

“Watch What You Teach”: A First-Year Teacher Refuses to Play It Safe

A high school teacher and college teacher collaborate to describe successful approaches to teaching not just antihomophobia but also queer theory.

On one of artist Barbara Kruger's photographs are written the words, “Your comfort is my silence” (http://www.studio-international.co.uk/studio-images/face_to_face/kruger_b.asp). In an effort to ensure that students feel “safe” and “comfortable” in the classrooms, we English teachers often avoid controversial topics, particularly issues of race, gender, class, and sexuality. The insidious hidden curriculum or the unintended consequences of what we choose to say or not say—teach or not teach—can have as much or more impact on students than the explicit curriculum (Apple). A component of this hidden curriculum is the failure of teachers to address queer issues in courses and in the school environment. Since no teaching is neutral, creating classrooms free from controversial topics does not situate the teacher as impartial or objective. Nor does it ensure that *all* students feel comfortable. As Kruger suggests, the “safer” our classroom spaces, the more we silence students for whom school seems foreign, hostile, or irrelevant.

As a former high school English teacher, I (Laraine) have witnessed countless acts of silencing. Besides glaring omissions in school curriculum, students freely label behavior “gay” or, in an attempt to emasculate, call a boy a “fag,” without any intervention from the teacher. And worse, teachers themselves convey heterosexist attitudes by teasing students about their “love interests” or laughing at “feminine” behavior in their male students and “masculine” behavior in female students. Therefore, as a professor of preservice teachers, I feel it is my responsibility to facilitate future English teachers’ understanding of our role in the classroom: that re-

maintaining “neutral”—or silent—in the face of discrimination always condones the behavior of the oppressor.

I created a course entitled Gender and Sexuality in Education for preservice teachers to see how issues of gender inequality go hand-in-hand with heterosexism and limit students’ potential. The course was rewarding: I watched one future teacher go from making homophobic statements in his journal to choosing to investigate the representations of queer youth in young adult literature; and another student who is transitioning (changing from male to female) shared his story and openly discussed the challenges he faces when he begins a teaching career. In this article we focus on what is possible when we offer preservice and inservice teachers courses based on critical pedagogy, and on the difference such courses can make in their classrooms. The example we use is Nicole’s experience as a first-year teacher.

Principle and Paycheck

As a first-year English and writing teacher in a high-profile school district in New York, I (Nicole) was cautioned by colleagues to “watch what [I] teach.” While keeping my job was—and is—important, I vowed that principle would always come before paycheck. I believe that one purpose of educating children is to help them to learn to question the status quo and become active participants in society rather than passive subjects. My curriculum this year reflected my belief that adolescents are fully capable and willing to engage in controversial conversations in which they expand their minds

and challenge hegemonic social norming. Throughout the year, I taught relevant and considerably controversial topics that provided students with varying perspectives of the world. Among those topics covered were feminism, racism, heterosexism, homophobia, and transphobia. To explore these topics in more depth, we studied a number of theories, including queer theory. During the time that we studied queer theory, the students impressed me with their maturity level, respect of each other, and desire to learn.

Looking back at my first full year as a high school English teacher, there are many things that I could have done differently. I might have chosen different books or tweaked some writing assignments, but one decision that I stand by 100% was my choice to teach queer theory.

Queer Pedagogy vs. Antihomophobia Education

In my (Laraine) graduate courses I teach queer pedagogy, which goes beyond antihomophobia education. Antihomophobia education, rooted in advocating acceptance, assimilation, and tolerance, does not require investigating the construction, production, and maintenance of what is considered normative, nor does it challenge the status quo. Tolerance carries within it “an antagonism toward [difference], as well as the capacity for normalization” (Brown 26). Queer theory suggests removing the focus of study from people who identify as gay to how labels, such as homosexual/heterosexual, man/woman, black/white, etc., are used to police behavior and affect all people. It provides a critical lens with which to disrupt traditional power hierarchies and imagine alternate ways of being in the world. Once students understand that many aspects of their lives are socially constructed, they can begin to problematize taken-for-granted assumptions about race, class, gender, and sexuality, as well as other linguistic constructs designed to maintain the current power structure.

