

# Feminist Methodologies for Gender Studies Teaching: Cross-Case Analysis of Practical Applications in Three Universities

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**Abstract.** In this article interpersonal communication in Gender Studies teaching is mapped and compared in feminist pedagogy in three universities: Södertörn University in Sweden, Novgorod State University in Russia and Vilnius University in Lithuania. The aim of this article is, first, to compare the uses of feminist methodologies in teaching during the first semester undergraduate Gender Studies courses in a cross-case comparison. And secondly, to suggest developments needed to pursue teaching in Gender Studies in the three countries. Scholarly discussions about feminist pedagogies are accounted for and characteristics from the field are identified and compared in the three empirical cases. The article further draws on qualitative feminist methodology and concludes that while the contexts investigated are different, the methodologies used have similarities. In all three universities the teaching methods focus on students' experiences and differences, teacher's reflexivity, working in smaller groups, highlighting community building and empowerment. In the conclusion these teaching holdings are discussed, and further development of interpersonal communication in Gender Studies teaching is suggested.

**Keywords:** Feminist methodologies; Gender studies teaching; Higher education; Cross-case comparison

## Feministinės dėstymo metodologijos lyčių studijose: kryžminė praktinio taikymo trijuose universitetuose analizė

**Santrauka.** Straipsnyje aptariama tarpasmeninė komunikacija lyčių studijose, ją lyginant su feministinės pedagogikos principais 3 universitetuose: Södertörno universitete Švedijoje, Novgorodo valstybiniame universitete Rusijoje ir Vilniaus universitete Lietuvoje. Straipsnyje siekiama, pirma, palyginti, kaip naudojamos feministinės metodologijos dėstant lyčių studijų kursus pirmos pakopos studentams (-ams) sukryžminant lyginamus atvejus.

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Antra, straipsnyje siekiama pateikti siūlymus, kaip toliau plėtoti lyčių studijų dėstymą 3 šalyse. Straipsnyje pristatoma mokslinė diskusija apie feministines pedagogikas, identifikuotos analizuojamo lauko charakteristikos ir trijų empirinių atvejų palyginimas. Remiantis kokybine feministine tyrimo metodologija paremta analize, straipsnyje daroma išvada, kad nors lyginti atvejai veikia skirtinguose kontekstuose, naudojamos dėstymo metodologijos turi panašumų. T. y. visuose 3 universitetuose dėstymo metodai fokusuojami į studentų (-tų) patirtis ir skirtumus, dėstytojų refleksyvumą, darbą mažomis grupėmis akcentuojant bendruomenės kūrimą ir įgalinimą. Apibendrinant aptariami šie dėstymo ypatumai ir pasiūlomi galimi sprendimai, kaip plėtoti tarpasmeninę komunikaciją lyčių studijų kursuose.

**Pagrindiniai žodžiai:** feministinės metodologijos; mokymas lyčių studijose; aukštasis mokslas; kryžminė atvejų analizė.

## Introduction

Teaching in higher education is a communicative endeavor. During the past half-century, interpersonal communication research has been less inspired by critical theories about power and equity than other fields (Baxter & Ashbury 2015, Moore 2017). Still, this is not the case in the ongoing discussion of the interpersonal communication of Gender Studies teaching. Contributing to the field of communication by studying the teaching, this article views the teaching as a place where interpersonal communication occurs, and draws on critical feminist theories about pedagogy and teaching as a communicative practice.<sup>1</sup> In focus are teaching methods with a feminist ethos in higher education in the tertiary education institutions, methods used by teachers in communication with students to promote equality in higher education and in society at large through teaching and learning.<sup>2</sup> Authoritarian teaching and transmission models of teaching communication are parallel influences on teaching holdings that are currently debated in many countries across the world (see, e.g., Torff 2021; Lehesvuori, Ramnarain & Viiri, 2018). We are arguing for engaging with teaching methodologies inspired by feminist pedagogies, a subfield of research on equality in teaching focusing on gender, often understanding gender as intersecting with other power dimensions like class, race and sexuality. Within the field of feminist pedagogies, methods have been developed to further a collaborative classroom with gender equality in mind, for students to develop critical thinking, to overcome inequalities and stigmas, and strengthen the link between learning and social activism.

However, as Rossella Ciccia (2016, p. 1) notes, “meaning and measurement of many gender concepts differ across countries and that the factors leading to feminist success and failure are context specific.” With her conclusion as background, this article takes its starting point in feminist pedagogies, personal experiences of teaching Gender Studies in three countries and from discussions with our colleagues who teach gender related topics in different national and sociocultural settings. More specifically, when searching for universal principles for successful application of feminist pedagogical methodologies in

<sup>1</sup> Here the scope does not allow us to detail the research on interpersonal communication theory further.

