

# Queering Public Pedagogy in New York City

Loren Krywanczyk

*What does it mean to queer pedagogy in a public middle school in Brooklyn in 2008<sup>1</sup>, when queerness itself is such a controversial subject in the United States? This article offers my personal experience as a gender variant<sup>2</sup> and out queer<sup>3</sup> second-year English teacher in order to explore the relationship between teacher identity and pedagogy. This piece offers crucial insights into the obligations and best practices of an effective radical, queer educator.*

1 The United States federal government is rapidly increasing its emphasis upon mandatory standardized tests in determining how to allocate funding to its public education system. The mandates of No Child Left Behind, a policy put in place by current President George W. Bush, dictates that schools whose students do not do well on these increasingly frequent tests will not receive as much funding. The policy exacerbates class- and race-based educational inequalities that already exist in the United States, and perpetuate what could be referred to as a socioeconomic caste system. New York City epitomizes this problem, as it has devastatingly poor public schools (mostly attended by racially minoritized students) located within mere miles of the wealthiest public schools in the nation (mostly attended by white students). Some of the most outspoken critics of the current public education system include Jonathan Kozol, Lisa Delpit, and organizations such as the New York Community of Radical Educators.

I approached my first year of teaching in the fall of 2006 with the attitude that the particulars of my personhood play a crucial role in my students' education. Over the subsequent two years my visible non-normativity has consistently opened discourse among my students about identity, gender, and sexuality. Since the first month of school last year, I have had students ask me questions from are you going to marry a girl? to what made you gay? on an almost daily basis.

It was the third week of this past school year, in September 2007, when the gay issue arose in my sixth grade classroom. In my English classes, I ask students for permission to photocopy their work for peer review. (If students prefer not to share, there are no consequences.) With a student's permission, I distributed a response she'd written to her

2 Gender variance describes any non-normative gender presentation or identity. Someone gender variant could be androgynous, transgender identified, transsexual, butch, femme, or express their gender in any number of ways that are not normative or hegemonic.

3 This essay attempts to dissociate queer from its frequent use as an umbrella term for all LGBT identities, as I argue that queering pedagogy is different from incorporating gay and lesbian content and curricula. Queer is here used to indicate radical or deconstructionist politics that accompany certain non-normative sexualities.

SQS  
01/08

28

QueerScope  
Articles

Loren  
Krywanczyk

independent reading book. Her peers were expected to note positive characteristics of her reading response and offer suggestions for improvement. Guiding questions for the class conversation included: How much of the response does the student spend retelling what happened in the story? Does she ask questions about her book? What inferences does she make to engage with characters in the book?

Several students in the class made the assumption that the main character in the book being discussed which no students except the author of the reader response had read had both a mother and a father. Several students repeated the complaint that the author had described the character's mother, but not the character's father. While I attempted to redirect students to examine the skills being used in the response rather than its content, the author of the response pointed out that the character does not have a dad, really.

My statement "That's a good point" not everyone has a mom and a dad prompted several quizzical looks, and I explained, "Some people live with grandparents, or an uncle, or with one mom, or with two moms, or with two dads."

The moment I said the words two moms and two dads, the class erupted with laughter. I froze for a moment, because I had not anticipated this response. As tends to happen in teaching, the course of the lesson boiled down to one split second.

"I want us to think about why some of us are laughing. Is it because this is different than what we are familiar with?" I asked.

Several students vehemently shook their heads no, while others silently looked down at their shoelaces. Sixth graders have gotten enough Discrimination 101<sup>4</sup> since kindergarten to know that "difference is okay!," so my question prompted a jumbled, somewhat confused response. I overheard one student whispering very softly with a smile on his face. "Well, it's just a little G-A-Y," he spelled out to the boy next to him.

I brought the class back to our conversation on the first day of school, reminding them that it is gay, and that in my classroom it's not the words you use but how you use them that matters. "'Gay' itself isn't a bad word." Many people happily self-identify as gay', I said. It's if you use gay' in a negative way that it becomes negative.

After a second of reflection on this idea, the class exploded in a wave of hands shooting up in the air and voices not waiting to be called on to shout out anecdotes.

---

<sup>4</sup> In United States public schools, beginning in kindergarten students are exposed to lessons about tolerance, and about how racism is bad and yet these lessons almost always further tokenize minoritized identities by limiting them to Black History Month or Gay and Lesbian day without incorporating them as crucial parts of the curriculum that overlap and intersect. Often, students hear the message racism is wrong without understanding the intricacies of what racism is, how it operates, or why we should proactively work against institutionalized racism.

