This may be done through dialogue with other 'authentic' individual voices within a co-caring community that questions and critiques as part of the process of changing our world, as this is what we see teaching to be about. Critical awareness of official scripts relating to education is part of this process.

There are possibilities to find alternative words and languages that disrupt existing managerialistic discourses and practices, or ways of 'being', that have become institutionally reified. In our practice, we explicitly teach and practice co-caring community as we feel it is our baseline or grounding for education. We do not view this as a contending force that is 'against' the dominant culture, but one that is 'outside' and bears no relation to it. It stands alone as its own system of intelligibility. Likewise, the feminised critical spaces that may emerge from such communities are a multifaceted refuge or asylum, and a forum for 'being' and for 'being yourself'. We still sometimes feel that we are not 'getting it right' and are caught within our own 'performance', but articulating and sharing such tensions allows for a certain kind of freedom. We hope this paper reassures others who are frustrated, silenced, alienated or marginalised in the context of researchers' discourses and practices of patriarchal managerialism and performativity. In UK academia there is a lot of ambivalence about whether people mean what they say or say what they mean (Tamboukou 2012). We seek to continue to trouble the hegemony, by openly saying

what we mean and by taking our 'private' authentic selves and voices into the public 'education' domain.

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<sup>i</sup> The REF is the new system for assessing the quality of research in UK higher education institutions. It replaced the **Research Assessment Exercise** (RAE), last conducted in 2008.