

A CALL FOR QUEERING ADULT CLASSROOMS

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Every time I stand in front of a classroom as an adult educator or sit in a classroom as a learner, I ask myself, “Is today one of those days?” Is today a day where I go along with the oppressive weight of heterosexist assumptions, or is it a day where I have the energy to remove some of that weight and bare parts of my soul by disclosing part of my identity? As a lesbian growing up and attending college in the South, many of my interactions were filled with decision points on how to best navigate heteronormative spaces. This reflection serves as a way to examine my journey, explore my memories, and further understand my own educational experiences. This article emphasizes moments from my past that have left an indelible imprint on my mind, but it also aims to share a vision for how we can create more inclusive campuses and classrooms.

NAVIGATING HETERNORMATIVE SPACES

My younger sister and I would ride the 45 minutes with my mother after school to sit in the back of the classroom while she attended night classes. We usually behaved and kept quiet while doing homework, but during the times I should’ve been memorizing my multiplication tables, I found myself fascinated by the classroom conversations. I remember rushing to complete my homework so that I could listen intently to the college lecture and pretend to take notes by scribbling on the back of my worksheets. I had an eagerness to learn and couldn’t wait for the day I was old enough to attend college. When asked what I wanted to be when I grew up I would proudly declare, “I am going to be a college student.” I didn’t understand much about the college experience at the time or that the goal was to get a job after college, but I knew I wanted to sit in a college classroom for real one day.

Ten years later, I was ready to take that step and decided on a college about two hours away from home. My motivations for attending college had changed by that time, and I was mostly looking forward to moving away to a bigger city and the freedom that came along with it. As I had started to explore my sexual identity a few years earlier, I began feeling less connected to the classrooms that once fueled my thirst for learning. My relationships with friends and family had been strained for quite some time after I came out as gay, so I was eager to start a new chapter.

After moving away from home and living off-campus, I was yearning for a connection to my classmates. Despite my efforts to fill the growing internal void and feelings of isolation, I quickly realized that my college campus might not provide that outlet. After having received my first group project, the group decided to meet at a local fast food restaurant, probably because it was one of the few places we could afford to eat. At the time, laptops and wireless internet connections were not yet commonplace, so we were armed with spiral notebooks and mechanical pencils. Eventually, the discussion drifted away from school to our social lives and dating. One student had recently been married, and her husband was stationed at the military base nearby. Another student was single and hoping to meet someone at the fraternity party she was invited to over the weekend. The third girl couldn’t stop talking about her boyfriend and when he might propose. When I was asked if I had a boyfriend, I said nothing. My heart beat so hard at that moment I could feel it in my throat. I fidgeted under the table and hoped no one would pick up on my avoidance while I tried to change the topic to something more

comfortable. What I didn't tell the other students was that I lived with my girlfriend. I had no plans to get married because marriage was a privilege reserved for only heterosexual couples at the time. I also began to think about how I was going to continue the façade that I had portrayed by intentionally omitting details of my sexuality. I would not be able to use the pronoun "we" when asked what I did over the weekend. I would not be able to have this new group of friends over to my house without hiding the pictures in my living room. I would not be able to get too close to anyone in the group because of the exhausting effort it takes to avoid conversations that may disclose details of my personal life. Being from a small town in rural North Carolina, I learned to let people assume I was straight. My hopes of moving away to college and being able to remove the weight of those assumptions had been shattered. The realization I made that day was that my identity as a lesbian would continue to be separate from my life as a student. I spent the remainder of the semester thinking of creative ways to avoid conversations that could turn to my personal life so that I could protect details that might hint at my sexuality. This continued to leave me with feelings of isolation and disconnection from peers in classroom settings.

A few semesters later, I enrolled in a sociology course that covered human development and stages across the lifespan. On the first day of class, I sat in the front row eager to learn. I was hoping in the back of my mind that this class would be different than previous experiences. My thoughts wandered to the idea that I would finally feel validated and not invisible in a room full of my peers. Naturally, we started with discussing early life stages, but I craved the day we would get to topics that might help me feel normal and maybe even re-connected to the classroom. I sat through weeks of lectures and slowly started to lose hope. After we covered adolescence and early adulthood, I started to select seats closer to the back of the classroom so that it was easier to retreat into internal isolation. I felt like a stranger to the idea of typical human development because I didn't see my identity reflected in the lecture anywhere. Heterosexuality was the assumption in every lesson, in every assignment, and every image presented in the PowerPoint slide deck. Midway through the semester, after returning from fall break, I once again had a glimmer of hope when we began talking about relationships. My roller coaster of emotions quickly plummeted during the one class session that mentioned same-sex relationships. The lecture started by covering terms and definitions related to sexuality and quickly turned to how homosexuality had been classified as abnormal, pathological, deviant, or as a mental disorder throughout history. The instructor wrapped up the lesson by sharing that in 1973 the American Psychological Association had issued a resolution that homosexuality was no longer considered a mental illness or sickness. He made it sound like being stamped as mentally fit was a final triumphant moment, and it minimized the experiences of an entire population of people. The emphasis on the history of intolerance in class coupled with the homophobic comments and snickers echoing in surround-sound from neighboring desks left me on the verge of tears and my hopes of having a different classroom experience shattered. As I continued my journey as a gay undergraduate student in the South, I battled the constant internal dialogue and the fatigue caused by navigating spaces where the assumption is heterosexuality. Many of the moments that stand out for me are associated with feelings of invisibility and isolation from my peers, teachers, and even family and friends. Educational materials were sometimes hard to connect with because I was unable to see myself represented in the heteronormative conversations, relationships, authors, language, assumptions, images, and curriculum throughout my years as a student.