All too often people assume that everyone falls into the dominant society’s acceptable norm. If someone does not fit into the majority, we expect them to tell us; otherwise, we do not hold ourselves accountable for the inappropriate and excluding comments that we sometimes make. As an educator

working with adolescents, I (Nicole) am particularly conscious not to assume that all students identify as heterosexual. For example, when I make connections about relationships, I tend to use the words *partner* or *romantic interest*. I also make an effort to call on girls and boys evenly in the classroom so as not to give one group an apparent advantage over the other.

In addition, I choose to infuse queer issues into my curriculum throughout the year. Below is a snapshot of one unit I taught in my senior classes on subjectivity, during which I decided to teach queer theory. As it is presented in the text *The Theory Toolbox: Critical Concepts for the New Humanities* (Nealon and Giroux), subjectivity refers to how individuals and groups are defined by their relative positions to one another (36–37). Thus, we determine a hierarchy in our culture based on subjective categories, e.g., race, class, ethnicity, gender, and sexuality. Throughout the unit, students are able to see that what we consider to be normal is a relative perception and that these norms change based on the historical and regional context in which they exist.

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Uncovering Hidden Assumptions

As educators, we believe it is always important to uncover and assess students’ knowledge, preconceived notions, and personal biases about a topic before beginning to teach that topic. Every student comes to school with a backpack full of books, emotions, and opinions. It is our responsibility as educators to help students unpack their backpacks; organize the contents within them; and then decide what texts, feelings, and thoughts are important to carry with them inside and outside of school. Once their preexisting notions are out in the open and noted, it is easier to gauge at the end of the unit whether or not students’ perceptions have changed or their understandings have grown more nuanced.

In the preassessment writing activity, I (Nicole) arranged the desks in my classroom in a circle to emphasize the idea that the classroom is a community of interconnected people rather than a hierarchy of teacher over students. Once we were

all seated in a circle, I read the following three statements:

- We value diversity in America.
- We value sexual diversity in America.
- We provide options for sexual diversity in America.

I gave students five minutes to freewrite after each statement.

At the end of this writing activity, I opened the floor for dialogue. I read the first statement again—*We value diversity in America*—and asked: *Do you agree or disagree? Why?* Student responses ranged

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from “I agree because we allow people of all different races into our country” to “I agree because colleges constantly talk about a diverse atmosphere and thrive on how many international students there are.” However, many students shared the opinion that we Americans say we value diversity but do not practice tolerance. They noted that if people were to look around a cafeteria in a school in one of many towns on Long

Island (where the district I was teaching in was located), they would see that many groups self-segregate.

In response to the second statement—*We value sexual diversity in America*—students referred to the fact that gay marriage is not legal in most areas in the United States. Other student responses that I recorded were, “I do not agree because as a nation, homosexuals are not allowed to get married”; “I agree and disagree because many people including myself do, but others don’t accept sexual differences. Gays are constantly on the receiving end of jokes in the media and many people make negative comments towards them”; and “I do not agree because if America valued sexual orientation, gays and lesbians would be able to have the same benefits married straight couples do.” Most referred to US laws to see whether we are an accepting society, while a few students noticed that those who iden-

tify as homosexual in our media are caricatures or comedians. This gave rise to a discussion about characters who identify as gay from television, movies, and literature and how there are few realistic representations, if at all. It occurred to us as a class that perhaps the problem in our society is not that we do not have sexual diversity, but that we do not choose to recognize it as a viable option because it is not considered normal.

This led into our discussion about the third statement—*We provide options for sexual diversity in America*. Most students’ responses were similar to the second prompt, but many recognized the way that language polices our behaviors through the use of the word *gay* or *fag*. They noted that high school students often say “That’s so gay!” meaning “That’s so stupid!” After discussing how language can be a tool of oppression, they recognized that there is nothing “stupid” or “boring” about identifying as gay. It is difficult for high school students to stand up to their peers, but after they participated in this preassessment activity, I was proud to see some of my 17-year-old students having the courage and conviction to stand up for themselves and each other by monitoring and challenging their peers in the hallways who spoke those derogatory phrases.

Fear and Silence

In the next activity, I wanted students to recognize the way in which labeling sexual behavior can lead to oppression through the use of fear and violence. I designed this activity to show students that sexuality should not be linked to levels of academic or professional performance. They were able to see that their sexualities do not reflect their performance as students, just as professionals’ sexualities do not reflect how they perform in their jobs.

