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Accessing a Queer Pedagogy: *Identity, Power Dynamics, and a Queerer Form of Teaching in Higher Education*

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Abstract
In this reflective essay I will examine how my own practice developed through interacting with queer pedagogical literature and theory. Interactions with queer pedagogy not only allows me to investigate power dynamics within the classroom, but within this reflective essay I will also show how it has allowed me to counter heteronormative practices within academia, introduce queer ideas into the curriculum, and examine the role of identity within the classroom and my own teaching practice.

This reflective essay will look at three different areas: my own queer identity as a Graduate Teaching Assistant (GTA), the role of queer pedagogy within my own teaching, and how my teaching has evolved in relation to this queerer form of pedagogy. This analysis will also show a level of dialogue between my own practice as a GTA and the literature surrounding queer pedagogy. I believe that it is through the examination of these three key areas that I will be able to examine how to access a queer pedagogy more generally, and how this has both led to a more effective form of teaching for me, and how this can be something that can be adopted by GTAs more generally.

Introduction

Queer pedagogy is an approach to teaching that can allow for a critique of heteronormative structures within higher education and an examination of how we perform pedagogy. Within this reflective essay I will be examining the interactions between my own practice as a Graduate Teaching Assistant (GTA) and my own queer identity, examining the ways this has impacted on both my own teaching and my place within higher education, especially considering interactions with a queerer form of pedagogy. I will examine relevant queer pedagogical literature, as well as my own queer identity and how both this literature and identity impact my teaching. To do this I will first establish my own queer identity, and queer identity generally, in higher education, referencing wider power dynamics and heteronormativity, as well as how queer perspectives and voices can be erased or deprioritised within higher education. I will then examine what queer pedagogy is, examining existing literature to form an overall picture of this queer form of teaching. Finally, I will examine the implementation of a queer pedagogy, both within my own teaching as a queer GTA, and more broadly, also touching on who can access this queer pedagogy.

Queer identity and Heteronormativity in Higher Education

When entering teaching within higher education, both my own queer identity as a gay man, and my own research which incorporates queer populations and queer theory, were at the forefront of my mind. This was mainly owing to a sense of apprehension regarding the integration of my queer identity within my own pedagogical approach. This anxiety also extended to how the integration of my specialism within International Relations (IR), queer international solidarity, would impact on my teaching of IR courses. Therefore, I will use this section

of the reflective essay to examine my anxieties about my queerness within teaching, and its place in wider structures of heteronormativity within higher education.

How do power dynamics and heteronormativity affect teaching within higher education, and how does this impact on my own teaching? Examining a study by Magnus and Lundin (2016), which examined a cohort of 22 students and their reflections on the interactions between heteronormativity and teaching, they found that students viewed diversity and inclusion as a goal, and the conclusions revealed that integration of queer voices, queer theory, and pushing against heteronormative beliefs and structures within educational settings was important to the students' views on diversity (ibid.). However, the study also found that heteronormative thinking is prominent within educational structures, with this meaning a level of queer exclusion both logistically and within the curriculum. Another area in which heteronormativity presents itself in the teacher-student dynamic is labelled as *'the heterosexist presumption*' (Buston & Hart, 2001), which is the presumption by educators that students are heterosexual/non-queer. This presumption leads to queer exclusion, as educators will perceive students as heterosexual and will not consider queer perspectives, the specific needs of queer students or any move away from heteronormativity within the design and implementation of higher education. This impacts on what is seen as '*good practice*' within educational settings; good practice within education does not seem to consider queer identities of either students or thinkers that these students may engage with. The heteronormative idea of good practice in teaching will implicitly problematise queerer forms of pedagogy within education as it will see moves away from heteronormative pedagogy as a move away from assumed good practice within education.

