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“Homo”-work: Queering Academic Communication and Communicating Queer in Academia

Ragan Fox

In this personal narrative, I rely on academic tales and anecdotes to advocate a specific deployment of queer pedagogy that focuses on the peri-performative aspects of queering Communication. I consider how Communication scholars are uniquely positioned to specify how academic communication might be queered. I also critique the ways in which some people in academia communicate about queer people. The essay challenges the grammars of compulsory heterosexuality in instructional settings and proposes specific ways to queer academe.

Keywords: Anecdote; LGBTQ; Pedagogy; Personal narrative; Instructional communication

In spring 2008, I served on the comprehensive exam committee of a masters student and graduate teaching assistant named Ross. One of the other committee members had asked Ross to write about his teaching philosophy. Much to my chagrin, his thoughtful answer neglected to address the role sexuality plays in teaching contexts.

“Ross,” I asked, “why didn’t you make any reference to sexual identity in your statement of teaching philosophy?”

A light coat of glitter-like sweat formed over his brow and twinkled under the room’s fluorescent lights. “I don’t think being gay affects my teaching,” he quickly responded.

“Sure, I’m not one of those guys who can hide it.”

“So your sexuality is present, whether or not you explicitly acknowledge it. Silence about your sexual identity may paradoxically magnify its presence in the classes you teach. If you were to rewrite your teaching philosophy, how might you include gay themes?”

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The committee member who had initially inquired about Ross’s teaching practices and values arched an eyebrow and exhaled audibly. “Ragan,” she said, “I’m confused by your question. I am inclined to agree with Ross. Instructional communication is about testing teaching strategies and measuring student learning outcomes. The instructor’s sexual identity is immaterial. What’s love got to do with it?”

I shook my head and widened my eyes. Was a heterosexual colleague using lyrics from a beloved gay icon to dismiss the importance of queer pedagogy? I was somewhat baffled by her claim, given that she is married to a male faculty member in our department and regularly co-teaches with him, thereby theatricalizing her heterosexuality in the classes she instructs. By probing Ross to consider the role of queerness in the classroom, I was not suggesting that he inject themes of sexuality in a place where they are not already exceedingly present. My goal was to encourage him to “excavate and interpret the way [pedagogy] already is sexualized—and furthermore... the way that it is explicitly heterosexualized” (Sumara and Davis 192). Heteronormativity is so engrained in the everyday mechanics of pedagogy that its overwhelming presence is frequently interpreted as absence. Much like whiteness is popularly and mistakenly constructed as the absence of race, love and sex in academic settings tend to be marked as significant and excessive only when matters of queer sexuality are evoked.

Questions like the ones posed to Ross lead me to consider important and often-dismissed conversations about how an instructor’s sexual standpoint influences his or her pedagogy. Many queer-identified teachers know that sexuality matters in a classroom. I am reminded of the resonance of my sexuality every time I read qualitative evaluations of my teaching, in which students sometimes praise me for addressing gay themes in lectures and sometimes chastise me for promoting a “gay agenda.” My queerness also comes to the forefront when colleagues ask me to guest lecture on gay studies or give them a crash course in queer theory. Like Deborah Britzman, my sexuality matters each and every time students, potential employers, and colleagues ask the question, “What theoretical perspectives and methods inform your research?” Queer instructors may have a hard time talking about pedagogy without a substantive discussion of why and how sexuality matters in classrooms. I therefore advocate a specific type of “critical pedagogy” (Shor 129; see also Freire) that augments discussions of race, class, and gender uniquely centered in most critical pedagogical theory (hooks). Specifically, I address the academic marginalization of sexual minorities and highlight how heteronormativity structures the foundations of traditional instructional philosophies and practices.

