

Queer and Nondemagogic Pedagogy in the Classroom

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I've given much thought to how to use the work on queer pedagogy in the classroom. Thinking on the larger possibilities of queerness points me back to the very recent work of Jonathan Alexander and David Wallace who, in reviewing the last fifteen years of work on queer pedagogy, remark that "We do not mean to suggest that queerness is the only phenomenon with the potential for transformative power...but that [it] remains an under-explored and under-utilized modality in composition studies." For all the work done on queer (or queer-ing) pedagogical practices, very little has been done to consider practice/praxis for it. Audre Lorde asked us, "What are the words you do not yet have?" and that question resonates in this moment, seeking new valences for queer thought, and particularly how it can infuse our work as educators. Much of the new vocabularies around queerness and pedagogy emanated from the pioneering work of queer theorists in the 1990s, such as the late Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, who considered the many valences of queer pedagogy in "The Pedagogy of Buddhism," fusing ideas of transindividual thought with the politics of dogma. Amy Winans has recently told us that "a queer pedagogy draws attention to the parameters of questioning, thus highlighting the process of normalization as it draws attention to the places where thinking stops." My experiences in the composition classroom, in which ideas flowed without any conscious efforts toward control, hegemony, or interpellation, reflect both of these influences. I'm constantly concerned about

balancing the needs of my personal politics with a desire to give my students the freedom to deliberate without “undue influence.” Our students trust us to maintain their physical safety in the way I endeavor to safeguard their intellectual safety in ways indebted to bell hooks, who has discussed issues of safety as concomitant with creating a “feeling of community” in our classroom. It strikes me that the work of our pioneering queer theorists on queer pedagogy establishes a holding environment (not unlike the ones we create for our students) for us to ruminate in on the further uses of queer pedagogy, and its evolution into other forms of pedagogy, such as nondemagogic pedagogy, which I will discuss. This article seeks not only to explore queer and nondemagogic pedagogy but also to think about best classroom practices using these ideas.

Queer pedagogy champions diverse voices, and nondemagogic pedagogy considers an absence of the heteronormative and the *idée fixe* as necessary to developing voices. Neither queer nor nondemagogic pedagogy can nor should be codified, but rather, they should continue to be practiced and deliberated in the service of our students. We’re indebted to the work of our pioneering queer theorists for providing us this tapestry with which we continue to interpret and purpose to further our collective causes, without the burden of dogma. Reviewing the writing on queer pedagogy has helped me to establish my own working set of “talking points”; these are bursts of past work on queer pedagogy that I find useful for explaining what queer pedagogy means (to me) and how it flows into nondemagogic pedagogy (which I will address later). Queer pedagogy seeks to interrogate the heteronormative, and encourage disenfranchised and marginalized voices. Helping to establish the notion of the heteronormative, Alan Sinfield has noted that “the prevailing structures produce us, as well as the bigots...unlike ethnic groups,

lesbians and gay men are born of the straight community that harasses them”—a crucial understanding that while queer academics may participate in prevailing structures (like universities), we are also as produced by heteronormativity as our students. Deborah Britzman’s seminal “Is There a Queer Pedagogy? Or, Stop Thinking Straight” is useful for seeing the polyvalent uses of the term “queer” in the development of classroom voices and more engaged students. There is distinctive use in purposing queer pedagogy as a developing tool for all voices (minoritized or not); it is a way of refracting the structural power back upon itself by working within its framework, rather than rebelling against it. William Spurlin has said that “queer theory’s investment in political struggle, in the proliferation of social differences, and in the creation of multiple, more participatory spheres of public deliberation is not unrelated to forms of critical pedagogy which do not see the construction of the disciplines and their institutionalized pedagogical delivery as politically innocent activities as situated within specific relations of power.” Spurlin’s construction of pedagogy as a space within larger paradigms of power and politics connects to Lauren Berlant and Michael Warner, who once posited that “pedagogy should not be about the reproduction of identities or their representation, but about world-building, culture making.” “Queer,” for these thinkers, represents an opportunity to free teachers and students alike from the limitations of terms like gay, lesbian, bisexual, etc., and to try and defy traditional structures of power endemic in such language (and the consignment to the margins often imbued in it before the 1990s).