To start, I asked each student to write down two things that they do not want their teachers to know about them. I told students that they would not have to share with me, but I wanted them at least to think about what those two pieces of information were and why. After five minutes, I asked if there were any students who felt comfortable sharing. One response was, “I don’t want my teachers to know that I have major image problems, and I am very self-conscious because I don’t want my teach-

ers to think less of me.” Another student revealed that she had anxiety issues, and she did not want her teachers to know because she did not want them to “treat [her] any differently.” After hearing from most of my class, I asked students to hypothesize the purpose for this assignment. While one student joked I was digging for gossip, another suggested the secrets were private and completely unrelated to academic performance. Students were then able to realize that just as they were trying to keep their personal lives separate from their academic lives, many professionals who identify as gay try to keep their lives private in fear that an employer might hold that information against them, even though one’s sexuality does not have any bearing on one’s professional performance.

I then asked students to write down the professions that they aspire to. Student answers ranged from doctors, lawyers, teachers, to actors, accountants, and entrepreneurs. I followed up with this query: *Is your sexual orientation something that you will keep a secret in this profession?* Most students answered that they probably would not, but that if they were gay they might not publicize it. One boy responded that since he wanted to be a doctor, he would not want his patients to know if he were gay because they might think that he would molest a little boy, unfair as that sounds. Students concluded that usually the name or gender of a person’s sexual partner is perfectly acceptable to share, unless the person revealing the information is queer, and then the information becomes a secret.

A student noted that while we label a woman kissing a woman a lesbian, we are not sure what to label a woman kissing a man who is dressed as a woman. To complicate their understanding of labeling a person “gay” or “straight,” I used this opportunity to ask why we label sexuality but not other parts of our lives. The final consensus in all three of my classes was that labels are a double-edged sword. Labels can be negative societal constructs used to marginalize. There is violence in naming, because once people are labeled gay/straight, black/white, or male/female, they can be controlled and limited. On the other hand, labels can be useful to give otherwise invisible groups, such as lesbians in the early gay movement, recognition and identification.

Heteronormativity

For students to understand heteronormativity, I handed out a questionnaire I received at a Kappa Delta Pi workshop called the “Heterosexuality Questionnaire” (Rochlin; see fig. 1). I invited students to fill out the survey without talking to a partner or asking me any questions. I heard giggles and saw puzzled looks on their faces.

Once finished, I asked, “Which question was the most difficult for you to answer?” A majority of the students said that it was “Given the problems that heterosexuals face, would you want your children to be heterosexual?” They said that this question was hard to answer because life is probably difficult for many types of people, so being homosexual would not fix that problem. I then asked them which question they

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FIGURE 1. Heterosexuality Questionnaire

1. What do you think caused your heterosexuality?
2. When did you first decide you were heterosexual?
3. Is it possible you are heterosexual because you fear the same sex?
4. Is it possible heterosexuality is a phase you will grow out of?
5. If you have never slept with someone of the same sex, how do you know you wouldn’t prefer that? Is it possible you just need a good gay experience?
6. To whom have you disclosed your heterosexuality? How did they react?
7. Why are heterosexuals so blatant? Why do they have to flaunt their sexuality?
8. Most child molesters are heterosexual men. Do you consider it safe to expose your children to them?
9. How can you have a truly satisfying relationship with someone of the opposite sex?
10. Given the problems that heterosexuals face, would you want your children to be heterosexual? Would you consider reparative therapy?

(Adapted from <http://www.pinkpractice.co.uk/quaire.htm>)

thought was the most ridiculous. Students thought that “Is it possible you are heterosexual because you fear the same sex?” and “Is it possible heterosexuality is a phase you will grow out of?” were the most ridiculous, because they saw the answers to both questions to be simply “No.” After discussing the supposed silliness of some of these questions, at least two students in each of my three classes had “aha” moments. One yelled, “Oh, I get it! These are the types of questions that homosexual people get asked all the time, and this questionnaire is to show straight people how ridiculous and inappropriate their questions are.” Once this connection was made, students were able to see from other perspectives. The last question I asked students was, “What did this questionnaire automatically assume?” A few students in each class knew right away—“It assumed that everyone in the class was straight!” That was exactly the point I was trying to communicate. Now I could introduce them to the term *heteronormativity*, that is, the assumption that everyone identifies as straight unless specified otherwise.