“Yeah! My aunt is a lesbian, and she’s just like everybody else, you shouldn’t discriminate based on race.”

“It’s like on the TV show *The Family Guy*<sup>5</sup>, when there’s that old man who hits on the young boys, he’s gay.”

“There’s this show where they have all these people who look like ladies and you have to tell who’s a woman and who’s really a man. You can’t tell! You really can’t tell!”

“There’s a bisexual boy in my neighborhood. He gets beat up every day.”

“It’s like on *The Simpsons’ Movie*<sup>6</sup>, when Bart is skateboarding around naked and Ralph says I like boys now”

My immediate impulse was to not let a single stone go unturned in what I perceived to be a sequence of huge misconceptions about queerness and gender variance. In my gut, I wanted to comment upon the similarities and differences between race-based discrimination and homophobia; on the distinction between pedophilia and queerness; on the problems with shows like *The Fam-*

---

5 *The Family Guy* is a television show (cartoon) geared for adults and young adults, engaging with very mature and controversial themes such as rape and child abuse in either offensive or humorously edgy ways (depending on your interpretation). The show depends on a heavy dose of sarcasm and irony, which I’ve found my students are rarely equipped to detect and fully understand.

6 *The Simpsons* is not as ambiguous in tone with regards to serious social issues as *The Family Guy*.

*ily Guy* and *The Simpsons* in terms of representation of queers<sup>7</sup>; and on the extreme heartache I feel as a queer person when I hear of fagbashing.

But I paused, realizing very quickly that I should reflect further on my positioning in the conversation before diving in. I needed to figure out when and how I should come out as queer to my students, and I also had to consider my place as a Yale-educated, white, upper-middle class individual for whom LGBTQ issues take on a very particular meaning. I knew I must avoid positioning myself as an all-knowing voice of reason on sexuality and gender, if for no reason but my own intellectual and personal limitations. At the same time, I made note that queerness and gender variance were subjects to incorporate into pre-planned lessons with the class, as students were clearly interested in LGBTQ affairs. It pays, I learned last year, to have a policy of open discourse with students, as that structure can contribute to a more democratic atmosphere with a less problematic teacher-student power dynamic. Dealing with identity- and sexuality-related questions without shutting down discourse is an integral aspect of distinctively the queer pedagogy I have hoped to incorporate into my classroom from my very first day as Ms. K.

---

7 In this example, my student was referring to an episode of *The Family Guy* in which Chris, an adolescent boy, is followed and solicited for sex by an older male neighbor. The show gave my student the impression that the older man was representative of a gay person, rather than a pedophile. This is an example of the show’s decision to cash in on stereotypes in order to get a laugh out of adults, without recognizing that children may not catch its sarcasm.

In seeking out references to guide and support me in queering my classroom, I learned that few existing texts contemplate queer pedagogy. Fewer still analyze what queer pedagogy can look like in public middle schools in the United States. Many organizations and authors<sup>8</sup> are concerned with Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, and Questioning (LGBTQ) issues in public schools but not with queer pedagogy, which uniquely stems from a combination of education theory<sup>9</sup> and queer theory<sup>10</sup>.

The foundations of queer pedagogy link back to William F. Pinar's *Understanding Curriculum as Gender Text* from 1981, which concerned itself with tracing historical connections between homosexuality and pedagogy as well as critiquing the role of masculinity in Marxist theories of education. Possibly the most pivotal work on queering

---

8 Including Jennings 1991 and Harbeck 1994.

9 Education theory includes an array of clashing fields of thought about learning and what education should look like. The three main camps of educational theories are behaviorism, cognitivism, and constructivism. Several theorists with an array of opinions about education include John Dewey, Jean Piaget, and Maria Montessori.

10 The term queer theory is attributed to Teresa De Lauretis, who first used it at a 1990 conference at the University of California. Following the constructivist theories of identity and categorization offered by Michel Foucault (1985), theorists Diana Fuss (1989), Judith Butler (1990), David Halperin (1990) and Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick (1990) soon became proponents in the 1990s. From their works it can be seen that queer theory, grounded in matters of gender and sexuality and often considered a by-product of feminism, focuses on challenging notions of straight ideology. Queer theory resonates strongly with post-structuralist theories, particularly deconstruction, and is constantly evolving in nature.

