

EMBODYING LEARNING: PRAXIS AS THEORY

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In our wonderful Learning Community “Citational Practice as Critical Feminist Pedagogy” in spring 2021, Cat Lambert and Diana Newby wrote in their description of the topic at hand: “In this LC, we’ll challenge ourselves to think about citation as a powerful tool for (re)making disciplinary structures and norms. Doing so will require us to think about which ‘bodies’ are centered, and which are not, by given citational practices. We will also be thinking together about what exactly citation is: the forms it takes and the places where it happens, beyond the most familiar examples.” The body of a text is an obvious resource we use constantly in our work, but why not also consider the bodies of the people from whom we learn, as well as our own?

I devised this resource, what I call a “field assignment,” for a class called “Intro to Asian Thought” that I taught for the Philosophy Department at Purchase College in the spring semester of 2021. The field assignment, which I will describe in more detail below, invites students to spend a week trying out an embodied practice related to our course material and to write a reflection about their experience with the practice. Though my resource can be adapted to any course in any field, it will be helpful to give some context regarding how I fit it into this particular class and why it worked.

On my original syllabus, I sought to include alternative perspectives from the typical academic sources on the course’s central topics. Many of these sources give more space to critical race theory, feminist philosophy, and how the principles of these theories relate to the all-too-general umbrella of “Asian Thought.”¹ While I did not choose this course title, its ambiguity provided an opportunity to encourage students to think critically about *who* counts as “Asian,” *where* these traditions take place, and *why* a more standard syllabus generally includes and does not include certain ideas or authors. With these things in mind, I began the class with excerpts from Tomoko Masuzawa’s (2005) *The Invention of World Religions*. This text does a lot of work in pushing against a narrative that has been accepted as standard by and from scholars

¹ See below for a list of references, including some that I used for this course.

who tend to be cis het white European Christian males.² Assigning Masuzawa’s introductory chapter served to encourage and even require students, from the very beginning, to question what they think they know about the topics at hand, and why positionality matters.³ I see my resource as only one part of a course that seeks to question and push against an academic status quo that at first glance seems to inhibit the potential for critical feminist citational practices. Therefore, I will also provide some detail to illustrate how this resource scaffolds and is scaffolded by other course requirements.

I split the course into three parts: primary sources of major traditions; the evolution of Buddhist philosophy; and contemporary practices. The final third of the syllabus focused on bringing textual sources into a space that is more directly relevant and applicable to students’ everyday experiences beyond the confines of the classroom. It was during this segment of the class that I had students complete the “field assignment,” which asked students to pick a particular practice that had been discussed in class, whether from textual or video-based resources, and to spend time engaging with that practice for five days in a row. Examples included practices like yoga, meditation, and mindfulness. Students then wrote reflections on their experiences—short responses right after completing that day’s activity and a longer one based on the experience overall. Students were asked to make further efforts to deepen their connection with their chosen practice by accessing members of their community as sources of further teaching, including fellow classmates, or personal contacts who may also be practitioners. I intentionally left the citational possibilities open so that the students were able to cite any resource that proved relevant to their experience (including YouTube channels or apps focused on the activity) and to do research outside the bounds of academic texts.

The primary goals of the field assignment resource are to encourage students to consider the benefits of incorporating research beyond traditional academic

² Importantly, this applies to many if not most academic fields, not only religion and philosophy. See Sara Ahmed’s (2017) *Living a Feminist Life*, where she very intentionally chooses to refuse to cite any white men.

³ An example: “the problem of Orientalist science is not a matter of would-be knowledge contaminated by ulterior political interests, or science compromised by colonialism. Our task, then, is not to cleanse and purify the science we have inherited—such efforts, in any case, always seem to end up whitewashing our own situation rather than rectifying the past—but rather it is a matter of being historical *differently*” (Masuzawa, 21).

methods and to think with their bodies. Rather than simply completing assigned readings, students are asked to try certain methods or modes of experience discussed in class. Such assignments involve embodiment of a sort not often found in the classroom and can encourage them to be more “in touch” with the world around them. Students are thus rewarded for their creativity and experimentation, which can lead to alternative forms of academic methods, including citational practices. The emphases of both the practice and the written reflections are on utilizing non-traditional sources that are not frequently found in academic texts and encouraging students to examine their own embodied experiences as a potential source of knowledge. As a general pedagogical philosophy, I believe this has the potential to encourage students to question and push against the status quo by taking lived experience into account. As we are all (differently) embodied, this means acknowledging both the variety and universality of human ontology that is not limited by one particular history of thought.