“Queer” opens up nontraditional spaces of discourse: In *Tendencies*, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick called queer “the open mesh of possibilities, gaps, overlaps, dissonances and resonances, lapses and excuses of meaning when the constituent elements of anyone’s

gender...aren't signified monolithically." Jan Cooper has written about her experiences at Oberlin, trying to create a safe space for queer bodies (including her own), a space that Robert McRuer takes and works through alternatives for, including issues of queer disabilities, in "Composing Bodies." Queer pedagogy allows for all of these spaces and for work like Nishant Shahani's "Pedagogical Practices and the Reparative Performance of Failure," which not only analyzes the workings of heteronormativity but thinks about reparative readings, and the performances in the classroom that can perform reparation. Reparative writing interests me; allowing students to do their own reparation, in the ways I also reparate my own body through my writing, is a logical extension of my work; if it also disrupts hegemony, so much the better, which dovetails from Andrew Parker's definition that queer theory is "a non gender-specific rubric that defines itself diacritically not against heterosexuality but against the normative." Jonathan Alexander has written that all queer theory in the classroom disrupts straightness: that is to say **not** to challenge heterosexual subject identity, but rather heteronormative assumptions. Alexander's ideas here blend into formulations of queer as a disruption of normativity, and queer pedagogy as the stakes of negotiating how we learn and teach, while refusing heteronormative structures (following Britzman).

In his influential *Homos*, Leo Bersani asks if queer is a political term, not an essential one, and much of the theory that has emerged since has defined queer/pedagogy as a political struggle. If the 1990s were about emerging/developing queer theory, after years of identifying and fighting oppression, then the current deployment of such theory in this century and beyond must be personal—it must be esoteric and consistently fighting the interpellation of the heteronormative. Creating political terms that lump groups together as specialty groups to be

pandered to or dismissed eliminates the individuality of the subject. Queer pedagogy and queer theory are producing exciting new spaces for our own writing, but they must absolutely be considerate of Spurlin and the ways we negotiate institutional power and our own queer bodies. David Wallace's "Out in the Academy" demonstrates aptly that effective pedagogy and efficacy in the classroom are not dependent on self-disclosure or definition, but certainly are enhanced by such action within the institutions that enclose the classroom. My self-defined sexuality (and its disclosure) may not create a more fruitful space for discourse for a composition class, but my clear pedagogical concerns in my sexuality can develop powerful political capital within my department or my institution, and the unifying themes of queer pedagogy are not limited to a queer subject in that classroom.

Lauren Berlant and Michael Warner noted in "Sex in Public," "Queer social practices like sex and theory try to unsettle the garbled but powerful norms supporting that privilege—including the project of normalization that has made heterosexuality hegemonic" (547). In addition to the resistance to heteronormativity that is crucial to effectively queer pedagogy, this remark usefully articulates the ways that (queer) theory can be (queer) practice, without conflation into (established, often hegemonic) praxis. Resisting the urge toward masterful or hegemonic forms of pedagogy fits into the broad spectrum of queer pedagogy I've outlined here, and helps to loosely define what I consider to be largely a definition by absence: the notion of "nondemagogic pedagogy." Nondemagogic pedagogy is not meant to be inscribed or epochal, which would be counterintuitive. The term is self-explanatory—it is an absence of leading the people, and the trappings of patriarchal terminology, in the development and deployment of pedagogy. Nondemagogic pedagogy is a term that emanates from the aims of queer pedagogy:

hoping to empower and amplify as many voices, particularly those traditionally marginalized or quieted, as possible in the classroom. Practicing nondemagogic pedagogy celebrates interpretation, and avoids the delivery of “right” or “correct” answers from the lectern or the red pen; it encourages questioning, particularly when directed at the heteronormativities often brought by students into their thinking and practices in the composition and literature classrooms. Nondemagogic pedagogy follows on what Jonathan Alexander has said about queer pedagogy disrupting heterosexuality: it is from disruption that discourse is located and created, by questioning, and interrogating the questions, and re-examining all the interrogations, until panoply of subjectivities and perspectives have been given explication and worth.

Nondemagogic pedagogy follows on the work of Althusser in drawing attention to Ideological State Apparatuses, and the ways in which we can allow ourselves to be hegemonically dominated by the state (and its corollaries and imitators, which can include professors and universities). It is pedagogy aware of the potential for hegemonic domination, charged with raising consciousness while eschewing any inclination to define that consciousness.

