
FORUM

Birthing the Lesbian Teacher Within: Towards an Understanding of Identity and Self-Actualization

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It is mid-semester and I have arranged individual conferences with all of my first-year composition students to gauge how they are doing in the course and to address any of their concerns about it. It's 12:00 and my next appointment, Monica, should be here any minute. Monica generally sits in the farthest corner of the room, arms crossed, rarely speaking in class discussions. Recently, in a class discussion about the NAMES project (it had visited campus and I required my students to attend), she stated that she has high moral standards for herself and perceives her body as the temple of God; and therefore, homosexuals could never be Christian because they all have the devil in their bodies. At this point in the semester, I have surmised that Monica has deduced that I am a lesbian and feels a certain amount of "justified" antagonism towards me. I'm hoping that this conference will break some of the tension between us; I want to show her that I am concerned about her needs as a writer and learner and that I am not out to replicate myself through my students. It's 12:01 and Monica knocks on my open office door. I invite her to come in and sit in the chair that stands a few feet across from me. She plops down in the chair and clutches her backpack to her stomach.

"How are you?" I ask.

"Fine," she replies.

"How is the course going for you so far?"

"All right, I guess."

"Do you have any questions or concerns about my comments on your last paper or the paper you're working on now?"

“Not really.”

It’s 12:02 and I’m sure that I will never make it through a fifteen-minute conference with this student. As the conversation stumbles along, Monica begins slowly to scoot her chair, inch by inch, away from me and towards my office mate’s desk on the opposite side of the office. I ask her more specific questions about her paper she recently handed in, hoping that she will reply with more than three words. The conference founders for another three or four minutes and I decide that I simply cannot evoke a meaningful conversation from this student.

During the course of this failed conference, Monica has managed to move her chair completely under my office mate’s desk so that it appears, with her back-pack on her lap, as if she is pinned between the back of the chair and the edge of desk. It’s 12:05 and I tell her she is free to go, but if she has any questions in the future to feel free to ask me. She scrambles out from her pinned position and quickly exits my office. I think we both exhale a heavy sigh of relief.

Before my next appointment arrives I keep picturing Monica scooting her chair farther and farther away from me. What could she have been thinking? This woman does not even know for sure that I’m a lesbian. I have never verbally disclosed any information about my identity as a lesbian to the class. I wonder if I would have to address concerns about their personal perceptions and reactions if I had simply come out to my students, or would coming out only have exacerbated my difficulties with this type of student?

What happens to a lesbian who is “out” in every aspect of her life when she is placed in front of the classroom as the teacher? Is the classroom a relevant place to disclose her sexual orientation? Will she alienate her students if she proclaims her lesbian identity? Will she alienate herself if she does not come out? What are the positive and negative pedagogical effects of lesbian self-disclosure? Every lesbian or gay teacher makes the choice to come out or to be closeted in the classroom; both choices have impacts on teaching and learning. These questions and implications are just part of what I must face as a lesbian instructor.

The above interaction with Monica marks the onset of many more “contractions” which led to the “birthing” of my lesbian-teacher identity. The following discussion emerges from two semesters of teaching; in the first semester I was closeted, in the next semester I came out to my entire class. My teaching experiences serve as a launching point from which to explore the complex issues involved in teacher self-disclosure of lesbian or gay identities and to show how the choice to come out can produce overwhelmingly positive effects on our teaching and pedagogy.

