Why Queer Theory Is Useful in Teaching: A Perspective from English as a Second Language Teaching

Cynthia D. Nelson

SUMMARY. In education there has been growing interest in making teaching practices more inclusive of lesbian, gay, and bisexual people and issues. However, the emphasis on including—and legitimating—"subordinate" sexual identities is being challenged by queer theory, which draws on post-structuralist theories of identity. With queer theory, the aim is not to accomplish inclusion but to facilitate inquiry—that is, to investigate the ways in which sexual identities are negotiated through day-to-day social interactions. This paper draws on literature from queer theory and English language teaching in order to explain why queer theory may be useful when serving groups who are culturally and/or linguistically heterogeneous. [Article copies available for a fee from The Haworth Document Delivery Service: 1-800-HAWORTH. E-mail address: <getinfo@haworthpressinc.com> Website: <http://www.HaworthPress.com> © 2002 by The Haworth Press, Inc. All rights reserved.]

Cynthia D. Nelson, PhD. MATESL, BA, is affiliated with the English Language Study Skills Assistance Centre, Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences, University of Technology, Sydney.

Address correspondence to: ELSSA Centre, University of Technology, Sydney, PO Box 123, Broadway NSW 2007, Australia (E-mail: cynthia.nelson@uts.edu.au).

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INTRODUCTION

In the field of education there has been increasing interest in making classrooms and curricula more inclusive and affirmative of gay, lesbian, and bisexual people and issues. This interest has been evident across a range of educational areas and levels, including secondary level English, social studies, and sexuality studies (e.g., Harris, 1990; Hart, 1989; edited volumes such as Epstein, 1994; Laskey & Beavis, 1996; Sears, 1992), tertiary level composition (e.g., Malinowitz, 1995; Parmeter & Reti, 1988), women’s studies (e.g., Garber, 1994) and of course lesbian/gay/queer studies (e.g., Phillips, 1996). Similar efforts to make learning environments more “gay-friendly” have also been occurring within English language teaching (e.g., Hirst, 1981; Nelson, 1993a; Snelbecker, 1994; Summerhawk, 1998; see also Kato, 1999 on lesbian/gay international students). This paper emerges from my recent PhD research on teaching lesbian/gay content in English as a Second Language (ESL) classes (Nelson, 1999, 2000).

An ESL perspective on lesbian/gay/bisexual issues in education may be useful to educators, trainers, social service practitioners, and others who are not themselves language teachers. This is because many groups, not just ESL classes, are international, intercultural, and linguistically diverse. Also, the focus on communication and culture that typifies ESL classes is of central importance across a range of educational contexts. Therefore, those whose work involves dealing with lesbian/gay issues that arise within linguistically and culturally diverse groups may have an interest in how such issues are being approached in ESL. Ways of theorizing sexual identities may also be of interest to teachers and practitioners because the theories that underpin teaching practices are an important aspect of those practices. The central argument of this paper is that queer theory offers a flexible, open-ended framework for addressing lesbian/gay issues within linguistically and culturally diverse groups.

This paper:

- outlines key concerns in making learning/teaching environments more “gay-friendly.”

- describes the origins of queer theory and the meanings of the term “queer.”
- explains how a queer theory framework differs from a lesbian/gay identity framework and why queer theory may be of use educationally.

CREATING GAY-FRIENDLY ENVIRONMENTS FOR TEACHING AND LEARNING

In ESL journals, newsletters, and conference presentations, it has been argued that there is a need to make teaching practices and learning environments more gay-friendly. This involves:

- making curricula, resources and teaching practices more gay-inclusive (e.g., Carscadden, Nelson & Ward, 1992; Hanson, 1998; Jones & Jack, 1994; in English as a Foreign Language see Neff, 1992; Summerhawk, 1998), for example, by integrating the topic of lesbian and gay relationships within discussions of families, or homophobia within discussions of social discrimination.
- considering the educational needs of learners who themselves identify as lesbian, bisexual, or gay (Kapra, 1998/1999; Nelson, 1993a) and those who encounter gay people or issues in their everyday lives.
- creating learning and working environments where any learner or teacher (not just straight ones) can be open about their sexual identity without fear of reprisals (Censotti, 1998; Destion, Nelson & Snelbecker, 1995; Mittler & Blumenthal, 1994; Nelson, 1993a; Saint Pierre, 1994; Shore, 1992; Snelbecker, 1994).
- mobilizing support within the profession—for example, Teachers of English to Speakers of Other Languages (TESOL), an international organization, established a task force (now a caucus) to investigate lesbian, gay, and bisexual concerns in relation to policy and pedagogy (see Cummings & Nelson, 1993a; Nelson, 1993b).

Much of the work cited above, along with similar work in other educational areas, seeks to make existing curricula (or policies) more inclu-
sive by adding representations of subordinate sexual identities. The (often unstated) aim is to promote what Britzman (1995, p. 158) calls "pedagogies of inclusion." The theoretical framework underlying this gay-inclusive approach is a lesbian/gay identity framework. However, over the past decade this theoretical framework has been challenged by queer theory, an emerging body of work which draws on poststructuralist theories of identity (e.g., Butler, 1990; Fuss, 1991; Sedgwick, 1990; for descriptive historical accounts see Seidman, 1993, 1995). In recent years educators have begun to consider the educational implications of queer theory (in ESL see Nelson, 1999, 2000; in education see Britzman, 1995; Sumara & Davis, 1999; in tertiary education see Fuss, 1991; Malinowicz, 1995; Phillips, 1996). In order to consider the key concepts of queer theory and what they might offer teachers and social service practitioners, it is important to understand why queer theory originated.

WHY QUEER THEORY ORIGINATED

In response to the widespread invisibility and pathologizing of "homosexuals," the gay liberation movement of the 1960s and the subsequent creation of a lesbian and gay community and culture encouraged an out-and-proud approach (Seidman, 1995, writing of the United States). What made it possible to form a cohesive social movement based on gayness was the notion that gay or lesbian identity expressed an inner, universal essence (essentialism). During the 1970s and '80s, growing recognition that gay or lesbian identity was not innate but socially constructed (social constructivism) did not significantly change the widespread belief that gayness was a "fact" that could be either acknowledged or denied, expressed (albeit in culturally determined ways) or suppressed (for detailed accounts of this period see Seidman, 1993, 1995).

As the gay/lesbian movement and community gained visibility and political clout, the focus began to shift from what its "members" had in common to what they did not. Gathered together under the political/cultural umbrella of a gay movement were people who identified as lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgendered. Their sexual practices, sexual values, relationship styles, multiple identities, and political affiliations were not only diverse but in some cases conflicting. Meanwhile, critical theorists and linguists were theorizing identities not as socially con- structured facts but as cultural and discursive acts (e.g., Gumperz & Cook-Gumperz, 1982; LePage & Tabouret-Keller, 1985). As a result of practical and theoretical challenges to identity-based social movements, in the mid-1980s queer theory and activism were developed. Whereas sexual identity formed the very basis of the lesbian/gay movement and community, queer theory makes sexual identity the subject of critique. The word "queer" is used to encompass "lesbian," "gay," "bisexual," and "transgender," but "queer" is also used to challenge clear-cut notions of sexual identity, purposely blurring the boundaries between identity categories (Warner, 1993). The paradoxical tension between the two meanings of queer—on the one hand including all "minority" sexual identities and on the other protesting the very notion of sexual identity—is central to queer theory.