classrooms, in which the term queer pedagogy was coined, was written by Mary Bryson and Suzanne De Castelle. In their 1993 essay *Queer Pedagogy: Praxis makes im/perfect*, Bryson and Castelle envision a tangible classroom applications of queer theory and critical pedagogy. They conclude that attempts to queer pedagogy are simultaneously crucial and impossible to finish; educators who introduce a queer criticality into our pedagogies can never fully overcome or solve the tensions between essentialist and poststructuralist interpretations of identity (particularly of gender and sexuality). Queering pedagogy is a never-ending process of critical analysis, and there is no static or unifying goal to achieve. Many thinkers agree that queer educators must perpetually self-reflect and adapt, continually shifting our approaches to applying queer pedagogical ideals in the physical spaces of our classrooms.<sup>11</sup>

If there is one message to be gleaned from existing texts on queer pedagogy, it is that queer pedagogy does not stay in one place. What it means to queer any classroom constantly *moves* and reshapes itself along with the context. Conceptualizing what it means to queer pedagogy, as opposed to simply advocate for LGBT rights and experiences, requires a constant and ongoing analysis of quotidian manifestations of queerness and everyday acts of queering that take place in one's classroom. My English classroom resides on the first floor of a 1000-student, under-resourced public middle school in which the visibly gender non-normative

---

11 Other authors who have provided valuable texts concerning queer pedagogy include Shantel Ivits (2006), Marjorie King (2003), Amy E. Winans (2006), and James Sears (2005).

teacher (me) is one of two white individuals in the room, and the only person from an upper- or middle-class socioeconomic background. To envision my role in the queering of such a space, I examine three specific facets of my teaching: my decisions about and execution of academic curricula; my body as a site or channel of various forces and perspectives; and the way in which I establish and foster my classroom environment.

The times when I have most successfully infused queer politics and methodology into my pedagogy, I have incorporated queerness into each of those three facets, and the results have been a reformation or reinterpretation of what it means for my students to learn and get an education. In those moments, I have emphasized students' development as critical and social justice thinkers in a public education system that frequently relegates most students of color, and most students whose first language is not English, and most working class or poor students to regurgitation, obedience, and direction-following.<sup>12</sup> Successful moments of holding onto what I consider to be a radical queerness<sup>13</sup> are frequently accompanied by times when I fail to successfully navigate the tension between

12 Jonathan Kozol's *The Shame of the Nation* and *Letters to a Young Teacher* (2005) are the best texts to refer to for more information about these expectation discrepancies.

13 The specific definition of radical queerness is unclear, though a general sense of the term as entailing anti-assimilation and a refusal to blend in with mainstream, heteronormative society has been hashed out by a variety of thinkers and groups, including the Radical Homosexual Agenda, Michael Warner (2000), and Amnie Nakao (2004).

teaching skills required for student success on increasingly significant standardized tests and teaching the concepts, deconstructionist edginess, and social criticality that a definitively queer lens demands.

Now in my second year and teaching sixth grade English, I continue to analyze moments in my everyday teaching that have illuminated the potential of queer pedagogy. The most obvious example of this is when I read *From the Notebooks of Melanin Sun* (1995), a novel by Jacqueline Woodson that magnificently interweaves issues of race, class, sexuality, and gender, to one of my classes last year. The book describes the process of Melanin Sun, an almost-fourteen-year-old boy, after his mother comes out as queer (her own language of self-identification) and, possibly even more shockingly for a biracial boy immersed in a predominantly Black neighborhood in Brooklyn, as being in love with a white woman. *Melanin Sun* opened up intellectual doors for the class, and students generated a running list of big issues and concepts we came across as I read it aloud to them. Teaching Woodson ensures that any teacher who includes this book in their curriculum would need to make an active effort to avoid tackling controversial topics with her/his students.

This text creates lessons for teachers. My understanding of my students' intellectual capabilities was expanded exponentially through this exercise. For example, the book demands that readers critically think about white people entering a mostly non-white world a phenomenon that manifests in many ways in Brooklyn, but most notably

in the form of gentrification. Any teacher who feels that gentrification poses too much of an intellectual challenge to middle schoolers should hear students who live in Red Hook (a neighborhood in Brooklyn) and witness the effects and manifestations of gentrification on a daily basis share their thoughts and suspicions about the trends they notice. Several of my students brought up examples from their lived experiences to contribute to a conversation and deeper understanding of class and racial conflicts that can erupt in gentrifying areas.