I initially chose to be closeted in the classroom (not in other aspects of my life) because I assumed it would make my experiences as a teacher only more difficult. I was also encouraged by colleagues to hide my lesbian identity because, in their words: "It's just *too hard* to be out in the classroom." In retrospect, I see that in checking my lesbian identity at the classroom door, I also (unconsciously) left behind almost all of myself; I became a *tabula rasa*, ready to be "written" as an instructor. For ten years prior to entering the university setting, I was involved almost exclusively in a lesbian-feminist community. I worked as a carpenter in a network of lesbian skilled workers, I volunteered at the local feminist bookstore and other feminist non-profit organizations, and I pursued an undergraduate degree in feminist and lesbian studies. I wrote religiously every day for most of my adult life and my undergraduate education was founded upon the importance written communication and writing as a mode of learning, all of which led me to teach first-year composition. Despite this strong background in written communication, I found it difficult to bring anything meaningful to the composition classroom during my first semester of teaching. When I checked my lesbian identity at the classroom door, I left my language history and competency with it. Harriet Malinowitz describes lesbian and gay students as "epistemologically straight-jacketed" in the mainstream composition class. Straight-jacketed is exactly how I felt; but I was the teacher. I struggled my entire first semester with the feeling that I had nothing valuable to offer; indeed, in my mind I had constructed a situation in which I was a "blank slate" with no past experiences as a person, as a student, as a learner, and as a writer. My first semester mid-term evaluations came back and the results were paralyzing: the significant majority of my students said that I was "completely unstimulating" and that I "couldn't lead the class in a meaningful direction as the teacher."

In my first semester, following the curriculum that was handed to me by the director of composition, I consistently pushed my students to define their social positions, always to "locate" themselves within their papers, to avoid blanket statements that generalized all people, and to examine the "assumptions" they brought to their papers. I now question: where was my social location all semester? Anza Stein puts in most succinctly, "what I believe in pedagogically, I [was] unable to practice" (10), because I was hiding my identity. I asked my students (who were mostly white and upper-middle class) to take the risk of examining and possibly disrupting the safety of their (often) unproblematized social positioning. However, I believed that sharing in this risk-taking by disclosing my lesbian identity was an inappropriate role for a teacher. I have learned to question: if I am not honest in my classroom, if I do not take risks, how can I expect my students to do

so? Also, if I build my classroom around the primary deception of allowing students to assume that I am heterosexual, or even worse, to assume that I am a lesbian fearful of coming out, then what kind of environment am I creating for these students as learners, and how does my reluctance to self-disclose contradict my pedagogy and teaching strategies?

Being closeted requires that we engage in a type self-monitoring and self-censorship that consumes a great deal of energy, energy that could be directed into more productive avenues. In fact, I think my students' commenting on my teaching as unmotivating and directionless indicates the amount of energy that was consumed by my self-censorship: I had to re-learn everything about being a student and learner and a teacher as if I had never experienced these things before. As well as being drained, being closeted can negatively direct the attention of a class or particular students, as the interaction with Monica demonstrates. She seemed consumed by the idea/fear that I am a lesbian. I now believe that if I had come out, her problems might have been dealt with in a more direct manner. It is infinitely easier to handle problems when they are above-board, rather than when they are covert; talking "around" an issue is time consuming, energy consuming, and ultimately unproductive. For instance, I imagine that if Monica was truly as homophobic as she appeared to be in class, she probably would have dropped the class on the first day if I had come out. Perhaps her joining another classroom would have provided a more productive learning environment not limited by the barriers she established between herself and me. If she had not dropped the class (from which I would guess that she was not as homophobic or hateful as she appeared to be), and I had overtly disclosed my identity as a lesbian, at least there would be a space for her to confront her difficulties. For instance, we could have constructed a dialogue on how to come to terms with each other, rather than allowing her difficulties with me (and mine with her) to fester in silence. Of course all of this is speculation; she may not have taken the opportunity to confront these issues, but at least if I had reciprocated by participating in the supposed space I had provided for "risk-taking" and being honest, I would have done more for this student than passively watching problems arise between us that seemed to be clearly linked to my identity as a lesbian and her homophobia.