Estelle Freedman’s work on small group consciousness-raising informs my regular use of group work across disciplines in my classroom. Freedman’s work descends from second-wave feminism, but nonetheless fits the queer pedagogy canon in its steadfast resistance to hegemony and encouragement of student voice development. Rather than explicitly trying to effect personal transformation in my students in assigning groups out of class, groups are used in-class to create a variety of effects—to give more voices opportunities to discuss literary texts, or to allow multiple groups to consider different (assigned) vantage points on the same assignment. Groups can be used to review the lessons of grammar without the stigma of right/wrong

emanating from a corrected quiz or a Socratic method for questioning the proper deployment of commas. Groups often provide microcosmic opportunities to do the work of queer pedagogy, as described by Berlant and Warner: world-building, culture making. Groups respond to assignments, but they also do so on their own terms, esoteric to each group, and begin the process of exploring and interrogating their own worldviews by exploring and interrogating each other's worldviews. Gayle Rubin has asked us, long ago, to start thinking about sex, for all the variety of reasons (political, philosophical, economic, etc.) that go along with thinking about sex. Compelling our students to consider sexuality and gender, oftentimes just by thinking about it, with pleasure, with permission, with institutional encouragement, is effectively accomplished with the consciousness-raising work of small groups, developing the voices queer pedagogy encourages us to embrace.

So, to practice/praxis: in intro writing classes, I often teach a variety of short texts on gender and sexuality, organized to build understanding of subjectivity, heteronormativity, and the subject position. I've assigned Deborah Tannen's "Men and Women Talking on the Job" as reading, with a one-two page response paper due on the topic at the beginning of class, followed by a free-writing (low stakes) assignment on the word "Aggression." After these ten minutes of free-writing, we discuss the term, and connect some themes to the text: essentialist vs. constructionist understanding of social behaviors, the gendered connotations of certain words (such as bitch or wimp), and connecting this writing with the prior class reading, Deborah Blum's "The Gender Blur," in which I first introduced subject positions in considering how people define themselves, and compile their identities through identifications. I avoid telling students there is anything "right" or "wrong" in their comments—the goal is to observe or

interpret, occasionally challenge, and try to provoke continued thought and conversation, sometimes actuated by giving an impromptu in-class writing assignment. This class session is completed with a lengthy (25 minutes) group work assignment in which each group must compose a paragraph on a term they are randomly assigned (“bitch,” “wimp,” “assertive,” and “aggressive”); this paragraph must include some evidence from the Tannen text, which gives me an opportunity to comment on how they use and analyze evidence in a low-stakes in-class setting. They then recite their paragraphs for the class, allowing for conversation to emerge on how each term connects to the text, and to each other’s paragraphs. I don’t bring an agenda to class on where they should “end up” in their conclusions, but rather make an effort to react to each group while they are doing group work, and then to try and connect points and referee the often heated discussions that can emerge. I find this assignment gives students opportunity to show off their emerging voices, using a text that gives them ample and relatable evidence to make their points with, while allowing me to feel that I am encouraging their burgeoning literacy in the composition classroom and their awareness of their subjectivities, which corresponds to my goals within a nondemagogic pedagogic structure.

Obviously there are limits to how nondemagogic or queer a classroom can be but, as we are increasingly regulated by corporatized rules of appropriate student/faculty interaction, we must, as David Wallace discusses in “Out in the Academy,” work within the system to create as much change as we can, within the parameters of queer pedagogy and respecting the development of all voices within our classrooms and institutions. I find safety in the strong syllabus: clearly stated rules of conduct and expectations of academic performance. I do not have to spend time being tyrannical or bureaucratic in the moments I spend circling the

classroom, interacting with my groups of students, because I have clearly articulated the expectations of the class in the syllabus. Nondemagogic pedagogy does not have to be nonrigorous, or unfocused, in its deployment (practice) if it has been thoughtfully designed (theory). Eschewing the lectern does not eliminate structure; the use of group work as queer/nondemagogic pedagogy creates a more supple structure, which expands to allow for the multitude of expressions that queer pedagogy demands we elicit from our students.