When examining ideas of '*good practice*' within teaching, it is important to consider how queer educators interact with disclosure and openness surrounding queerness with students. If heteronormativity is seen to be an all-encompassing structure, rather than something more interpersonal and individualised, then these interactions can be seen as an anomaly within this structure (Batten et al., 2020). Disclosure is examined through a study by Batten et al., who examined how an openly gay lecturer changed the dynamics and attainment for the students they taught, especially regarding the use of queer examples within the teaching of course content. The study found that interactions with both the openly gay lecturer, and the use of queer examples within teaching, had a positive impact on student attainment and reduced overall levels of prejudice within the group. This study presents the link between interactions with queerness and attainment/combatting prejudice, through a critique of ideas that queerness interrupts '*good practice*' within teaching, perhaps even suggesting that queer identity can form part of a queer educator's '*good practice*'.

When I examine my own experiences as a GTA, running seminars within undergraduate courses in both Politics and International Relations, my own queer identity and study of queerness within my discipline laid bare my own interactions with heteronormative structures within higher education. My experiences can be split into two different areas of anxiety and tension with regards to my queer identity: '*good practice*' and adding queer material into the curriculum. Firstly, in terms of '*good practice*' and professionalism within my teaching, I often felt anxious about any implementation of queer theory within my own pedagogical approach, which not only meant that my teaching practices would fit within heteronormative standards of teaching but may also disregard and erase the queer identities or identity-based hierarchies within the student groups I was teaching.

Often, the interactions between queer gender identity and sexuality, and 'good practice' meant that these identities were seen as permissible in higher education, but not as part of the wider learning process. This is because, despite there being more representation for queer staff and students, through societies and staff networks, the queer experience is often still seen as niche and the aforementioned 'heterosexist presumption' still assumes heteronormative identity until proven otherwise.

The curriculum that I teach within the seminars was also a source of tension, regarding the idea of implementing an idea of queerness and queer theory into my teaching. In IR, there are queer theoretical frameworks, examples, and thinkers, and I believe that the study of these queer aspects can help students to deconstruct and analyse the binaries that underpin the discipline. However, I have noticed that queer perspectives and theories are often considered to be an unnecessary addition to the core elements of the discipline. Queer theory, identity, and queerer aspects of curriculum are often seen as extras to be thought about at only certain times of the year, such as LGBTQ+ History Month, and not implemented into wider discussions. Queer thinkers often have their queerness erased or muted, or have their queerness entirely define their contributions, with this meaning that the queerer elements of identity and theory were areas I often felt anxious about teaching and incorporating, and these created a tension within my teaching of the wider discipline.

Therefore, both the literature and my own experiences within this section have shown that heteronormativity is a pervasive structure within higher education that can erase queer perspectives and conceal the queer identities of educators, through ideas of both what constitutes '*good practice*' within teaching and through the presumed heteronormative/non-queer identities of all students. These systems of

heteronormativity have impacted my role as a GTA personally, as the ideas above discussing '*good practice*' meant that I was nervous about incorporating queer elements into my own teaching, as well as approaching my overall teaching methodology and pedagogical approach from a queerer perspective. However, one way in which this heteronormativity within higher education can be disrupted and countered is through queer pedagogy.

What is a Queer Pedagogy?

The direct definition of queer pedagogy can be difficult to clearly state, and is not simply a tactic or method, *'but a methodology- not a strategy, but a stance and a compass.*' (Mayo & Rodriguez, 2019). In my own experience, queer pedagogy is more of a philosophy towards how we perform teaching, as opposed to a set of direct strategies. This makes queer pedagogy a much more amorphous concept, which then means it is better to try to define this as an approach to approaches, rather than a specific and prescriptive set of methods and rules for teaching.