Throughout *Melanin Sun* readers are exposed to LGBTQ experiences that extend beyond teasing and beyond simplistic portrayals of homophobia. Kristin, the partner of Melanin's mother, explains to Melanin that family came to mean a chosen family for her after her birth family disowned her when she came out as queer (again, her self-identification). This example of concept repossession and redefinition is a very salient one, and the experience of disownment by one's family can be a distinguishing aspect of queer or LGBTQ identity.<sup>14</sup> The book demands a close examination of identity-related terminology and critical inquiry into who owns language that pertains to identity. Woodson tosses out daunting terminology to refer

14 Many LGBTQ individuals face daunting rates of homelessness in the United States, and the very high percentage of homeless youth in New York City who are LGBTQ-identified verifies the fact that LGBTQ individuals face a risk of disownment not experienced by other groups at the same rate. In 2007, the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force published a study of LGBTQ youth and determined that the state of affairs involved an epidemic of homelessness among them, which explains the need for queer-specific youth homeless shelters like the Ali Forney Center and Sylvia's Place in New York City alone.

to sexuality: queer, fag, and dyke. The words lesbian, gay, or even homosexual are rarely seen in the book. This characteristic alone makes it emotionally challenging to read for most adults. Some of the issues students brainstormed as we went along were questions: What does queer mean, and why do Melanin's mother and Kristin use it? What does it mean to identify as queer? How can Melanin's mom be a lesbian if she has a kid? Did she choose to be a lesbian? Should she have told Melanin earlier than she did? What does it mean to be a true friend?

I came to realize that my role as an effective teacher involves asking effective questions rather than declaring certain ideas right or wrong regardless of what a student may be saying or thinking, unless their words are immediately threatening to another student. After finishing *Melanin Sun*, students debated the question: When, if ever, should dyke, fag, and queer be used, and by whom? My seventh graders responded with a fascinating array of ideas: Nobody should ever use those words. Only adults should use those words. Only people who identify in those ways should use those words. Anyone can use those words it's a free country but what matters is how they are using them. The questions soon opened up into debates about ownership over language, and who has the right to invoke what terminology. The tentative, general agreement after the first round of debate was that it is somehow different for an LGBTQ-identified person to use those terms than it is for a straight person to use them. Students began to differentiate among the various terms used in the book and realize that though they all refer to similar phenomena,

context, tone, and perspective matter tremendously in the implications of those words.

I noticed one unsettling trend during this conversation: Almost every single student's comments and thoughts consistently implied that tolerance and acceptance must always happen even though someone is queer, or despite the fact that someone is queer. I've rarely heard the subconscious homophobia implicit in those phrasings adequately addressed in conversations about tolerance and acceptance. To invite my students to confront those impulses, I returned to the portion of the text itself when Melanin's mom responds to Melanin's accusatory question "Is it cause she's white [that you love Kristin]?" (Woodson 1995, 115.) His mother explains that it is complicated. While she does not love the whiteness itself and what it stands for, she loves Kristin and Kristin's whiteness is a part of her, so in a certain sense Melanin's mom does love Kristin because she is white. I want to avoid drawing generalizing parallels between issues of racial identity and issues of queer identity, but the text provides a valuable idea here. Perhaps we can love and accept queer people not even though they are queer, but because they are queer.

Queering curricula and lesson content involves more than just inserting LGBTQ themed texts and gay authors into the syllabus in this way. It entails fighting against the frequent institutional relegation of discussions of identity to non-nuanced celebrations of diversity, troublesome tokenization and indiscriminating categorization. Take, for example, the use of the short story *The Other Side* (2001),

another text by Jacqueline Woodson. The basic premise of this picture book is that the main character, Clover, a Black girl, lives in a town racially segregated by a fence white people live on the other side of the fence, and Clover spends her time with her Black friends, including a girl named Sandra. Clover wants to become friends with a white girl named Annie whom she frequently sees near the fence, but the first time Annie asks if she can jump rope with Clover and her friends Sandra says "no" immediately, without asking the other girls. (Clover is unsure of what she would have said had Sandra not responded immediately.) Eventually, over the course of the book, Sandra comes around, Annie is integrated into their social network, and they all hope the fence will be torn down one day. I have frequently seen this book used to teach students about tolerance and held up as an example of why everyone is fundamentally the same despite the color of their skin. Rarely have I seen the complexity of issues of segregation and power adequately addressed.