A VISION FROM MY CURRENT SELF

My experiences as an undergraduate student more than 20 years ago would be different if I were sitting in those same classrooms today. There has been progress made in understanding the experiences of marginalized populations including, but not limited to, the LGBTQ+ community. That said, my biographic present can't be discussed without reference to some of the historical events that are embodied in the past of the queer community and that impact my current experiences and are a part of my understanding of the world around me. I was not alive during the Stonewall riots or the beginning of the AIDS epidemic, but I stand on the shoulders of those who fought during those times. I remember distinctly the shooting at Pulse nightclub in Orlando, Florida, in 2016 that resulted in the death of 49 people, injuring dozens of others, and traumatizing a community for decades to come. I remember the controversial law passed in my home state of North Carolina that prevented transgender individuals from using the bathroom that matches the gender with which they identify. My current experiences and responses to the world around me are related to the messages these events send to people who do not fit into majority categories related to sexual orientation or gender identity.

In addition to heterosexist messages, LGBTQ+ students also face victimization and bullying on campuses ranging from microaggressions to harassment and violence. There is evidence of higher rates of depression and suicidal ideation among LGBTQ+ college students when compared to their heterosexual and cisgender peers (Woodford et al., 2018). My experiences of constant heteronormative messages throughout my post-secondary educational journey, as well as current research on the needs of LGBTQ+ students, support the need for different approaches in the classroom. The core of college students' experience is the curriculum, so we must bring LGBTQ-sensitive pedagogy into the classroom (Renn, 2017). By making these issues visible, students have the opportunity to explore topics related to identity, which can expand thinking around the experiences of other marginalized populations. Paiz and Zhu (2018) add that queering teaching involves designing a course "so that students engage with and interrogate identities, not just sexual ones, in a critical manner and come to understand how social discourses structure and police those identity options" (p. 566). This vision for inclusive classrooms will require additional support for faculty development focused on facilitating difficult or uncomfortable conversations and improving classroom climate for LGBTQ+ and other minority students (Renn, 2017). Some of these conversations have been included in the social sciences, but faculty and higher education leaders in all areas should strive for emphasizing diverse topics in the curriculum.

In addition to exploring topics related to identities, educators must work to break down binary views of gender in learning spaces. Gender nonconforming students are limited in how they can connect to classrooms when educators refer to students as "ladies" and "gentleman" or other gendered terms. Imagine sitting in a classroom as a female and the instructor consistently referring to you as "sir." Not only would it be inappropriate, but rather distracting from learning. Students should be provided the opportunity to share their names and the pronouns they would like others in the class to use. One way of doing this is to begin the first few class sessions with name tents that include names and pronouns. This would allow students to write their pronouns without being put on the spot to announce them to the entire class if they are not prepared to do so. In online courses, students should be encouraged to include pronouns in their student profiles on the learning platform. There are many ways to approach breaking down binary references to gender in classrooms, but each of them requires intention by the teachers setting the tone for acceptable classroom interactions.

Educators should also be mindful of the messages embedded in selected texts, images, and materials such as problem sets or case scenarios. Not only is it important to include course materials that reference queer perspectives, but an emphasis should be placed on interrogating the lens through which students are reading texts. For texts not written from a queer perspective, students should be encouraged and supported to examine texts from stances of otherness and difference (Shlasko, 2006). Some of the most profound conversations I have experienced in classrooms have been sparked by questions that encourage students to step away from dominant perspectives. A professor asking, “What does this look like from a same-sex family’s perspective?” in an education class could be what allows a student feeling connected to the content. These concepts should also be considered when writing problem sets for a math class or adding images to slide decks. The assumptions in our classroom should not always be the dominant perspective if we are to provide a space for inclusiveness.

MY PRESENT BECOMES MY PAST

My vision for the future will continue to grow and change as my present eventually becomes part of my past. As an adult learner working a full-time job and raising a family with my partner while attending graduate school, I bring into the classroom an accumulation of my experiences. According to William Pinar (2010), “when we listen to the past we become attuned to the future” (p. 178). My reflections as a student struggling to find a voice in the classroom or amongst school peers were just a few examples that helped me become attuned to the need for a different approach towards inclusiveness in the classroom. We each may have parts of our identity that have been in some way excluded, so my vision for inclusion emphasizes the need for breaking down binary ways of thinking that continue to marginalize groups. Oppressive hierarchies are carried over into classrooms, and my hope is that as educators we can continue to support alternative ways of thinking that question these norms.

I am in no way claiming that my experiences are representative of everyone in the LGBTQ+ community. What these experiences are representative of is my way of knowing and how I have arrived at my understanding of my current self. Baszile (2015) described this through her explanation of critical race/feminist *currere* as “a desire to both understand and free oneself from the confines of oppressive ways of knowing and being” (p. 120). What this means for me and my current work in LGBTQ+ issues in adult education is to continue my research focused on understanding the classroom experiences of other LGBTQ+ learners. I was not able to find a place for my voice in the classroom for many years, but through this journey, I’ve committed myself to sharing my voice and serving as shoulders upon which others may stand. And so, I revisit my opening question, “Is today one of those days?” Yes, today is absolutely one of those days where I remove the weight of heterosexist assumptions, and I call out to fellow educators to revisit our classrooms with intention and attention.

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