<sup>2</sup> Gert Biesta (2017) emphasizes the role of the teacher, making judgements in relation to the diverse practices of education. Learning is an active process where the students meet education. But the teacher is neither passive or authoritarian in Biesta’s view of education. It is such a definition of teaching we follow in this article.

teaching, we have to adjust our performance to prerequisites coming from several strongly determining and fundamentally overlapping layers: our personal qualities, including background training, experiences, etc.; structural constraints and cultural restraints / promises in our closest and more distant academic environments; and socio-cultural / -political powers. Considering the motivation of the authors, we consider how the existing feminist pedagogies could be applied in the most efficient ways in different countries.

The aim of this article is to suggest developments needed to pursue and evolve feminist pedagogies in university teaching. For this purpose, we compare how the feminist methodologies in teaching are used in undergraduate Gender Studies courses at three universities: Novgorod State University (Russia), Södertörn University (Sweden), and Vilnius University (Lithuania). The empirical material we draw on is our experiences of teaching, the curricula structure and teaching methods, and the schedules of the courses.<sup>3</sup> We link the empirical cases to ongoing nation specific discussions on feminism, democracy, activism and methodologies in teaching and learning, and consider variations between the universities' structures, the geopolitical situations and legal frameworks in relation to feminist methodologies in teaching.

The article is structured as follows: first, the previous research about feminist pedagogies and methodologies in teaching is summarized; then methods and empirical materials are described; third, the contexts of the three cases are introduced, the empirical material is presented and discussed. We end by an analytical discussion of our cases in comparison, presenting our main conclusions drawing on the analytical sections and comparing the cases, and suggest developments for the evolution of feminist pedagogies in university teaching.

## State of the art

Feminist pedagogies is a field where multiple theories on teaching and learning meet, it can be described as signified by focus on the role and position of the teacher, the political meaning of curricula and knowledge regimes, what sources and methods are used to produce knowledge, on student participation and practical methods used with the aim to take into account the experiences of different social groups. Feminist pedagogies have emancipatory goals to promote equality inside and outside the classroom, and often employ collaborative methods (Shrewsbury 1987). The field is also known to emphasize the positions of teachers and students as not abstract, but determined by different experiences, in particular, in relation to gender, sexuality, class, race, ethnicity, citizenship, age, and health status (ibid.). This focus on experience and empowerment in feminist pedagogies developed in the 1970s was much inspired by critical pedagogy in the vein of Paulo Freire (1972). Accordingly, contemporary feminist pedagogies build on the idea that knowledge

<sup>3</sup> The project, *Internationalising teaching with a gender perspective in the Baltic region* (funded by the Swedish institute 2021-2022), that this article is based on included Södertörn University (Sweden), Vilnius University (Lithuania) and Novgorod State University (Russia). Two workshops on teaching methodologies inspired by gender research in higher education mapping the development of teaching methods were conducted by the project.

is situated (Haraway 1988), teaching and learning are shaped by the materializations and embodiments of context, time, and place, and their appearance in different systems of power. Feminist pedagogies ask questions like ‘whose contribution is considered more significant?’, ‘what knowledge is considered objective?’, “who has access to education?’, ‘what knowledge is taught and what is hidden and is ignored?’

Feminist pedagogies, as a practice in teaching and a theoretical discussion in research, have been influenced by radical and critical pedagogies *and* the methods of the women’s movement in the 1960s and 1970s (Lundberg & Werner 2013). Crucial was the redefinition of education as a political process associated with issues of social justice and that the prospective scholars started seeing the education as a potential tool for overcoming various forms of oppression. This perspective on education has developed with feminist theory in the twenty first century, but the goal of social justice remains (Ringrose, Warfield & Zarabadi 2019). Today feminist pedagogies are multiple, present in Education research and Gender Studies as well as in teaching practices aimed at uncovering and reducing inequalities in the classrooms of schools and higher education. Some feminist pedagogies focus on gender inequality, but more frequently the feminist teaching methodologies are addressing intersecting power trajectories of sexism, homophobia, transphobia, racism, and ageism, through reflexivity (Hooks 1994). bell hooks scholarly Black feminist work on teaching and community has been influential for how feminist pedagogies have developed since the 1980s introducing self-reflexivity for teachers and intersectional power analysis of classroom dynamics as two major tools.