In one of my classes, while reading *The Other Side*, we were practicing the skill of inference, making judgments about characters and citing evidence from the text to support those judgments. Almost unanimously, students in this class proclaimed that Sandra is racist or Sandra is mean. This instance illuminates the risks involved in the practice of inference-making itself, at least when students are not willing or encouraged to form and *constantly reformulate* ideas about characters. While there is certainly some validity in the discouragement of treating someone differently because of their race, complete race-blindness

is a vestige of privilege that enables certain individuals to conveniently ignore or overlook harsh realities of race-based experiential differences. I tried to challenge my students to think more critically about what, specifically, prompted Sandra to say no to Annie. Ultimately, many students found that distrustful was a preferable word to apply to Sandra, and raised questions about when an individual has a right to be angry or distrustful.

In this sense, queering pedagogy extends beyond identity politics and opens up an entire range of possibilities in a progressive or revolutionary movement. Queer theory was formed as a primarily deconstructivist methodology, developed to account for intersections of the many parts of people's lives including multifaceted identities and the complex ways in which identities are read on a daily basis, depending on aesthetic presentation and context.<sup>15</sup> Queer pedagogical methods consider questions of visibility and readability and provide the opportunity to recognize inequalities across a complex web of identities and life experiences while simultaneously challenging the founda-

---

15 Many of the queer theorists I have already referenced have attempted to navigate between a poststructuralist challenge of categorical boundaries and a social justice-driven recognition of the valence of identities in everyday life. Judith Butler (1990), Gayatri Spivak (1988), and Gayle Rubin (1984) often writing before queer theory emerged as such have worked with both deconstructionism and materialism. They recognize that identities overlap in complex ways, and that while scholars can challenge a notion of essential identity categories (and in this way challenge a notion of difference) they cannot deny differences in lived experiences among individuals with different identities.

tions of categorical distinctions.<sup>16</sup> Queering pushes conversations about characters and identity beyond simplistic observations into an exploration of power dynamics, social issues arising in texts, and character experience.

Appealing to difference in a positive and non-tokenizing manner requires digging deep into issues of gender, race and class, and pushing students beyond easy notions of Black and White or rich and poor and into a realm of complex, ever-shifting power dynamics and intersections of identity. This is something that far too many teachers are fearful of doing. Even I have moments when of worrying that I will be accused of neglecting standard curricula in order to promote a radical or anti-establishment agenda, even if these activities cover state and national academic standards. For me and many other educators, though, supporting students in becoming analytical and critical thinkers is worth the risk.

One thing has become clear to me: Middle school students are not only ready to examine complex and sophisticated issues of identity but are already forced to tackle them on their own, if nowhere but in the hallways of our school. Racial typing and stereotyping, sexual harassment, and queer-bashing can be witnessed right outside my classroom each and every day and this phenomenon is by no

---

16 Queer theory primarily derives from the deconstructivist methodologies of Jacques Derrida and Michel Foucault, as applied by predominantly feminist thinkers of the late 20<sup>th</sup> century.

means specific to under-resourced<sup>17</sup> public schools. I aim to make my class a forum to directly confront and process these realities rather than sweeping them under the rug in a cloud of esoteric educational theory. The devastating ramifications that the shutting down of interactive discourse and critical thought can have on students and certain students in certain public schools, in particular makes me shudder. Students in under-resourced public schools tend to have test prep and drills thrown at them all day, every day, sometimes even for extended days. In a New York City school system that is appallingly segregated and unequal, the distinctions between students who are encouraged to think critically and create knowledge and students who are applauded when they form a straight line in the hallway (and who are functionally prepared to play a very limited role, and nothing more, in a broader capitalist economy) fall consistently along racial and socioeconomic lines.

These genres of resignation and relegation have no place in queer theory. To queer is to venture into controversial, intellectually complicated, nuanced terrain with students, having the faith that middle schoolers in a public school such as mine not only can, but must, learn to grapple

17 Usually, the percentage of students who receive government-subsidized school lunches determines whether a school is classified as under-resourced. Homophobia is not only witnessed at under-resourced schools, however. I was reminded of this fact by a March 2008 interaction at the True Colors conference for LGBTQ youth with a seventh-grade boy who attends a very wealthy public middle school in Connecticut. He discussed his experiences grappling with severe homophobia and transphobia there. This dispels the myth that homophobia and transphobia only exist at poor schools.

with complexity if their education is going to provide opportunities, rather than impose utterly insurmountable limitations.

There are, admittedly, dangers of going there in such a way with students, and with each and every class I have struggled to negotiate between skills that will truly open doors for students and those which will appear on the standardized texts in January.<sup>18</sup> How can I avoid strictly teaching to the test without doing my students a huge disservice? How can I queerly make room for critical thought in my classroom when there is barely enough time to cover what students need to know to succeed on the standardized tests that brand them in the eyes of the state and the nation?