Another way this resource opens up the possibility of subverting traditional citational practices is by encouraging students to give credit to their teachers. By “teachers” I do not simply mean their professors or their main interlocutors in assigned texts but also the people in their lives who teach them new perspectives. In other words, this resource invites students to give credit to people who might not have the recognized “clout” within academic circles that still tend to be overwhelmingly white and male. Including the potential for recognizing experiences such as group meditation or fitness classes, for example, means going beyond the often solipsistic citation practices prevalent in academic work. Giving credit can encourage new ties between the academic world and those outside it. This can lead in turn to an enduring sense of community-building that goes beyond the limits of the ivory tower and, thus, dismantles the power structures that prevent many from receiving the credit they deserve.⁴

⁴ I asked my friend Mike Araujo (2021), who practices and teaches Parkour, about the importance of giving credit to people who have created particular moves that he then teaches to his students. He agreed that it marks a sense of community and respect, adding, “History as well. And maybe it might show a bit of my personal practice if I preface a skill with ‘I first saw this move at this event with this person who is really cool.’ Now I’m sharing a bit about me, the community outside of that single class, and how we tend to share/learn movements from each other constantly.” He brings up an important point about narrativizing common history that can lead to better outreach and inclusion and has the potential to subvert the status quo. I see no reason not to carry out this philosophy in academic work as well.

Because of the way that the field assignment scaffolded the final project for the course, students were able to cite their own experiences with the field assignment in their final projects: another way in which this assignment promotes empowering citational practices. For their final projects, I asked them to utilize their personal skills, interests, and areas of academic concentration to cement and contextualize what they had learned in class. Some chose to write more traditional research and philosophy papers, while others submitted projects such as illustrations, original songs, and paintings with written commentary on their process and how it helped them to solidify their knowledge of the course materials. For example, two of my students submitted final projects that were continuations of their field assignments as well as creative culminations of what they had learned in the course. These particular students were both Visual Arts majors specializing in printmaking and graphic design, respectively. Their projects and reflections incorporated several of the concepts that we had studied over the course of the semester, as well as their experiences with observing their own artistic processes as a form of meditation. The way that they both presented their projects and interpretations of meditative practice to the class inspired robust conversations among their peers, offering more potential for collaboration and, thus, citational practices. (With their permission, I have provided these students' projects as examples of student work [here](#).)⁵

⁵ It is relevant here to note the demographics of Purchase College, which is a state school and thus generally more accessible than private colleges, in terms of tuition costs as well as academic admissions requirements. Many Purchase students are first-generation college students and students of color. The unique culture of Purchase within the state school system (the school motto is “Think Wide Open”) also facilitates an environment where many students openly identify as queer and/or LGBTQIA+. Purchase is also known for its focus on the arts, specifically in the form of its conservatory programs, and about half of my students were artists. Identity was a frequent topic of discussion during our class sessions, and I encouraged them to think about individual identities and positionalities—both their own and those of others—in the context of a course on “Asian Thought.” I was thus somewhat surprised that none of them found it relevant to mention their race, gender, sexuality, or ability status in the field assignment. These elements of identity did come up for some in their final projects, though, particularly because the last text we read was Anne Anlin Cheng’s (2018) *Ornamentalism*, which explicitly deals with depictions of Asian women in art and fashion. I suspect the reason for this was that the field assignment is primarily a personal exercise that involves reflecting on the body in very physical, interiorized terms, while the final project asks students to synthesize the personal with the inter/impersonal. (It’s also worth noting that I did not have any students who openly identified as physically disabled.)

Both the field assignment and the final project prompted students to think beyond the often formulaic expectations of higher education and potentially cite experiences and sources that are likely not found in typical bibliographies or indexes. Focusing on embodiment gives us, as educators, the opportunity to pursue critical feminist citational practices. As Sara Ahmed (2017) writes in *Living a Feminist Life*, “theory can do more the closer it gets to the skin” (p. 10). Much theory done on the body is either overtly conceptual or laser-focused on the embodiment of people who fall outside of the supposedly universal cis het white male identity and experience. As Elizabeth Grosz (1994) writes in *Volatile Bodies: Toward a Corporeal Feminism*, women are often coded as somehow *more* embodied than men.⁶ A resource like this reminds us that embodiment is central to any academic discipline as it marks our ontological reality. In other words, we are not embodied in the same ways, but we *are* all embodied. Rather than attempting to “whitewash” embodied existence, or assume a universalizing male gaze, students should thus be encouraged to consider the “whole self,” to borrow a phrase from Columbia Senior Lead Teaching Fellows’ Adam Massmann and Abby Shroering’s Fall 2020 Learning Community on “Considering the Whole Self in Teaching and Learning.” Our “whole selves” include our differences as well as the qualities we all share as people.⁷

I make a point of thinking about “the whole self” in my own work as well, which is why I rely on a particular embodied practice in terms of both my pedagogy and my academic writing. Practicing martial arts for about 16 years has completely informed the way I think and the way I see and experience the world. Having a particular understanding of my proprioceptive existence (i.e.