Here feminist pedagogy is used as an umbrella term that includes various critical approaches to and theories of the education system and learning process with gender theoretical starting points. As such, feminist pedagogy encompasses various more recent strands of scholarly discussions and conceptualizations. For example, queer pedagogy (Kumashiro 2009), critical pedagogical traditions juxtaposed with neoliberal developments (Giroux 2021), transformative borderlands pedagogy (Elenes 2003), decolonial pedagogy (Walsh 2015), black queer feminist pedagogy (Lewis 2011), feminist disability studies pedagogy (Knoll 2009) and feminist-of-color disability studies (Schalk & Kim 2020), just to mention a few developments in feminist pedagogies. Dialogue within and between these traditions enriches feminist pedagogy, and, on the other hand, generates conflicts, gaps and contradictions, resulting in discussions, subsequent transformations and rethinking of theories and methodologies used in teaching. Two traits that bring these diverse feminist pedagogies together are seeing learning as an active process within a field of power, and the teacher’s self-reflexivity as important in order for them to learn through communication with students actively involved. However, Lucy Ferguson (2019, p. 18) referring to Jean Shackelford (1992), argues that “while feminist pedagogies share some key aspects with other radical or critical pedagogies, feminist pedagogies are distinctive because of their explicit goal of ending patriarchy and oppression and empowering or giving voice and influence to those disempowered by patriarchal structures.” The focus on pedagogical tools to transform gendered power thus unites a broad field of feminist pedagogies with different epistemological grounds.

Ann Manicom (1992) has identified three main themes characteristic of feminist pedagogy: that teaching should begin from women's experiences, that sharing experiences is a way of building women's sense of solidarity and mutual support, and that authority relations in the classroom should be dismantled to equalize power relations. Through a meta-analysis of writings on feminist pedagogies in the United States, Lynne M. Webb, Kandi L. Walker and Tamara S. Bollis (2004, p. 218) have drawn out six principles of feminist pedagogy: reformation of the relationship between teacher and student, empowerment, building community, privileging individual voices, respecting diversity of personal experience, and challenging traditional views. The reformation of the relationship between teacher and student includes an openness and motivation of decisions made by teachers while empowerment is defined as positive reinforcement of work and persons. Building a community can, according to the authors, be achieved by encouraging students to speak to and listen to each other (Ibid., p. 419). The privileging of individual voices entails providing space for every person speaking and being heard at every meeting, and respecting diverse experiences includes learning from differences between participants and including them in knowledge production (Ibid. p. 420). Finally, in Webb et al. (2004, p. 421), the challenging of traditional views is described as questioning hierarchies. The authors further argue for the positive impact of these six principles not only on teaching outcomes, but also for collaborative work in a research team (Ibid., p. 418-421). Further, Lucy Ferguson (2019) argues that when feminist pedagogical principles are put in practice, four key aspects or principles stand out as unifying traits, "which run through the application of feminist pedagogies in the sphere of training for gender equality" (Ferguson 2019, p.18). These are (a) participatory learning; (b) validation of personal experience; (c) encouragement of social justice, activism and accountability; and (d) development of critical thinking and open-mindedness. The characteristics of feminist pedagogy as described above will be used in our analysis to compare them with the methods of our three cases of Gender Studies courses.

## **Method and material**

Case study analyses struggle to systematically account for the ways in which context specific forces operating in different locations shape and contextualize meanings of gender concepts and predetermine feminist success and failure (Ciccia 2016, p. 1). Moreover, cross-case analysis is "a research method that facilitates the comparison of commonalities and difference in the events, activities, and processes that are the units of analyses in case studies," it opens possibilities for the researchers to not only produce new knowledge, but also share available knowledge and experience (Khan & Van Wynsberghe 2008). In this article, striving to "explore parallels and differences among the cases" (Azarian 2011, p. 113), we aim (a) to map the uses of feminist methodologies in Gender Studies teaching at three universities in Lithuania, Russia and Sweden, and, following this, (b) to suggest development of these methods in order to pursue and evolve inter-regional feminist pedagogy. Because of the exploratory nature of our study, we are "highlighting

the particularity” (Ibid., p. 117) in our comparative analysis. Further, we take into consideration social actions and events from several contexts to highlight implicit and often taken-for-granted practices of teaching, as comparison has “the potential of revealing and challenging our less evident assumptions and conceptions about the world, especially the familiar one of oneself” (Ibid.).