Not practicing what I believe in goes deeper than simply not taking risks; in checking my identity (as well as the rest of my history) at the door, I failed to allow space in my classroom for the type of writing and reading that was meaningful to me as a young person. A great deal of what motivated me to write as an undergraduate could be categorized within the "expressivist" camp.¹ Writing became meaningful for me because I was able to "write from the heart" about "my

true self” in order to “discover my voice,” which *only* became complicated by notions of “multiple selves” and “fragmentation” after I had the opportunity to write in about my “true self” first. This mode of writing was immensely useful to me as a young writer and learner. However, in following the curriculum at my institution (which emphasizes social constructionism), I felt compelled to exclude this kind of writing and meaning-making.

An excellent example of “expressivist” writing is coming out narratives. Harriet Malinowitz has pointed out that coming out narratives generally operate out of the assumption that gay and lesbian experiences “hatch independently and a priori from within *despite* the social world, and their expression itself is seen as an act of resistance to that world—not in any way as a product of it” (68). I agree that there is often a lack of examination in coming out narratives as to how being gay or lesbian is as much a product of the dominant culture as being heterosexual is; but this critique elides how this particular type of “expressivist” writing is empowering for the readers and writers of these narratives. Many experiences are unarticulated or seemingly (un)articulatable, particularly when they come from non-dominant locations. Allowing space for naming and articulating experience is necessary in the composition classroom. Many lesbians find *The Original Coming Out Stories* to be a life-boat in a society that not only renders invisible, but often completely negates woman-to-woman intimate relationships.² Adrienne Rich speaks of the unearthing that these coming out narratives allow:

As you read the stories in this book I would like you to think of those piles of ash, those cages behind which women’s words, lesbian words, lie imprisoned.... This is poverty. This is starvation. This is cultural imperialism—the decision made by one group of people that another group shall be cut off from their past, shall be kept from the power of memory, context, continuity. This is why lesbians, meeting, need to tell and retell stories like the ones in this book. In the absence of the books we needed the knowledge of women whose lives were like our own, an oral tradition—here set down on paper—has sustained us. (xi-xii)

Writing about personal experiences allows us to articulate and name something that has been previously “unspeakable.” I cannot emphasize enough that this genre (both written and read) has sustained *me* as a lesbian. In choosing to be the invisible lesbian teacher, this history is part of what I “left behind” with my identity. For example, I was required to write a thesis in order to complete my undergraduate degree and I chose to write an autobiographical piece which recreated the gradual development of my relationship with my mother. I wanted to tell the truth of my experiences (I purposefully do not use scare quotation marks here), I wanted

to articulate something which seemed as if it could not be pinned down by language. In this way, using language and writing was a form of power because I was able to name my experiences. After I began writing and (re)membering my history, I came to understand that my truth was only one “truth” and that others (my siblings and my mother) might have a rather different “truth” to tell—it was at this point that I could begin to place my experiences within a larger social, cultural, and political framework. In this way, language became a means to empowerment for me. But it was only through the process of being allowed to start at the point that was useful to me, with my truth, that I was able to get to the point where I could then situate and understand them within a larger framework and a more critical consciousness.

I detail this history to make the point that students can, eventually, come to see that their experiences exist within larger forces of cultural production and reproduction. However, I face difficulties in denying them the same place to start (“expressivist” writing) that was crucial in my development as a writer, learner, and knowledge maker. Donna Qualley has argued that “If we are to help our students construct richer, more complex ways of thinking, we would do well to remember our own developmental journeys” (26). Essentially, I want both worlds. I want my students to see themselves as positioned within larger matrices of power relationships and identity constructions at the same time that I want to allow them the freedom to explore their worlds and identities through expressivist modes of writing. Qualley goes on to explain, “I cannot expect [my student] to learn to negotiate the thickets of ‘multiplicity,’ ‘ambiguity’ and ‘complexity’ immediately. *That would be like asking her to arrive without having traveled.* After all, I don’t want her simply to replace one uncritical or absolute conception of reality with another” (25; emphasis mine). Too often this is precisely what happens in classrooms that are focused solely on a social-constructivist mode of writing (students uncritically accept social constructivist, which then has the potential to become another form of hegemony). I now aim to create a classroom that employs both expressivism and social constructionism as complimentary modes of knowing and writing, rather than as opposing forces. This embrace of “both worlds” represents a feminist pedagogy; experiential knowledge and critical analysis of larger social and cultural powers go hand in hand with each other.