WHY QUEER THEORY IS USEFUL IN TEACHING

Theorizing Sexual Identities as Acts Rather than Facts

According to queer theory, gay identity is not discovered and then expressed, but is actually produced through repeated discursive acts. In other words, sexual identities are not descriptive but performative—not what people are but what they do (Butler, 1990, drawing on Austin's [1962] notion of linguistic performativity). In this view, sexual identities are not personal attributes or individual constructions but culturally readable acts that are being created or "performed" during social interactions. From a teaching or training perspective, there are several advantages to theorizing sexual identities as culturally readable acts rather than inner, universal essences. For one, this situates sexual identities within the realm of the ordinary—negotiating day-to-day interactions routinely involves "performing" and interpreting sexual identities. Secondly, it keeps the focus on observable behavior—what people say and do rather than who they feel they are. This is useful in those teaching contexts (such as ESL) where a major objective is to demystify social interactions unfamiliar to those who are new to, or outside of, a particular culture or subculture. With queer theory, it becomes possible to examine the linguistic and cultural patterns through which sexual identities are communicated, even constituted. Finally, the notion of "performativity" makes it clear that sexual identities are not universally accomplished but may be produced or "read" in different ways in different cultural
contexts (see Livia & Hall, 1997). Acknowledging this diversity, and being able to examine it, are crucial to achieving intercultural understanding.

**Problematizing All Sexual Identities Rather than Legitimating Subordinate Ones**

Lesbian/gay activism has sought to ensure that people who do not identify as heterosexual are not denied the same rights and privileges that are automatically accorded to those who do identify as heterosexual. Implicit to such efforts is the notion that it is possible, even desirable, to categorize people according to sexual identities. But queer theorists caution that sexual identities can be limiting as well as liberating, for they rely on exclusion as well as inclusion (Butler, 1991; Fuss, 1991; see also Foucault, 1990). In this view, affirming subordinate sexual identities has the (unintended) effect of reinforcing a hierarchical system, one that insists on solidifying sexualities into sexual identities, which can then be divided into those that are considered socially “acceptable” and those that are not. Rather than affirming sexual identity categories, queer theory questions the need for them. Rather than legitimizing minority sexual identities, queer theory problematizes all sexual identities.

In terms of teaching and learning, problematizing sexual identities does not mean presenting them in negative ways. On the contrary, it makes it possible to explore how acts of identity are not necessarily straightforward or transparent but can be complex, changing, and contested. It also acknowledges that, for a myriad of reasons, not everyone relates to a clear-cut identity category. To put it another way, acknowledging that identities are not truths, facts or things, but theoretical constructs that “arise at specific times, in specific places, to do specific work” (Poynton, 1997, p. 17) does not dismiss the need for identities nor their limitations. Instead, this approach makes it possible to ask what purpose identities serve, how they work, and also what constraints, dilemmas, or contradictions may be associated with them. In the end, problematizing all sexual identities may actually be more “inclusive” than simply validating subordinate sexual identities, because it allows for a wider range of experiences and perspectives to be considered. It may also be more practicable, since teachers or trainers are not expected to transmit knowledge (which they may or may not have) but to frame tasks that encourage investigation and inquiry.

**Considering Sexual Identities Potentially Significant to Anyone**

Queer theorists discuss a “heterosexual/homosexual binary” by which sexual identities are defined. The argument is that questions of definition are meaningful not just to “a small, distinct, relatively fixed homosexual minority” (“a minoritizing view”) but to “people across the spectrum of sexualities” (“a universalizing view”) (Sedgwick, 1990, p. 1). One reason for this is that the hetero/homosexual binary shapes the production of all sexual identities—not just gay ones. That is, “heterosexuality” has meaning only in relation to “homosexuality,” and vice versa, since the two terms are necessarily relational and interdependent (Fuss, 1991; Sedgwick, 1990; see also Weedon, 1987, p. 23 on Saussure’s “sign theory”). In other words, straightness does not exist separately from gayness but is in fact defined by it (and vice versa). Furthermore, sexual identity is experienced or accomplished “in a particular class-, race-, or gender-mediated way, and only so” (Seidman, 1993, pp. 136-137); likewise, cultural identity is “done” differently depending on one’s sexual identity (see Mac An Ghaill, 1994). When identities are understood to be not just multiple but mutually inflecting (see Pallotta-Chiariotti, 1996; Phelan, 1994), it becomes clear that to understand the workings of any domain of identity (e.g., gender) it is necessary to consider that domain as part of, or in relation to, the domain of sexual identity. Lastly, according to queer theorists the significance of the hetero/homosexual binary extends far beyond identities. This binary is a pervasive, shaping force throughout “Western” knowledges and discourses. Its cultural significance is as great as other powerful binaries such as masculine/feminine or bourgeois/proletariat (Sedgwick, 1990). Thus, classifying sexual identities involves more than just sexualities but extends to cultural patterns of thinking and living.