Despite the risks and anxieties that come along with opening the floor for students to speak out and exert agency, I maintain that queering pedagogy in a radical way entails opening, not shutting down, discourse even when it is very challenging or uncomfortable to confront. “Faggot” is the

18 The English standardized test that takes place every January for middle school (6<sup>th</sup>8<sup>th</sup> grade, approximately 11 to 14 year old) students in the United States weigh down on students each year. In New York City, eighth graders are required to apply even to public high schools, and students’ sixth- and seventh-grade test scores are considered tremendously important in this process. In New York City, some public high schools have a graduation rate as low as 10 percent, and therefore even sixth graders’ test scores can end up having an extreme and terrifying impact on their future in academia. Because of the gravity of the test for students, many teachers and administrators focus on test preparation to the point of eliminating art, music, extra curricular activities, and even classes like Science and Social Studies in an effort to raise students’ (and schools’) overall test scores.

derogatory remark of choice in my middle school, and at first I was unsure how to couple such frequent displays of uninhibited and even violent homophobia with students' general curiosity about and genuine respect of my identity and presentation. Instead of discouraging words like "gay" or "faggot" with reprimands of don't say that word!, I try to open dialogue about what these insults and words mean literally, historically, and colloquially just as I would do in studies of other words students stumbled across in texts. I have explained that I call myself a "fag" or a "dyke" often, as do friends of mine who are queer. The word "fag" to me does not mean anything negative in fact, it implies drag and fabulousness. But for a stranger to call me a "dyke" or a "fag" is different, and that tonal difference is where negativity develops.<sup>19</sup>

There are, of course, risks to personalizing discussions of LGBTQ affairs or identity in general. Exuding confidence as a queer, feminist, gender non-normative woman to my students is important to me. However, there are limits to the subversive and radical potential of being an LGBTQ role model to my students in part because I am a white Yale graduate, and if I came to represent gay in my students' eyes it would perpetuate the troublesome stereotype that LGBT people are white, educationally privileged, and

---

19 Historically in the United States, many oppressed identity groups have used word repossession to reclaim previously derogatory terms. Queer is an example of such a term that has in the past been used to deride LGBTQ individuals and is now used by some but not all LGBTQ people and redefined with positive connotations. This process is considered by many to be empowering to former (and current) victims of intolerance and hate.

upper-middle-class.<sup>20</sup> In relatively gay-friendly contexts, the response to homophobic slurs or language is often the assertion that "gay is okay!" However, closer examination of that kind of statement reveals that the kind of gay that is affirmed as okay is often an assimilationist kind the gays who are just like normal people except they happen to be homosexual in orientation.<sup>21</sup> There is little room anywhere in the United States for queerness that isn't pathologized, and even less room in the public education system. A statement like gay is okay unfortunately does not help anyone who is visibly non-normative or politicized in their identity, but makes it even more difficult for us. Prevalent ageism prompts too many teachers to assume that young people do not have the intellectual capacity to break down sexuality in this way when, in fact, many of my middle schoolers deal with repossession and code-switching on a

---

20 White, wealthier, and normatively gendered gays and lesbians have long dominated LGBTQ visibility and dictated LGBTQ activist agendas. During the earliest parts of the gay rights movement, led by individuals like Frank Kammeny and Barbara Gittings in the 1930s and 1940s, only normatively-gendered, white people were allowed in public protests because the gay rights organizations at the time wanted to prove to mainstream America that they were just like normal people. The continued classism and racism in many LGBT circles is best exemplified by current organizations like the Human Rights Campaign, which charges fees for membership (that many poorer people are unable to afford) and focuses almost exclusively on issues like gay marriage that, while socially relevant, are far from the most pressing issues for all LGBTQ individuals in the U.S. Commentary on racism and classism within LGBTQ communities can be read in the writings of Audre Lorde (1982), and in the work of New York City organizations like FIERCE and the Sylvia Rivera Law Project.

21 Michael Warner's book *The Trouble with Normal* (2000) gets to the root of this issue.

daily basis but are not necessarily equipped with the vocabulary to discuss or explain it yet. Conversations about the repossession of previously derogatory terms to infuse them with positive meaning connect directly into lesson plans about word choice and linguistic performance that are more than appropriate for my students.