Based on literature from several queer pedagogical writers, such as Britzman (2012) and Allen (2015), I have defined queer pedagogy here through three points: a lack of striving for satisfaction, an acceptance of discomfort in learning, and an acknowledgement of the role of identities and identification in the classroom. Firstly, queer pedagogy looks away from models of success often employed within higher education, such as student satisfaction and reaching decisive conclusions, and admits that learning is all about the open-ended, and that satisfying pedagogy may not fully address issues (Allen, 2015). This is because any strive towards disruption of heteronormativity within higher education will lead to levels of discomfort, Allen (2015)

remarked that within her course '*Learning Sexualities*', students became uncomfortable surrounding discussions of heterosexuality within learning, and therefore satisfaction will be hard to achieve, and students may leave more uncertain than they began. However, queer pedagogy embraces this, as it embraces the '*negative'* emotions that can happen during learning, such as embarrassment, sorrow, and disappointment, as crucial to the pedagogical process. The link between student satisfaction and ideas of good teaching is strong within higher educational settings, and this means that queer pedagogy will *'categorically fail*' (ibid.) in the standards of a heteronormative institution, if it meets its own standards of success. Queer pedagogy is interested in the deconstruction of power, identity and binaries, and challenging long-held beliefs that can cause discomfort. Again, whilst this doesn't lend well to student satisfaction, queer pedagogy embraces that and instead looks at how negative emotions are part of the pedagogical process, and how this may lead to a better understanding of the world.

Queer pedagogy examines identity, and how we are identified within society, and within higher education, where queer people, subjects and topics are often identified and othered, and this raises several questions surrounding how this can lead into *othering* binaries in education, and how these are seen within the wider curriculum:

> 'However, the question that cannot be uttered is, just how different can these different folks be and still be recognized as just like everyone else? Or, put differently, given the tendency of the curriculum to pass knowledge through discourses of factuality and morality, how can difference be different? And, different from what?' (Britzman, 2012: 298)

Britzman raises here that the identification as '*other*' or not within normalcy means that these topics and pedagogy are seen as different. Different from what? What does this difference mean? These are questions it is important to deconstruct within a queer pedagogical practice, as these directly relate to the structures queer pedagogy is aiming to critique. Through this critique of heteronormativity, and suspicion of identification, queer pedagogy can unlock a viewpoint to see the ways in which our lives and teaching methods are constructed.

Queer pedagogy allows for new insights into the ways in which we conduct and perform learning within academic settings, and how this learning can disrupt heteronormativity that both limits pedagogical potential and aids in the inclusion of non-heteronormative students, viewpoints, and ways of thinking within academia, as well as the ways in which we learn (Ayres, 2019). This allows for an educator to 'uncover and disrupt hidden curricula of heteronormativity as well as to develop classroom landscapes and experiences that create safety for queer participants' (Thomas-Reid, 2018: 3), which in turn will allow for a safer environment for further critiquing the structures of power within higher education. Queer pedagogy exposes and critiques heteronormative power structures, and to do this needs to examine identity, how we are identified, and what that means for learning, all whilst keeping a baseline of safety for students. This is because to effectively critique this system of power relations, students must be in a safe and affirming environment, but as previously stated, this does not necessarily need to link to feelings of comfort or satisfaction.

Queer pedagogy will also change how we engage with academic sources and texts, and how we encourage our students to engage with these readings. Looking at this queer pedagogy, Hawthorne (2018) examines critical theory and reading with ideas around pairing action or getting closer to the reading. A queerer pedagogy will examine

readings in this way, especially highlighting discomfort, which was mentioned previously in this article. Instead of using this discomfort to step away from a reading, we use it to step closer to the reading and examine how those feelings are part of reading the text, which is often facilitated in discussions within classrooms.

A queer pedagogy will examine how the relationship between the teacher and the student can help to facilitate enabling students to challenge binaries, hierarchies, and forms of subjectivity which work to exclude and disrupt critique. This queer pedagogy will help to critique power dynamics within the classroom, which can deconstruct both queerphobic power dynamics, as well as equalling out the power that all in the classroom hold. It is important to note that the power dynamics between students and educators is relational and heteronormative structures of power will shape this relationship, as well as shaping definitions that outline the student-teacher binary (Seal, 2019). This is another form of binary identification to be critiqued and examined by queer pedagogy, accepting that these identities are not fixed, but rather something we are identified with. This goes together with the need to critique heteronormative power dynamics based on identity, as well as power dynamics between students and teachers in higher education.