In addition, when performing this study, we highlighted feminist epistemological principles suggested by Liz Stanley and Sue Wise (1990). They argue that feminist epistemology “should be located in research behaviour but also in written research reports by explicating the analytic processes involved in understanding ‘what is going on here’” (Stanley & Wise 1990, p. 23). More specifically, while collecting and generating our data, we discussed the relationship between the researcher (ourselves) and the researched (our field of academic work, our methods and classrooms) in the different national contexts where we worked. We were aware that our intellectual (auto)biographies affect our work and communication in the project group. Furthermore, we had extended discussions on how to manage the different realities of the students and teachers (as we operated in three different socio-political contexts, which altered enormously during the process of writing this article) and our understanding of teaching and epistemology. The below presented findings are based on analysis of and critical reflection on (a) our course materials of undergraduate courses (see Table 1), schedules and curricula from 2020/2021 and (b) our, as Gender Studies lecturers, personal experiences. We employed feminist research methods to analyze “unplanned personal experience” (Lucal (1999) 2011, p. 23) in our own contexts through consciousness rising conversation (Sarantakos 2012, p. 78-79) among Gender Studies teachers in our universities.

Table 1. **Description of BA level Gender Studies courses in the three universities.**

The university	Course title	Length / format of the course	Duration of the course
<b>Södertorn university</b>	Gender studies first semester – Introduction to Gender Studies 2021	34 hours lectures 42 hours seminars	18 weeks / one semester
<b>Novgorod State university</b>	Gender across cultures 2020	36 hours lectures + 18 hours practical sessions	18 weeks / one semester
<b>Vilnius university</b>	Gender studies 2021	32 hours lectures + 16 hours seminars	16 weeks / one semester

Our empirical material was developed, first, by reviewing the courses, curriculum and schedules at our respective universities, comparing them and identifying the most similar courses (Table 1). In the second stage we identified the type of teaching and teaching methods used in interaction with our students, and students’ actions and interactions with us during the courses. Third, the material was approached in discussions between the three authors about how we ourselves have taught in these courses, our experiences of the types of teaching methods used. These discussions also laid ground to two international

workshops on feminist teaching methodologies where other teachers from the three universities and countries participated. Finally, the retrospective narratives describing the cases were elaborated by each author separately and compared using theoretical frameworks introduced here (Manicom 1992, Webb et al. 2004, Ferguson 2019).

## **The national contexts and cases**

In the following presentation of teaching in Gender Studies in three countries, we focus on first semester Gender Studies courses of three universities, the assignments and methods employed in them, and our experiences of teaching them. However, before starting to describe our cases, we provide brief descriptions of the national contexts in which the universities operate.<sup>4</sup>

In Russia, gender studies, summer gender schools and conferences were actively developed from the mid-1990s until the 2010s. During the 1990s and in the beginning of 2000s many university teachers acquired knowledge and experience in Gender Studies and feminist studies through these summer schools and conferences and went on to use them in their teaching. The experience gained had a major impact on the style and methodology of teaching in some disciplines. Gender Studies united teachers and researchers who adhere to a feminist perspective and those who refuse the ‘feminist’ part of a gender approach (Zdravomyslova & Temkina 2014).

The development of feminist methodologies in teaching has not been prominent in Russian higher education, and the field has seen developments by Ukrainian researchers working in Russia (Plakhotnik 2017, Sukovataya 2004, Shchurko 2017). Still, Gender Studies issues in education were actively developed by some researchers (Shtyleva 2008). Their work was devoted to the gender approach in education and drew attention to the need to take into account gender socialization in the educational process in Russia. A feminist analysis of school and university textbooks has been carried out (Yarskaya-Smirnova 2004, Smirnova 2005, Ryabova 2005, Kolosova 2014 and others), and the influence of gender on the learning process has been analyzed (Shtyleva 2008, Lukovitskaya & Osipov 2005). In the expansion period of Gender Studies in Russia there were several Gender Studies courses at Novgorod State University like “Sociocultural aspects of gender research” (2001–2011, Master level), “Gender psychology” (2001–2010, Bachelor level), and “Culture as a method for producing gender asymmetry” (2001–2011, Master level). After 2010, Gender Studies courses gradually declined in a number of universities due to the changing framework of state conservative policies (Uzlaner 2019, Budraitis 2020). In Russia higher education is governed by the Ministry of Education currently promoting ideologies of traditional values, not coinciding with gender/feminist ideas. Many international foundations that supported Gender Studies left the country in 2014 and the decline in financial support for feminist work has led to a decrease in feminist research articles, summer schools, and Gender Studies courses.

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<sup>4</sup> The contexts are described as they were in 2020/2021 and neither the pandemic or the war in Ukraine is discussed in this article.