Performativity

According to queer theorist Judith Butler, sex, gender, and sexuality are all culturally constructed through repetitive and stylized bodily acts. She challenges the idea that our gender and sexuality are natural manifestations of an essential self; rather, the social worlds and regulatory discourses that we are born into are so powerful that we enact that reality as if it were normal. Through language, gesture, and other sign systems, we “perform” our sex, gender, and sexuality continually, creating the appearance of a feminine or masculine, gay or straight identity. And it is the repetition of these performative acts—the way we hold ourselves, talk, dress, etc.—that makes and maintains a hegemonic heteronormativity (179).

To trouble, or complicate, gender and sexuality for the students, I asked the class to list all of the actions that they take that determine their genders. Female students responded that wearing makeup, folding their legs, staying quiet, and wearing their hair long are all performative acts of gender. Similarly, the males noticed that they all

sat the same way in class, with their legs wide open, and kept their hair short as ways of establishing their masculinity. Then I asked students to list all of the actions that determined their sexuality. Students had a harder time with this, but responses included going to the movies with girlfriends and kissing their girlfriends/boyfriends. Once students had listed all of the ways they perform their gender and sexuality, I followed up with these questions: *If gender and sexuality were so normal and “natural,” why would you need and use words such as gay, fag, dyke, and homo to police behavior? Why do you work so hard at continuously performing your gender and sexuality? Why do you become uneasy when you see people who do not fit into “neat boxes”? Why do you label identities based on actions taken?*

Why Play It “Safe”?

I think of my first year teaching high school as successful because I taught students to read the word and the world (Freire and Macedo) from multiple perspectives and to understand the complexities of gender and sexual orientation. I refused to play it “safe” by remaining silent about issues of sexuality. At the end of the year, my English language arts director noted that even though I had taught queer theory in my classroom, he did not receive a single parental complaint about me. He complimented my open approach to this topic and reported that he had heard my students share our classroom discussions in other classes.

Sometimes high school students are not given enough credit; we underestimate their maturity levels. Therefore, teachers often shy away from teaching seemingly controversial topics. At the end of the year my students thanked me for treating them like adults. I received notes from about 70% of the students telling me that they are going to approach college with the same openness that they learned in my classroom.

And while the director did not receive any parental phone calls, I did. The parents called not to complain but to support my approach to teaching queer theory because I was able to get their teenagers to think outside of the proverbial box. Their children actually were bringing classroom discussions to the dinner table. Teachers who fear reper-

cussions for teaching an LGBT curriculum may assume their students' parents to be closed-minded. While this may be true of some parents, we could also assume that other parents (and administrators) can be our allies and support us.

Students look to their teachers as models for how to be in the world. The first step is to show them that we accept and embrace all genders and sexualities, but to stop there does nothing to challenge the status quo—we must also recognize and confront all artificial constructs that dehumanize. We both have seen what is possible when students begin questioning the status quo and become agents of change. While some of Nicole's high school students recognized the changes in themselves as the most important change that occurred from this unit, others sought to make contributions that might change stereotypical views of the world. These students became more engaged in school activities that addressed queer issues; they joined the Diversity Club and the Gay Straight Alliance Club, both of which raise awareness in our school and town about LGBT issues. On Diversity Day, they wore rainbow pins to signify their acceptance of all genders and sexual orientations. When given the option to choose their own topics for their papers in

our argument and analysis writing units, at least three students in each of Nicole's classes chose to write about a topic from the queer theory unit. While some think us bold for teaching these topics without tenure, we argue that it is completely appropriate to infuse queer theory into our curricula. As Kruger reminds us, playing it "safe" is the same as condoning heterosexism and discrimination. 

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READWRITETHINK CONNECTION

Traci Gardner, RWT

Follow up students' discussion of how we value diversity in America with "Varying Views of America." As students compare Walt Whitman's "I Hear America Singing," Langston Hughes's "I, Too, Sing America," and Maya Angelou's "On the Pulse of the Morning," ask them to consider how diversity, sexual diversity, and in particular the poets' sexual identities are (or are not) reflected in the poems. http://www.readwritethink.org/lessons/lesson_view.asp?id=194