Overall, queer pedagogy is an approach to teaching that critiques heteronormative structures, it is less of a specific method or tool, and more of an examination of how we perform teaching in general. Queer pedagogy encourages educators to be critical of standards of success under heteronormativity, such as satisfaction and comfort, and to instead see the open-ended and uncomfortable emotions as part of the learning process. It is also important to examine all the ways in which we are identified within higher education, and to see these identities through a critical lens. This will allow for a deeper

examination of topics within disciplines, allow for us to see the constructed nature of the identifications we face, and can also mean that the lives and experiences of queer theorists and writers, as well as queerer forms of thought and theory, will be considered within the formation of wider curriculum.

Implementing and Accessing a Queer Pedagogy

In terms of my own experiences with queer pedagogy, I first encountered and engaged with queer pedagogy when doing my Associate Teacher Programme (ATP), part of which included engagement with literature around teaching in higher education settings. I decided to engage mainly with literature surrounding queerness in teaching in these settings, after encountering a text surrounding this as part of my own research. Once I had engaged with literature on queer pedagogy, I endeavoured to try and implement it in my own teaching methodology, to have a critical awareness of identification, a rethinking of what success would look like in teaching, and an implementation of queerer aspects of my discipline into teaching.

One way in which I did this was by investigating how I interact with students and how I discuss identities and power within my own classroom. Firstly, when discussing how the seminars will run with my class, I examine ideas of mutual respect and not using dehumanising language, looking at identity and how our identities (both mine and the students') will affect both how students interact with each other/staff as well as how they interact with the course material. I do this through posing several questions to the students surrounding equity in seminars, such as why some students may feel more confident to speak, and whose voices may be given higher priority in

the classroom. I would also then reiterate this around particularly sensitive sections of the course, such as a section of the politics course I teach on about colonisation and race. I also made a concerted effort to ensure that students realised that their contributions in class not only mattered, but to deconstruct the teacher-student binary, allowing students to see that their contributions are as important as mine, deconstructing ideas of whose voice is identified as more important. To do this I had to have a level of introspection, to ensure I was not centring my own voice within my practice, and to ensure that students' contributions were allowed to guide the seminars. A challenge with this was around ensuring that course content was stuck to, which involved a level of trust with the students that their contributions would be linked to the seminar topic. This goes back to introspection, not assuming that my views on what is immediately relevant to the topic and what is not is not centred, and instead exploring with students how what they are bringing into the classroom may relate to the topics being discussed. I also considered how queer aspects of the discipline of IR can be implemented into my teaching and, therefore, endeavoured to cover Queer IR as a theoretical framework for my groups, examining the importance of queer identities/identifications. This, in turn, meant that I began to have discussions with students about the importance of identity in general in the discipline of international relations. This led to students not only further engaging with this queer material, but beginning to look at aspects of the discipline, such as power and binaries, through a more critical lens.

The work of heterosexual and cisgendered educators will be just as important as the role of their queer counterparts, as this work is needed to help interrupt heteronormativity within higher education (Seal, 2019). This is linked to the idea that queer pedagogy and deconstructing heteronormative beliefs will help to allow students, queer and heterosexual, to '*think of the 'constructedness' of their lives*

in a heteronormative society' (Alexander, 2005: 375). Therefore, queerer forms of pedagogy are useful for both queer and non-queer students and educators, allowing for a questioning of heteronormative structures that disadvantage some students/educators and limit possibilities for learning. This means that queer pedagogy is not just for queer educators and students, and that the nature of this queering is also emancipatory for higher education generally.

It needs to be considered that a queer pedagogy will fail at meeting the heteronormative standards for satisfaction and quality control within higher education. However, as Halberstam (2011: 88) states in his book '*The Queer Art of Failure*', it is through failure queerness unlocks other potentials:

> 'The queer art of failure turns on the impossible, the improbable, the unlikely, and the unremarkable. It quietly loses, and in losing it imagines other goals for life, for love, for art, and for being.'