Sweden has pursued state sanctioned gender equality politics since the 1960s including policy in education where gender equality work is mandated in schools. Norm critical pedagogy (Björkman & Bromseth 2019, Kumashiro 2009) has been both widely applied, critically discussed and contested in Sweden as a contemporary and intersectionally based development in feminist pedagogy and methodology in the 2000s. Gender Studies were established as a subject in Swedish universities during the 1990s, up until then gender research had been pursued in other subjects and in research centers focusing on women, gender or feminism. In 1990s and 2000s, one saw Gender Studies in Sweden expanding and developing courses and degrees on all levels, from undergraduate to postgraduate. The institutionalization of Gender Studies in Sweden happened in a period of political support for feminist research and gender equality policies. Not only in Sweden, but in the wider European context, the position of Gender Studies was strengthened during these decades. Feminist influence on politics, research and education remain strong in Sweden and “norm critical” (Björkman & Bromseth 2019) pedagogy has been implemented in many levels of children’s education. Gender equality was also mainstreamed in all state agencies. During the 2020s the subject’s growth in universities has halted and it is increasingly questioned in the public and political sphere as a ‘biased’ science, less worthy of support than other subjects (a critique also voiced against ethnic, migration, minority studies etc.). The widespread support for Gender Studies is presently being questioned in public and political debate, and by right-wing politicians, but the threat to the education and research is still unspecific since Gender Studies has been institutionalized as its own subject at almost all Swedish universities and will not be easily removed.

In Lithuania, political focus on gender equality issues echoed in a wave of institutionalization of academic Gender Studies in the beginning of the 1990s. Much like in Russia and in Sweden, the 1990s was a period of growth for feminist politics and Gender Studies in Lithuanian universities. Later in the decade, Gender (Women’s) Study centers, giving a number of courses, seminars, projects and other activities were established in almost all universities in Lithuania. The institutional bodies created to support Gender Studies teaching were engaged in international collaborations and published new research journals, for example *Feminizmas, visuomenė, kultūra*,<sup>5</sup> *Lyčių studijos ir tyrimai*,<sup>6</sup> and other. Debates on strategies for implementation of a feminist perspective in social research (Mažeikienė 2000) and the creation of distinct national feminist discourse and a language for Gender Studies in Lithuania (Mažeikienė 2008) as well as possibilities for educational measures to integrate gender parity in primary school education (Eitutytė & Šidlauskienė 2002) have been held in Lithuania. The issues of gender and sexuality are legislated in form of a general secondary school program “Health and gender education and preparation for family life” and are obligatory in secondary school education (Lietuvos Respublikos, 2016). However, this policy has not been translated to efficient practice because of Catho-

<sup>5</sup> *Feminism, Society, and Culture* – issued by Gender studies center of Vilnius University in 1999–2002, <http://www.lsc.vu.lt/mokslas/zurnalas-feminizmas-visuomene-ir-kultura>.

<sup>6</sup> *Gender Studies and Research* – issued by Gender studies center of Šiauliai University (currently – Šiauliai Academy of Vilnius University) in 2005-2014, [http://lsc.su.lt/?page\\_id=854](http://lsc.su.lt/?page_id=854).



lic theology values based approach prevailing in the program content (e.g., Narvilienė & Dragūnaitė 2003, Obelenienė 2009) and due to lack of knowledge and lack of political will to continue the implementation among school teachers and politicians. Feminist pedagogies and methodologies have received comparably little attention from academics, NGOs and teaching practitioners in Lithuania. Currently, there is no Gender Studies department or Gender Studies program institutionalized at any university in Lithuania,<sup>7</sup> and Gender Studies topics are fragmentary integrated in other courses and programmes.

### ***Case 1. Novgorod State University, Russia***

The undergraduate course ‘Gender across cultures’ at Novgorod State University is a course running over one semester, for 18 weeks, designed for beginners (Table 1). This course was developed through an online cooperation with Brockport College in the United States (collaborating teacher was Barbara LeSavoy and students from the US also participated) and presented the following topics: introduction to Gender Studies, sexual identity, women’s bodies, women and religion, women and work, family, and gender equality movements. During the first week, students complete a survey on attitudes to feminism, referenced throughout the semester for assessing perceptions of feminism. Another students’ task at the beginning of the semester is to post responses to the headline ‘A Day in Your Life’ on the course blog. This task asks students in cross-country groups to introduce themselves to each other and share details about self, family, living circumstances and fears (LeSavoy, Lukovitskaya, Perlman 2015). Teachers also share information about themselves and their fears, which creates a more trusting atmosphere in the classroom. For example, one of the topics for joint discussion during the course is women’s political participation in the two countries. One of the discussions showed that Russian students had a tendency to not trust women in political leadership and this reflects general attitudes towards women’s political participation in the Russian society (according to the Global Gender Gap Report (WEF, 2021), Russia ranks 133rd out of 156 countries in terms of women’s political participation). For cross-cultural collaboration the Blogger, a weblog publishing tool by Google, was used to strive for an egalitarian platform where students and teachers could introduce themselves and discuss different gender topics according to the course schedule. During the semester there were about 4–5 video conferences where students could ask questions.