In order to come a place where I could recognize the importance of valuing and encouraging different modes of writing and knowing in my classroom, I had to come to terms with the fact that in denying my existence as a lesbian, I denied an essential component of my own growth as a learner and writer. Surprisingly enough, I value my undergraduate education very much because it offered a non-

traditional, holistic approach to learning, but I was not able to incorporate my history as a learner into my composition classroom. I also denied what brought me to teach composition. I believe that language is a means of power as well as potentially empowering, but I could not make this connection between my past experiences and my position as a composition teacher because this history with language and writing was “attached” to my lesbian identity and hence, was left behind.

There are many reasons why people believe that disclosure of a queer identity does not belong in the classroom (most of which are rooted in heterosexism and homophobia), the primary reason being that it has the potential to create a hostile environment. Mary Mittler has argued:

if coming out creates a “hostile environment,” one that infringes upon a student’s right to learn, the institution must deal with the always horrible tension of conflicting rights. That’s hard. Each student has an unwritten contract with the institution which requires it to provide—among other things—competent instructors who will teach the content specified in the catalog and course descriptions. (5)

Mittler has also suggested that coming out in the classroom is not the same as coming out in another context. She argues that the teacher has institutionalized power in this situation; therefore this disclosure is potentially “unfair” (7).

There are many complications in what is “fair” and whose “rights” will be honored in the classroom. Most certainly, if there is a hostile environment the students participate in creating it. After all, the act of coming out does not in itself create hostility; it is people’s reactions to this type of disclosure that has the potential to be explosive or disruptive. Rarely do students complain about infringement on rights when teachers disclose their heterosexual identities.

Coming out *is* a matter of rights; it is also a matter of voice, a matter of presence. Perhaps most importantly, it is a matter of being *whole*. Bell hooks discusses the importance of self-actualization; in fact, she argues that teachers have a *responsibility* to be self-actualized:

Progressive, holistic education...emphasizes well-being. That means that teachers must be actively committed to a process of self-actualization that promotes their own well-being if they are to teach in a manner that empowers students. Tich Nhat Hanh emphasized that “the practice of a healer, therapist, teacher or any helping professionals should be directed toward his or herself first, because if the helper is unhappy, he or she cannot help many people.” (15)

My lesbian identity has been and continues to be a vital and dynamic aspect of my life outside the classroom. I don’t know how to negotiate life without being an

out, visible lesbian. I ask myself, how can I be self-actualized in the way that I know a “good” teacher must be and not come out to my students?

And yet, hooks’ notion of self-actualization seems to contradict so many post-structuralist theories that have been empowering to lesbians and gays. For example, many of us invoke queer theory to move in a direction that destabilizes structures that have scripted lesbians and gays as deviant. Then again, much of the literature by lesbian teachers suggests a need for a stabilized, authentic identity. For example, Anza Stein writes, “Having to silence a central part of my identity also affects how I approach teaching in general. In front of my students, I do not feel I am completely authentic because I am always on guard” (10). Despite her love for teaching, Stein explains that she will not teach forever because she cannot exist in this fragmented, incomplete state of being for the rest of her working life. She writes, “It stirs my imagination to picture myself as being a ‘complete’ person at work” (13).

This speaks so clearly to my experience: I was not complete when closeted. And, yes, my imagination is stirred to believe in a space where I can feel complete. Statements such as Stein’s, which I understand more on an intuitive level than a theoretical level, make theories of deconstruction and (de)centering incredibly problematic. I understand the positive effects of poststructuralist theories which encourage us to embrace the fragmented self. However, given my history of immersion in a lesbian-feminist culture, being fragmented and splitting off this piece of myself was simply too much to give up and still arrive in the classroom with something to offer. I need to feel centered, I need to draw on some locus, some knowledge-based, some center of self-assurance that allows me to meaningfully facilitate my students’ learning.