⁶ “Patriarchal oppression, in other words, justifies itself, at least in part, by connecting women much more closely than men to the body and, through this identification, restricting women’s social and economic roles to (pseudo) biological terms. Relying on essentialism, naturalism and biologism, misogynist thought confines women to the biological requirements of reproduction on the assumption that because of particular biological, physiological, and endocrinological transformations, women are somehow more biological, more corporeal, and more natural than men. The coding of femininity with corporeality in effect leaves men free to inhabit what they (falsely) believe is a purely conceptual order while at the same time enabling them to satisfy their (sometimes disavowed) need for corporeal contact through their access to women’s bodies and services” (Grosz, 1994, p. 14).

⁷ I assume that many of us who went through public education in the United States were taught to stay away from using “I” in essays starting around middle or high school. A resource like this actively works against this restriction and encourages students to utilize their personal experiences to their advantage rather than seeing them as a potential hindrance to “objective” learning. This can help boost their confidence as well as remind them that learning is *fun* and *useful*. I think teaching with this in mind can help us feel the same about our own work as well.

bodily awareness in space) has meant always thinking with and through embodiment, especially when it comes to abstract theory and philosophical concepts. As I have taught martial arts in addition to college and language courses, I find it helpful to think through pedagogical techniques that bridge gaps between academia and everyday life. What would higher education look like if we encouraged our students to think more critically about their physical realities, particularly in relation to those of others? What possibilities might emerge if they are required to apply their knowledge and interests both inside *and* outside the classroom and when considering various career paths? What might it mean for our students to have teachers who model the kinds of practices we encourage?

For future users of this resource, the field assignment has the potential to be adapted to any number of courses and fields. My students overwhelmingly referenced this assignment as their favorite, and the work they produced demonstrated their eagerness and ability to take advantage of resources that interest them. It is important to note that students' reflections for this assignment must explicitly tie their individual experiences to the course materials, as they may have a tendency to stray too far afield. The basic premise can be applied to any class, though it does require some creativity from the instructor.

GOING FURTHER

- One thing I could do better, which became particularly clear to me after attending Cat and Diana's Learning Community, would be to more explicitly integrate critical feminist citational practice by scaffolding some class discussions regarding the importance of citation, what "counts" as legitimate, and why it is important to disrupt the status quo. As graduate students, it can be easy to forget that our undergraduate students may not have much citational knowledge at all, and that taking the time to talk through accepted and alternative practices can in itself be a form of critical feminist pedagogy.
- There are parallels to ethnography in this assignment insofar as students are to make reflections on their chosen activity, and students can be encouraged to use their own expertise and personal backgrounds in applying these hands-on field assignments to their work in class. In *doing* the things they're reading about rather than simply reflecting intellectually, a sense of deeper empathy, understanding, and community can be developed.

- It is also beneficial for students to upload their reflections to a discussion forum so they can read each other's submissions, further encouraging sharing resources that would not normally be cited.
- An enduring question for this kind of resource is how to apply it to a variety of classes and to ensure that students stay on task while taking advantage of creative license. Though I had only assigned this once during my course, it might be a good idea to assign it two or three times during a semester so they get consistent practice with such a method of learning and in a variety of contexts.

TEACHING RESOURCE

Student-facing Instructions

Field Assignment

What you should submit: 5 brief reflections on each session, 1 longer reflection on the whole experience. Send as ONE collective document.

Dedicate at least 15 minutes per day for 5 days to an activity of your choice from this list, or email me with another suggestion:

- Mindfulness
- Meditation
- Wim Hof method
- Martial arts
- Yoga

Length: The 5 reflections can vary based on how much you want to say about each session. The final reflection should be at least 3 double-spaced pages. This final reflection should focus on your experience over the course of the 5 days. **You must explicitly reference the connections you make with the work we have done in class, whether from our discussions or readings.** You are also encouraged to cite sources outside of the syllabus, including non-academic teachers and inspirations. There are plenty of free resources online that you can choose from to assist you in practicing one of these things. If you already practice one of them, take advantage of your experience, or try something new. You may also partner up for this if you wish, though each individual must write their own reflections.

You must also take account of the time it takes to write your reflections after each session—don't overwhelm yourself! You are free to do your chosen

activity alone or with others, but be sure to document your thoughts, feelings, and reflections during and after the experience. You can be as personal or as objective as you feel comfortable, but always remember to synthesize what you're thinking about for class. When writing your session reflections, it's more important to get your thoughts down as soon as possible rather than worry about your writing (though of course it must be readable). Your final reflection, however, should be clear and polished.

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