Teaching formats used in the course consist of lectures (online and IRL), seminars, advising students on preparing research papers and oral presentation on a gender topic. The oral assignment was to compose and present a Public Service Announcement (PSA), a public interest message disseminated via media with the objective to raise public awareness and change public attitudes and behaviors toward a social issue. Topics for students PSA included work, family, sex work, masculinities, poverty, rape and violence, sexual identity,

<sup>7</sup> An exclusion is MA Program “Gender Studies” (<https://en.ehu.lt/studies/gender-studies/>) at Center for Gender Studies of the European Humanities University, though which is Belarusian university that operates in Lithuania and provides higher education for students from Belarus and the region.

women and religion, reproductive health, Slut Walks, Pussy Riot, Occupy Movements, abortion, equal pay, LGBT Equality, domestic violence, popular culture, body image (LeSavoy, Lukovitskaya, Perlman 2015). Some of the PSA works have been posted on YouTube for public viewing.<sup>8</sup>

As a feminist teacher, the author was taking the individual characteristics of students into account, relying on personal experience, and using cases of gender inequality as examples. Among the students were those silent and afraid to speak out in front of a group. For them independent analytical work on some gender topics was suggested. In one case, a student who did not participate in the class' conversation chose to develop work on gender issues through analyzing men's comments about the anti-violence flash mob "I'm not afraid to say."<sup>9</sup> As it turned out, the research work had a therapeutic effect for the student.

Most important in teaching with feminist pedagogy is to be sensitive to inequality and discrimination in planning and conducting the teaching. Still, the feminist content of the classes is also central: what to talk about, what to write about, what topics to include and how to explain feminist discussion. The methods used during the course included group work and working in pairs, where students had the opportunity to express their opinions to each other. Many students were pleasantly surprised by the democratic forms of interaction and the lack of hierarchy, despite maintenance of hierarchy being common practice at many Russian universities.

## ***Case 2. Södertörn University, Sweden***

The first semester undergraduate Gender Studies course at Södertörn University is a full time course for one semester, 18 weeks. It is divided into four parts focusing on different themes from gender research and feminist theory: introduction to feminist theory, power and history, feminist cultural studies and gender perspectives in political science and society. The number of students in the course varies between 20 and 60 and it runs both in fall and spring. Starting in 2021 the course is given as both a course on campus and online, here the teaching in the campus version is discussed. Teaching consists mainly of lectures, seminars and student led seminars in smaller working groups (3–5 students per group). During the course there are also alternative and mixed teaching formats: study visits, film screenings and public speaking workshops. However, the distinguishing model of teaching for seminars that runs the whole semester is that the students are divided into working groups that study and prepare together every week. In the working groups they discuss the readings, answer questions posed by teachers and prepare presentations and assignments for the teacher-led seminars conducted in bigger groups (15–25 students). The work the students do in small groups is sometimes scheduled in order to encourage them to meet on campus or online before the teacher-led seminars. The methodological

<sup>8</sup> See, e.g., Women and Gender Studies Brockport/Novgorod, WMS 360 Sex Education PSA (<http://youtu.be/QPeUx4HZzCM>) or Transgender Awareness (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GIDjfc8JuZE>)

<sup>9</sup> I'm (Not) Afraid to Say. What are the limits of frankness in posts about sexual violence (<https://iq.hse.ru/en/news/218631197.html>).

idea of student-led seminars and small working groups is to let students learn from each other and together create a community of learning (as suggested by bell hooks) and a responsibility for each other where different experiences meet. The course provides a structure for this learning community and the care for each other implied by it, teaching the students not only the content of the course but how to work together.