It is infinitely easier to “decenter” our identity or give up a sense of wholeness when we already feel centered and complete. Self-actualization and wholeness are common tropes in the lives of many lesbians and gays who have been forced by the dominant heterosexual culture to exist in a state of fragmentation and (dis)location. At this point, I am unsure of how to theoretically reconcile the notion of an “authentic self” in a postmodern age that destabilizes traditional notions of identity. Yet I know on a level that is not accessible by theory that not being my “authentic” self was the locus of many of the difficulties I faced as a closeted lesbian.

Audre Lorde writes, “Your silence will not protect you.” Indeed, my silence was incredibly damaging to my teaching. I knew that I had to come out my second semester; and I had to do it on the first day of class. And yet that question still kept running through my mind: Why is it important for my students to know this about me? I could not come up with a rationale; but my intuition told me

that I could not let a day go by without disclosing my lesbian identity. I now see that coming out made it possible to make connections with my history as a writer and learner, enabling me to bring this rich history into composition classroom in a meaningful way. My first semester I felt disconnected and fragmented, which was why my students stated that I could not lead the class in a meaningful direction. I had nothing to offer because I was not allowing “all” of myself to be present in the classroom; I was not self-actualized.

The first day of my second semester went something like this: “My name is Catherine Fox, I am your instructor, I am a lesbian (which is probably an odd thing to hear from your teacher, but I tell you this because it is important for me to be myself in the classroom). This is English 112. We will be focusing on reading and writing in this course...” Coming out on the first day made me immediately feel like a complete person in the classroom and it made a world of difference in my comfort level (which only makes sense given that it is more of an oddity for me to be closeted than it is for me to be out). I didn’t need to tell an extending narrative about my lesbian identity; I just needed to feel free to be me.

Bell hooks states that “Professors who embrace the challenge of self-actualization will be better able to create pedagogical practices that engage students, providing them with ways of knowing that enhance their capacity to live fully and deeply” (22). In disclosing my identity, I met the challenge of self-actualization: I was honest, I took a huge risk, and I was being my “authentic” self. Throughout the course of the semester I was able to engage my students in a more meaningful and directed way because honesty, authenticity, and self-actualization became the foundation of my teaching and pedagogy. When my mid-term evaluations came back, I learned that my students loved the class; they enjoyed most of what we had read and discussed. Not one negative word was mentioned about my self-disclosure or the lesbian-oriented texts we had read in class. I cannot help but believe that the vast difference in my students’ responses to me were (and continue to be) a result of being out and whole in the classroom.

I realize that all of this paints a picture of a complete and finished success story of how the lesbian teacher heroically finds her “self” and suddenly becomes a “great” teacher. I offer this caveat to complicate this seemingly tidy narrative. I continue to have a great deal of self-doubt about whether or not I should come out, or if I do it the “right” way when I disclose my lesbian identity. For example, I have a tremendous knee-jerk reflexivity about whether or not I should make a dramatic “coming out speech” on my first day rather than simply stating that I am a lesbian. I question how I am “read” by my students and how those readings may feed stereotypes about lesbians rather than disrupt them.

One thing I know for certain: coming out has enabled me to move from being straight-jacketed in a room without windows and doors to a space where I am free to move, explore, and reclaim my past and go forward through the open window that coming out has provided for me. What *does* my lesbian identity have to do with writing or teaching? *Everything.* ✨

Notes

¹ The binary between expressivism and social constructionism is one that I resist. However, I use the terms here to explicate complications I faced in the kinds of writing that seemed available to me as an instructor of composition.

² I use coming out narratives only as an example, there are other types of “personal” writing that are important to young writers too: for example, the “truth” of women coming to realize how they are “embodied” as women and subsequently oppressed in a misogynistic society.

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