The application of queer theory to teaching or training contexts allows for acknowledgment that issues pertaining to sexual identities might be relevant to anyone, not just gay people, and for a range of reasons. This wider focus allows everyone, whatever their own positioning with regard to sexual identity, to participate in and contribute to the discussion. This may also help to counter any tendency to reductively construct people as either tolerated or tolerant (see Britzman, 1995, pp. 159-160). Also, considering sexual identity and other “acts of identity” as interconnected, even mutually constitutive, underscores the broad relevance of matters pertaining to sexual identities. Furthermore, learning opportunities are opened up when the hetero/homosexual bi-
nary is seen as working on and in a wide range of social and cultural practices, not just sexualities.

Looking at How Certain Sexual Identities Are (or Are Not) Made to Seem Normal

Of primary concern within lesbian/gay identity-based theory and politics has been the promotion of tolerance and social justice in order to challenge and transform prejudicial attitudes (homophobia) and discriminatory systems and actions (heterosexism). Queer theorists, however, are concerned with analyzing cultural knowledges and discourses: "The roots of heterosexism are not socialization, prejudice, tradition, or scapegoating, but a basic way of organizing knowledges and fields of daily life which are deeply articulated in the core social practices of Western societies" (Seidman, 1995, p. 135). Queer theorists have therefore coined the term "heteronormativity," which refers to making heterosexuality—and only heterosexuality—seem normal or natural (Warner, 1993).

Identifying norms and analyzing how they operate may prove useful educationally for several reasons. First of all, the focus is not on whether a particular sexual identity is normal or natural, or even whether it should be considered natural, but on what makes it seem natural (or unnatural). (This follows Foucault’s [1980, p. 118] interest in discovering "truth" but in analyzing how "the effects of truth" are produced.) The point is not so much to debate as to analyze. Secondly, attempting to identify cultural and linguistic norms makes it possible to recognize not only prevailing norms but also competing norms. In linguistically and/or culturally heterogeneous groups it may be especially important to underscore the fact that norms are not static or universal but context-specific, changing, and contested. Lastly, and perhaps most importantly, making norms explicit enables people to make choices that are more informed and therefore more strategic as they position themselves in relation to those norms.

A FOCUS ON INQUIRY

An emphasis on inclusion, which adds subordinate sexual identities and aims to validate them, may be less effective than an emphasis on inquiry, which seeks to understand how language, culture, and social interactions operate with respect to all sexual identities. An inquiry approach follows queer theory in theorizing sexual identities as acts rather than facts, problematizing all sexual identities rather than legitimizing subordinate ones, recognizing the broad significance of sexual identities, and looking at how certain sexual identities are (or are not) made to seem normal. In culturally and linguistically diverse groups, a focus on investigating sexual identities as socially situated practices may be more useful than a focus on promoting "tolerance" of those who identify as gay. Educationally, the aim, as Burbules (1997, p. 111) puts it, should not be "[tolerance of difference, or for that matter celebrations of difference," but "the critical re-examination of difference, the questioning of our own systems of difference, and what they mean for ourselves and for other people." It is this sort of inquiry that a queer theoretical approach invites.

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