Building a teaching and learning community is also encouraged in other ways. During the first teacher-led seminar the topic is a discussion about what a good seminar and discussion climate is. With support from the teacher the students make the rules for their seminars often including the importance of being respectful to others, listening to each other with empathy, preparing and reading, and give response in a way that promotes a climate where it is ok to think differently without creating negative conflict. Challenging and critically questioning must be done with care and respect, but critique should not be silenced. The students also discuss how to make sure everyone's voice is heard in the seminar without pressure or (subtle) discrimination of anyone. The 'seminar rules' are put online for the students to return to during the semester. Feminist democratic methods, as well as emphatic practices of reading and discussing texts are introduced in order to highlight to the students where the methods coloring their education originate. During the teacher-led seminars the 'seminar rules' are also upheld and honoured by the teachers ensuring that all working groups are heard, that perspectives and experiences of students are honoured and that equality is pursued in the classroom.

As a teacher in Gender Studies at Södertörn University (and previously at Stockholm University) one of the authors experienced a big emotional and political engagement in the education from students and teachers. The methods drawn upon in teaching have this engagement as a predisposition, the small working groups functioned as long as all participants were engaged. This caused an unpreparedness for conflicts of interest and interpretation of assignments as well as the content of readings presented, between students and between students and teachers. The aim to have a teaching practice where everyone's voice can be heard did not include those students who did not really get engaged. While the politically engaged teaching milieu created heightened learning where many students were motivated to learn, it also at times was a foundation for conflicts around topics that resulted in a crisis in teaching, when some students felt left out. For example, racialized students and transgender students had experiences of not being included in the 'we' of Gender Studies. While at the same time other (white cis) students found the topics racism and transgender difficult to speak about.

### ***Case 3. Vilnius University, Lithuania***

In Vilnius University, Gender Studies is an elective course for bachelor level students in all faculties and programmes (i.e. languages, medicine, law, sociology, physics, chemistry, IT, etc.) and students from other universities may also apply. Thus, usually 50–100 students take the undergraduate 48 hours Gender Studies course running in spring and fall semesters. The course consists of 32 hours of lectures and 16 hours of seminars as the basic class (on-line, since spring 2020) format during the course. The lectures are based

on presentations of feminist theoretical approaches and findings from empirical studies, statistical data, experts' and laypersons' opinions. During the course the students are introduced to a number of topics: perception of sex/gender,<sup>10</sup> social movements, gender theories, gender and labor, gender based violence, gender and culture, gender equality policy, gender mainstreaming, and other. The topics are explored and discussed in more detail during the seminars. Aiming to encourage the students to share their experiences and knowledge, and learn from each other, the students are invited to express their opinions about a particular topic or issue, they are encouraged to raise their questions and share experience during all class meetings. For example, as the final seminar assignment students were asked to make presentations of gender related topics, which were not discussed in-depth during the course, but were interesting to them. In spring 2022, the topics of student presentations included women in science (and STEM), gender based violence in the family, women in Islam, gender in the porn industry, and gender stereotypes.

The course is led by one or two lecturers; additionally, some experts are invited to present particular topics (e.g., EU level gender equality policy has been presented by a representative of EIGE; gender based violence topic has been presented by a representative of a women's NGO working with the issue).

In the beginning of 2020, the seminar group activities transferred from classrooms to online breakout rooms, and the lecturers lost the ability to follow the student communication in the groups. Therefore, striving to create a safe environment for discussing sensitive topics (e.g., gender identity, gender based violence, etc.), students were introduced to several rules in the beginning of the course. In addition to remaining the conventional academic rules (e.g., avoid plagiarism, respect other opinion, etc.), the rules encouraged students to consider the level of personally accepted disclosure and possibility to say "stop" to interrogations during group discussions. Additionally, the possibility to present personal opinions in an anonymous way and then discuss them with other members of the seminar group was also provided using online technologies (e.g., menti.com, miro.com).

Being a lecturer of Gender Studies in Vilnius University, one of the authors believes that it is her obligation to introduce students not only to the core Gender Studies topics (i.e. theories, social movements, gender in social institutions, etc.), but also draw their attention to gender related topics prevailing in present public discourse. Realization of this approach sometimes is a challenge as it requires to follow media debate continuously and assess critically all emerging opinions and contexts. In addition, gender related topics usually have strong emotional charge and their presentation to students requires thoughtful preparation in terms of emotional control of both the lecturer's and the students'.

Cross-case comparison of our cases with characteristics of feminist pedagogy is presented in Table 2.

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<sup>10</sup> In Lithuanian, one word "*lytis*" is used for naming both sex and gender; sometimes, aiming to be more specific, additional terms such as "biological [*lytis*]" and "social [*lytis*]" are used.