In terms of teaching and pedagogy, this quote is relevant as the heteronormative structures in higher education may condemn any queer pedagogy to failing, especially when the standards/metrics of success and failure are built for heteronormative teaching, mainly due to these standards of success not considering queerer forms of practice or what success outside of satisfaction may look like. However, whilst queerer forms of pedagogy may be built for failure in terms of heteronormative standards, it can be through this failure that queer pedagogy can unlock other goals for education, such as different ways of learning and relating in these educational settings. This is what can be taken from the Halberstam (2011) quote: it is not how queer pedagogy may fail within a heteronormative system that needs to be focused on, but rather what queer pedagogy allows us access to outside of these heteronormative standards.

It is not only failure that can be a component of queerness and queer pedagogy's place within heteronormativity; disappointment can also play into this dynamic. This is also due to, once again, the ideas that the standards of success and failure within education are often heteronormative, which can lead to queer pedagogy being '*disappointing'*, with this perhaps meaning that queer pedagogy can be seen as failing at what it needs to be (Seitz, 2020). This disappointment, like the previously mentioned queer failure, is a sign of moving away from this heteronormative success model and unlocking other possibilities; queer pedagogy, through disappointment, can unlock new possibilities for learning, for curriculum and for redefining power in higher education. One way in which this can be avoided, or circumvented, is to redefine what is meant by success in higher education, to move away from heteronormativity and to queer ideas of success. This is due to the standards of success and quality within higher education institutions often being tied to '*the needs for tidiness and simplicity' (ibid.)*, simplifying metrics for successful teaching into areas such as student satisfaction. This, once again, shows that queer pedagogy will not meet these heteronormative standards, but with this disappointment and failure also comes a liberation from heteronormativity and access to queerer possibilities for education.

Overall, it is not just important to understand what a queer pedagogy is, but also how we engage with it, implement it and who can, and should, engage with this pedagogy. Within my own practice, the queering of my own pedagogy seemed to influence my teaching by both allowing for more of a critical lens for analysis for students, as well as acknowledging the role of power dynamics and identification within the classroom. Also, considering the role of failure and disappointment in the implementation of queer pedagogy, as

heteronormative standards of success within higher education can mean queer theory and pedagogy is bound to failure, but through this failure allows for a liberation from heteronormative structures, not just for queer students and educators, but all those in higher education.

Conclusion

Higher education is evidently host to a heteronormative system of power dynamics that systematically silences and disenfranchises queer voices, perspectives, and theories, as well as deemphasising, or overemphasising, the importance of queer identity to perspectives and events. This means that queer students and educators will have to exist within an oppressive environment within higher education, with contributions from their experiences as queer people perhaps not being seen as important or valuable. Therefore, it is important for queer pedagogy to be implemented within teaching as an approach that can be critical of heteronormativity within higher education, work to allow for discomfort and unpleasant emotions being part of the learning process, moving away from a strive for satisfaction as the end goal of education, and a critique of how we are identified in higher education.

Through my own practice teaching within higher education, I have seen how working within a heteronormative educational environment can cause a level of anxiety within queer educators, such as myself, regarding areas such as '*good practice*' and through the presumed heterosexuality of students and staff. My interactions with queer pedagogy have shown that this critical approach allows for an acknowledgement of power and identity within educational settings, as well as introducing queer elements into the curriculum, which has been seen to have reverberations into the learning and engagement

with the wider course material, critically assessing how discomfort can unlock new learning potentials within this. Finally, it is important to consider that queer pedagogy will struggle to succeed within a heteronormative higher education environment, due to standards of success in this environment striving for student satisfaction over critical engagement with the curriculum. However, it is through the failure of queer pedagogy that we all, queer and non-queer educators alike, can examine its possibilities, how it can queer what success looks like and change what higher education looks like and aims for.

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