I've mentioned the notion of the holding environment; it's a term borrowed from psychology to assist in defining the levels of trust and rapport we must develop in our classrooms to help develop dynamic writer-thinkers. Bollas, in *The Mystery of Things*, describes the forms of free association that he thinks are necessary for productive reparation through psychoanalysis: "The wish for knowledge must not interfere with a method that defers heightened consciousness in favor of dreamier frames of mind, encouraging the free movements of images, ideas, pregnant words, slips of the tongue, emotional states and developing relational positions." Bollas's ideas blend well with the work of D.W. Winnicott, whose notion of the "holding environment" is implicitly discussed in *Playing and Reality* as the space created by the good therapist that allows the patient the freedom to "play" and enact transcendent psychic work. In discussing the "playing" of a young child, Winnicott establishes certain definitions for his use of the term: "The area of playing is not inner psychic reality. It is outside the individual, but it is not the external world. Into this play area the child gathers objects or phenomena from external reality and uses these in the service of some sample derived from inner or personal reality. Playing implies trust, and belongs to the potential space between (what was at first) baby and mother-figure. *Playing is essentially satisfying.*" There are multiple levels of "play" in the holding environments of this

narrative: there is the holding environment provided me by friends and family to react and grieve in safe yet nondeterminate ways (a reification of the old maxim “everyone grieves his own way”); there is the act of writing, which provides a holding environment in which to explore emotions and thoughts without external definitions of form (a space Bollas has mentioned in *Being a Character* as dark genera, or a way of creating art from a place of darkness or mourning); and there is the classroom holding environment, in which the professor (using Winnicott’s terms via Peter Elbow, the analyst and moderator) is providing students free space to develop their own thoughts regarding composition, literature, and the formation of individual subject position. This adult deployment of play is consistent with Winnicott’s comments on the locations of cultural experience: “The place where cultural experience is located is in the *potential space* between the individual and the environment (originally the object). The same can be said of playing. Cultural experience begins with creative living first manifested in play. For every individual the use of this space is determined by *life experiences* that take place at the early stages of the individual’s existence.” The act of writing the journal creates cultural experience as implicitly as the act of creating the journal’s events (the pedagogic “programming” via classroom holding environment, utilizing free associative techniques, such as free-writing and open, nondogmatic discussion)—so, the act of writing, similar to the therapeutic exoskeleton of a support group, provides remedial and restorative genera. As Adam Philips has noted in his analysis of Winnicott’s work, performance is valuable because it denies deadness, and accepts the importance of externality in our psychic work. The adult experiences of developing and interacting with environments provide new opportunities for play, which yield the developmental blossoms that sprout from these loci of cultural experiences. The uses of play and the holding

environment richly extend past the analyst and the analysand to the classroom, and to the professor, who uses the holding environment for multiple purposes of pedagogy, mourning, and healing. At the end of this day, I finally see my composition students blossoming in the holding environment I've tried to create for them—which is why I see the creation of a holding environment as a valid, vital use of this psychological trope in the classroom. Jane Tompkins, in *A Life in School*, frequently mentions the need not only to make the classroom a safe space, but also to make it a holistic one, in which the learner also teaches and the teacher continues to learn. As professors, we may not have the time, inclination, or training to be therapists, but that isn't to say that our classrooms can't benefit from the structure of therapy, particularly as a holding environment.

Queer presences in the classroom can be varied—from the literal body of the queer subject to the practices of interrogating the heteronormative (in texts easily “queered” or resistant to such interrogation, in texts easily called queer or resistant to heteronormative interpretation). Our bodies—the bodies of queer professors—represent not just queer pedagogy, or a commitment to the voices of our students, but also the institutions in which we teach. David Wallace's ideas of how we can change institutions from within by speaking up—by marking ourselves as queer scholars—strike me as appropriate, even as I am still resistant to explicitly marking my body as queer in the classroom (for reasons descendent from Jane Gallop's infamous suggestion that the teacher is the phallic symbol in the classroom, and the student is his receptacle). Queer pedagogy does not require a masterful voice, and nondemagogic pedagogy demands a move away from mastery—a move that still champions confidence and scholarship, while it avoids the concomitant concerns that “mastery” suggests. In the intervening years since

queer pedagogy emerged, we've seen a rapid, constant change in our technologies, and the mores that arise and fall around them—the question of how we interact with our students changes more profoundly when we consider how they can “access” us, using email, social networking tools, or even address search technologies. Nondemagogic pedagogy allows the suppleness—both for students and for professors—to consider each situation, each new technology, each assignment, each academic challenge as individual, examinable, and worthy of discussion. This pedagogy, like queer pedagogy, does not foreclose based on heteronormative or traditional means, but relies on culture-making and world-building to react, respond, and elicit. Attention to the nondemagogic can practically guide us through the mundane and the monstrous tasks alike in our classrooms and our research interests.

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