**Table 2. Cross-case comparison of three cases with characteristics of feminist pedagogy.**

	SU	NSU	VU
<i>“themes characteristic of feminist pedagogy” (Manicom 1992)</i>			
<i>teaching should begin from women’s experiences</i>	Raise questions and share experience	First week survey	Questions and experiences in class meetings
<i>sharing experiences is a way of building women’s sense of solidarity and mutual support</i>		Blog sharing	
<i>authority relations in the classroom should be dismantled to equalize power relations</i>	Critique is encouraged	Teachers participation on blog	
<i>Principles of feminist pedagogy (Webb, Walker, Bollis 2004)</i>			
<i>reformation of the relationship between teacher and student</i>	Student led seminars	Sharing experiences in cross-country groups	Student presentations of individual topics
<i>empowerment</i>			
<i>building community</i>	Working groups	Blog responses	
<i>privileging individual voices</i>	Discuss how everyone’s voice can be heard		Anonymous questions through menti.com
<i>respecting diversity of personal experience</i>		Cross-cultural groups	
<i>challenging traditional views</i>	Student make the rules	Lack of hierarchy	
<i>Key aspects or principles as unifying traits, “which run through the application of feminist pedagogies in the sphere of training for gender equality” (Ferguson 2019)</i>			
<i>participatory learning</i>	Working groups	Discussion in groups	Seminar groups
<i>validation of personal experience</i>			
<i>encouragement of social justice, activism and accountability</i>		PSA	
<i>development of critical thinking and open-mindedness</i>			

## Discussion and conclusion

We end by discussing our main conclusions drawing on Table 2 and the descriptions of the cases, and suggest developments for the evolvement of feminist pedagogies in university teaching. In this article we have exemplified how teaching methodologies of Gender Studies in Lithuania, Russia and Sweden are used in Gender Studies first semester courses’ classrooms in order to promote equality and democracy through interpersonal communication. We started out by establishing that studies of interpersonal communication rarely employ

critical perspectives (Baxter & Ashbury 2015, Moore 2017), and by means of previous research about feminist pedagogies describing characteristics of feminist pedagogies that can be used in interpersonal classroom communication. As seen above, the contexts of our material are different on national and educational system levels. Where Sweden is the most ‘Gender Studies friendly’ context having institutionalized the discipline, Russia the least because of policies that caused decline in Gender Studies courses across the country, and Lithuania is found in-between keeping Gender Studies education but without institutionalization. Despite the differences we found similar tendencies of decline in interest and support for Gender Studies in public debate during recent years in all three countries.

The teaching methodologies used in the classrooms shared similarities between the countries as can be seen in Table 2. Firstly, all courses included encouraging students to share their **personal “gendered” experiences** and use their own narratives as points of departure for further discussions. Highlighted experiences privilege students’ voices, and can be a foundation for respecting differences. Without knowledge of those different experiences there is no foundation for respect. Secondly, group work where students lead teaching, combined with **teacher’s reflexivity** about their roles of steering the classrooms were present in all our courses’ teaching methodologies as means of reforming the relationship between teacher and students. Thirdly, the methodologies used in the classrooms also aimed to create a democratic seminar environment by encouraging students to bring their contributions in small groups or working groups employing **interactive methods and collaborations accounting for differences**. One of the aims of such group work was for students to connect with each other, and **build a community**.

However, there were also characteristics of feminist methodologies that did not fully match the classroom interaction. Some of those, like development of critical thinking and open-mindedness, can be developed in the written essays of the courses that we have not discussed here. Others, like validation of personal experience could be included in the student work conducted in small groups, and in advisory work. But as teachers we did not manage to validate experiences of such big groups of students.

Finally, we turn to what our findings could mean for developing the use of feminist pedagogies in teaching in Lithuania, Russia and Sweden. Returning to Table 2, it leaves room for improving and reflecting on teaching methods in the classroom in all countries. Further, we identified some difficulties and sensitive topics in the classrooms of the three cases. In all Gender Studies courses presented here methodological tools to meet sensitive discussions and conflicts could be advanced, be they about family, domestic violence, trans people or racism. Highlighting differences in experiences, views and taboo topics among students and teachers is part of furthering feminist methodologies as mapped above, but can also cause conflicts that need to be dealt with.

However, as was highlighted by Ann Manicom (1992, p. 381) citing Charlotte Bunch (1983, p. 258), “there is no one method for thinking and there is no one way to teach it.” Our main conclusion is therefore that the different approaches, as well as the similar ones all include variations that are unavoidable aspects of interpersonal communication in the Gender Studies classroom.



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