As per the suggestion of my students, I have instituted a drop box in my classroom, where students have the opportunity to anonymously write down any questions they have whether or not they consider them as related to the curriculum or lesson plan of the day. Every Friday I take ten minutes and go through the drop box. Which questions I respond to depends on the appropriateness of the question, my comfort level, and the respect with which the question was written. For the past month or two that it has existed in my room, the drop box has successfully enabled me to carry on an uninterrupted lesson while simultaneously encouraging students' creativity and curiosity, rather than squashing them.

The drop box is a risk for several reasons. First, any activity that detracts from time spent focused on explicit test preparation, regardless of its general educational value, can quickly come under fire in a public school system with such high stakes for standardized tests scores and with principals who feel a tremendous amount of pressure to improve student performance in the eyes of the city and the state. Second, the drop box opens the door for students to ask incredibly touchy questions though the fact that I reserve the right to choose which questions I will read out

loud and which questions I will answer indicates that the power in this exercise ultimately resides with me.

It is challenging at moments to decide in an instant what constitutes an appropriate response coming from an educator. Drop box questions range from the mundane ("when are we going to get our tests back?") and the random ("what is the difference between an ego and an alter ego?" and "did Michael Jackson bleach himself?") to the unsettling and deeply personal ("do you have boy's privates or girl's privates?"). I have gladly answered a variety of questions about myself: Yes, I have a girlfriend, I came out as queer in high school, my favorite game is basketball, I have never skateboarded, I love being queer, people call me Mr. K often and I don't mind it one bit, I get upset when I'm called faggot in a negative way but sometimes enjoy it when friends call me faggy. However, I avoid questions like "what happened to your tits?"; "how many times have you kissed a girl?"; and "would you get pregnant?"

When a student asked "what does 'faggot' mean?" and the class seemed fascinated to learn about the subject, I made a language study of the word 'faggot' the topic of one class period. As a pre-lesson exercise, I gave students a survey about their experiences with the word 'faggot'. The results of the survey confirmed, for the most part, what I'd already suspected: Most of my students do not associate 'faggot' with homophobia, necessarily, but simply recognize it as the most potent all-purpose insult society-at-large has provided. Curiously, an overwhelming number of my students do not even connect 'faggot' to queerness or

homosexuality at all, but thought it is specifically a way to insult fat people. When I asked “what does the word ‘faggot’ mean when you hear it used?” one student even drew a very clear comparison between the word fag and the word fat. As a linguistic and etymological study, I had the class read an essay on *The History of Faggot*’ found on the website of the Gay, Lesbian, and Straight Education Network (GLSEN).<sup>22</sup> This text provided a jumping-off point to discuss the social significance of a word like faggot as it may or may not differ from literal definitions. When an administrator walked into the classroom while one of my classes was discussing the article and reprimanded a student who was asking a valid question about historical usages of faggot, I unhesitatingly supported my students in their respectful, thoughtful exploration of the way in which language can change over time. The administrator did not challenge my teaching, because the lesson was evidently grounded in the fundamental skills of language comprehension and the administrator himself has hopefully since become an ally.

At meetings with fellow self-identified radical teachers or queer educators, the relationship between teacher identity and pedagogy often arises as subject for debate. What are the obligations of a successful social justice, queer educa-

---

<sup>22</sup> *The History of Faggot*’, found at <http://glsen.org>, delves into the etymology of faggot and the ways the word and its popular usage have changed over time. It traces it from the burning of heretics at the stake (when faggot shifted from meaning a bundle of sticks to meaning the outcast who was killed), to a misogynistic term often referring to women, and then its shift to mean effeminate and become negatively applied to gay-seeming men.

tor? Does she or he try to construct a teacher self devoid of personal identity and personality, or bring herself or himself into the classroom with confidence? What sharing or personalizing is productive rather than detrimental to the momentum of an English class focused on writing and reading skills?

Self-described radical, queer educators I’ve met have mixed responses to these questions, and considerations of queer pedagogy indicate that the answers depend a great deal on specific circumstance and context. Keeping queer pedagogy in sight at all times, an educator like myself must not allow my individual body to become an overly dominant representation of queerness in my students’ eyes. At the same time, I must recognize the ways my positioning as a queer individual fuels my criticality. My queerness, which for me is inseparable from my social justice politics, supports me in pursuing a queer pedagogy that contributes invaluable to my students’ intellectual and analytical growth. Every year and every period of every school day, even - what is effective, ethical, relevant, and queer in my classroom will change. As an educator invested in queering pedagogy, I must be always ready to shift, too.

