

Reclaiming the 'workshop' as collaborative pedagogy

Françoise Vergès



The two-day symposium *Reclaiming the 'Workshop' as Collaborative Pedagogy* was held at the Cogut Center for the Humanities at Brown University in the framework of the IAS programme *Humanities across Borders: Asia and Africa in the World* (hereafter: HaB). It was organized by Françoise Vergès, Visiting Professor at the Cogut Center and Advisor to the HaB program.



Holding a symposium connected with the HaB program at the Cogut Center for the Humanities at Brown University offered many opportunities: debating with US scholars working in the tradition of alternative pedagogies in a country in which women and minorities often had to build their own institutions in a context of their exclusion; debating of the present and future of humanities in a context of assault and privatization; presenting HaB; and strengthening the global network of institutions and individuals that are experimenting in alternative pedagogies.

The point of entry was to present practices and experiments around knowledge production, conducted since 2013 by anthropologist Aarti Kawlra and myself in the sustained context of collaboration under the Mellon-funded IAS programs *Rethinking Asian Studies* (2013-2016) and *Humanities across Borders: Asia and Africa in the World* (2016-2020). The workshops and Summer Schools we co-organized and oversaw in Chiang-Mai (2014), Jaipur (2015), Accra (2015) and Chiang-Mai (2017) led us to critically question and expand our own disciplinary frameworks and methodologies. We observed that the classroom, seminars and field contexts nevertheless progressively spiraled to subtly reproduce a pervasive hierarchy of knowledge and deeply entrenched gender biases. We became attentive to any spatial arrangements that institute a relation of authority, based on implied superiority of knowledge position; to the question of translation; to the contamination by a business vocabulary that imposes 'outcomes' or 'end results' rather than paying attention to the need for slowness, moments of silence, meditation, laughing and resting. Though we are aware that the business world is fast-integrating these methods for better efficiency, we nonetheless trust our method of collaborative pedagogy, which is always done in situ, hence open to setbacks, doubts and revisions as we go.

Facilitated by and through IAS's global network, our collaborative inquiry has developed in spaces outside of formal disciplinary borders and academic settings, and has been galvanized by our shared passion in search of craft itineraries and practitioners. Being attentive to embodied knowledge and open to surprise in the ordinary – the unexpected answer to an unframed question – we became interested in challenging the division between pedagogy for higher education and pedagogy for the people, between 'high' and 'low' education and between technical and humanistic education.

We planned to explore an *ecologically grounded humanistic pedagogy* that would deploy entry points of the everyday: memories and languages, food and health, art and performance, livelihood and dwelling. It was the method we had applied at a curriculum development workshop on 'Environmental Studies' in Mandalay in July 2017. However, we were also open to new axes of discussion. We invited the students who were present to join us, so that there would be no spatial division between professors and students.

The participants were: Amanda Anderson, Andrew W. Mellon Professor of Humanities and English and Director of the Cogut Center for the Humanities at Brown University; Tricia Rose, Chancellor's Professor of Africana Studies and the Director of the Center for the Study of Race and Ethnicity in America at Brown University; Yoko Inoue, artist and visiting faculty member at Bennington College; Tharapi Than, Assistant Professor in Burmese Studies, Northern Illinois University, Dekalb; Gaye Theresa Johnson, Associate Professor Chicana/o Studies, UCLA; Debjani Bhattacharyya, Assistant Professor of History, Drexel University; Philippe Peycam, Director of IAS; Ariella Azoulay, Professor of Modern Culture and Media and Professor of Comparative Literature, Brown University; Trica B. Keaton, Associate Professor of African and African American Studies and Associate

Professor of African Diaspora Studies, Dartmouth College; Thomas Asher, SSRC; Aarti Kawlra, Academic Director of the program 'Humanities Across Borders'; and myself, Françoise Vergès.

Given the political context in the USA, many interventions were around censorship and political pressure in the universities. Gaye Theresa spoke of what it meant to teach "under and against terror", of rethinking pedagogy in the context of "collective anguish". Teaching to 800 undergraduates in a single course, and where many of her students are undocumented, she suggested a "radical politics of love" to facilitate courage and encourage the idea of a possible future. Tharapi Than, who has students from communities under assault, wondered if 'safe spaces' were really preparing students for the brutality of the outside world. Her presentation led to a very interesting discussion around the notions of safety, violence and non-violence. One student asked if that meant 'turning the other cheek' and another "what to do if the other does not love you back?" Tricia Rose intervened to remind us that non-violence as a passive movement is a myth, that violence has never generated a world we want, and that healing places are needed.

Ariella Azoulay, who saw pedagogies as processes, led the discussion towards the invisible role of the perpetrator: How to bring white students to acknowledge their inheritance as white perpetrators because it should be their responsibility to find out about their own privileges. In the debate that

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followed, Aarti Kawlra discussed subjectivity in the classroom and the pedagogy of laying bare the concealments. Trica Keaton exposed the threats of censorship that could lead to self-censorship in order to protect students and to avoid serious problems of employment. She recalled many instances of direct repression in academia in this year alone.

Philippe Peycam, Debjani Bhattacharyya and Amanda Anderson presented examples of pedagogical practices. Peycam narrated his experience in Cambodia setting up a research center and a library and archive. Bhattacharyya told us how she taught her students the way in which power inscribes itself in the environment, by taking them on a guided tour through the campus. Anderson described the humanities program at the Cogut Center – team-taught courses, facilitating the creation of communities of students outside of bonded departments – and stressed that humanities are there to keep the problematic alive rather than searching for solutions. Questions were raised about the position of authority in which teachers put themselves when they are making syllabi of pedagogies of dissent. Is there a way it can be done collaboratively? Racism was often evoked. Tricia Rose asked: How do you make structural racism accessible

to people? How do you explain the take-over of color blindness, meritocracy, and individualism by structural racism?

I had asked participants not to read a paper but to address the topic in ten minutes however they wanted.

This made for a

manifold approach but what finally appeared as common threads were the understanding that humanities are under assault by forces such as governments or groups, that students constitute a very diverse community in which gender, class, status, and civic rights intersect, and that rethinking pedagogy is an urgent task. Tools and references are there, we must trust what we have – which is usually a lot – and not start from what we should have; we must nurture collaboration, empathy and a respectful environment. We must always pay attention to the ways in which hierarchy insinuates itself in a setting. Altogether, it was a very fruitful conversation. To teach is to un-learn.

More information

www.ias.asia/research/humanities-across-borders-asia-africa-world

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We are interested in challenging the division between pedagogy for higher education and pedagogy for the people.

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Humanities across Borders: Asia and Africa in the World (2017-2020) is a four-year IAS programme for global collaboration

on humanistic education, carried out by twenty-three leading institutes in Asia, West Africa, Europe and the United States, and their local partners in Asia and Africa. Its functional goal is to mobilise the development of a global consortium of universities and their local partners interested in fostering humanities-grounded education. Its substantive vision is that of an inclusive and expanded humanities.

To this end, the program will initiate methodological interventions in teaching and research to surpass narrow disciplinary, institutional and ideological agendas in the production of knowledge.

The programme facilitates border-crossing meetings, workshops and other collaborative pedagogical formats, organised by its partners together with their local civil society

agents and actors with the objective to shape a curricular matrix and framework for humanistic education across borders. These activities are carried out in the framework of fourteen projects, focusing on such themes as food, embodied practices, voices of dissent, language, memory and migration, in all their dynamic articulations in the world.