## References

- Bryson**, Mary and Suzanne de Castell 1993: Queer Pedagogy: Praxis Makes Im/perfect. *Canadian Journal of Education* Vol. 18, 285305.
- Butler**, Judith 1990: *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*. New York: Routledge.
- Casper**, Virginia and Steven B. Schultz 1999: *Gay Parents/ Straight Schools*. New York: Teacher's College Press.
- Delpit**, Lisa 1995: *Other People's Children*. New York: New Press.
- Delpit**, Lisa and Joanne Kilgus Dowdy (eds) 2002: *The Skin that We Speak*. New York: New Press.
- Foucault**, Michel 1985: *The History of Sexuality: Volume 2*. London: Routledge Press.
- Fuss**, Diana 1989: *Essentially Speaking: Feminism, Nature, and Difference*. New York: Routledge.
- Gay, Lesbian, Straight Education Network. *The History of Faggot*. [Http://www.glsen.org/cgi-bin/iowa/educator/library/record/846.html](http://www.glsen.org/cgi-bin/iowa/educator/library/record/846.html) [24.2.2008].
- Halperin**, David 1990: *One Hundred Years of Homosexuality*. New York: Routledge Press.
- Halperin**, David 2003: The Normalizing of Queer Theory. *Journal of Homosexuality* Vol. 45, 339343.
- Harbeck**, Karen M. 1991: Coming Out of the Classroom Closet: Gay and Lesbian Students, Teachers, and Curricula. *Journal of Homosexuality* Vol 22, Pages 9 - 28.
- Ivits**, Shantel 2006: If Judith Butler Taught Grade School University of British Columbia. [Http://72.14.205.104/search?q=cache:MjOyz0OhC44J:www.shantel.ca/Skills/If%2520Judith%2520Butler%2520Taught%2520Grade%2520School.pdf+shantel+ivits+%22if+judith+butler%22&hl=en&ct=clnk&cd=2&gl=us&client=firefox-a](http://72.14.205.104/search?q=cache:MjOyz0OhC44J:www.shantel.ca/Skills/If%2520Judith%2520Butler%2520Taught%2520Grade%2520School.pdf+shantel+ivits+%22if+judith+butler%22&hl=en&ct=clnk&cd=2&gl=us&client=firefox-a) [24.2.2008].
- Jennings**, Kevin 1994: *One Teacher in Ten*. Boston: Alyson Publications.
- King**, Marjorie 2003: Queering the Schools. *City Journal*. [Http://www.city-journal.org/html/13\\_2\\_queering\\_the\\_schools.html](http://www.city-journal.org/html/13_2_queering_the_schools.html) [24.2.2008].
- Kozol**, Jonathan 2005: *The Shame of the Nation*. New York: Random House.
- Lorde**, Audre 1984: *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches*. Trumansburg, NY: Crossing Press.
- Lorde**, Audre 1982: *Zami: A New Spelling of My Name*. Pittsburgh, PA: Persephone Press.
- Nakao**, Amnie 2004: Rejecting Normal' in Favor of a Distinct Gay Identity. *San Francisco Chronicle* September 19, F4.

National Gay and Lesbian Task Force 2007: *New Report Reveals Epidemic of Homelessness among Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender Youth*. [Http://www.thetaskforce.org/press/releases/prHY\\_013007](http://www.thetaskforce.org/press/releases/prHY_013007) [24.2.2008].

**Rubin**, Gayle 1984: *Thinking Sex: Notes for a Radical Theory of the Politics of Sexuality*. In C. Vance (ed.): *Pleasure and Danger*. London: Routledge, 267319.

**Sears**, James T. (ed.) 2005: *Gay, Lesbian, and Transgender Issues in Education*. Philadelphia: Haworth Press.

**Sedgwick**, Eve Kosofsky 1990: *Epistemology of the Closet*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

**Spivak**, Gayatri 1988: Can the Subaltern Speak? In C. Nelson & L. Grossberg (eds): *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 271313.

**Warner**, Michael 2000: *The Trouble with Normal*. Boston: Harvard University Press.

**Winans**, Amy E. 2006: *Queering Pedagogy in the English Classroom: Engaging with the Places Where Thinking Stops*. Durham: Duke University Press.

**Wittig**, Monique 1969: *Les Guerilleres*. Paris: Minuit Press.

**Wittig**, Monique 1992: *The Straight Mind and Other Essays*. Boston: Beacon Press.

**Woodson**, Jacqueline 1995: *From the Notebooks of Melanin Sun*. New York: Penguin Books.

**Woodson**, Jacqueline 2001: *The Other Side*. New York: Penguin Books.

SQS  
01/08

41

QueerScope  
Articles

Loren  
Krywanczyk