I am admittedly part of the “network of power relations” (Foucault, History 95) that I critique in this paper. Power and resistance are, in this sense, two cogs in the same academic mechanism. Thomas K. Nakayama and Frederick C. Corey reflect on systems of internalized academic homophobia when they contend that, “Throughout the academy, queer students idolize heteronormative theories, methods that constructed variance, deviance, discourses of abnormality, and documents of marginalization. Queer students worship the institutions of oppression. Queer academics want to join the ranks” (324). I come to this project aiming to answer a tricky and paradoxical question that may prove to be significant in the lives of
many queer academicians: How might queer instructors contest institutionalized homophobia when they are so utterly invested in the very establishments they hope to critique? In this paper, I advocate specific exercises in queer pedagogy and, in doing so, consider the roles academic narratives and other forms of scholarly communication play in identity formation and maintenance.

“What’s Love Got to Do with It?”

The worst academic experience of my life occurred in 2001. I was a masters student registered in my first queer theory graduate seminar. I had never been exposed to lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgendered, and queer (LGBTQ) history, let alone the complex intricacies of poststructuralism. Despite my limited understanding of queer criticism, I was totally invested in the course. I used class time to ask a lot of questions and debate the merits of our assigned readings. For the first time in my academic career, I was “that guy”—the one who raised his hand every 10 minutes and the one who everyone else in the class avoided at break. At midterm, we submitted our final project proposals. Many of the arguments in my paper challenged some of the foundational tenets of queer epistemology. I wanted to consider how an overarching label like “queer” might erase other important and intersectional aspects of identity, like gender and race. This argument is now a common critique of queer theory. At the time, though, I was too ineloquent and inexperienced to frame and articulate my criticism. The instructor gave me a failing grade on the assignment and suggested that I talk to her during office hours.

I will never forget sitting on the cold linoleum floor outside her office while waiting for her to finish a phone conversation. She finally waved at me, indicating I could enter the room. I dumped my nervous body into an uncomfortable chair and greeted her. “Ragan,” she said with little hint of emotion, “I think you should drop the class. Your contributions are a distraction, and I think you’re an essentialist.” I had never been asked to drop a course before, let alone one to which I was so devoted. Heartbroken and embarrassed, I withdrew from the queer theory seminar the following day. I open the theoretical portion of this essay with an intimate understanding that queer theory is complex in its philosophies, investments, and implications. Some may not understand what it means to “queer” a statement of teaching philosophy because queer epistemologies continue to be marginalized in academia, and some queer instructors—myself included—sometimes feel personally attacked or insulted when colleagues and students do not understand queer theory’s relevance and intricacies.

Mary Bryson and Suzanne de Castell first used the term “queer pedagogy” in 1993 to describe a “radical form of educative praxis implemented deliberately to interfere with, to intervene in, the production of ‘normalcy’ in schooled subjects” (285). As the name suggests, queer pedagogy is rooted in queer theory, a camp of cultural critique that extends the work of thinkers like Michel Foucault, Judith Butler, and Eve K. Sedgwick. In the introductory volume of The History of Sexuality, Foucault considers primary ways that sexuality has been strategically deployed in Western culture, including the “psychiatrization of perversity,” the “pedagogization of
children’s sex,” and the “socialization of procreative behavior” (104–05). Each method of deployment works in a dialogic, concomitant fashion. Take, for example, two ballot initiatives that were voted upon in California, the state in which I teach. In 1978, California Proposition 6 (aka the Briggs Initiative) sought to ban gay and lesbian teachers from working in public schools. Many who supported the bill did so to “protect” children from the contaminating threat of homosexuality (see Secretary of State of California). Similar rhetoric emerged in advertisements touting the benefits of Proposition 8, the 2008 ballot initiative that eventually eliminated the right of gay people to marry in California (see Voter Information Guide). One commercial in favor of Proposition 8 features a young girl coming home from school and greeting her mother. “Mom,” the girl exclaims. “Guess what I learned in school today…. I learned how a prince married a prince and I can marry a princess” (VoteYesOnProp8). Sad, foreboding music then drowns out the dialogue, suggesting that this knowledge has soiled the girl. In both cases, children are elevated to a place of spectacular danger (pedagogization of children’s sex), where they must be protected from sexually perverse adults (psychiatrization of perverse pleasure). Moreover, knowledge that gay people exist has the profound power to alter the sexuality of the child and render her unable to marry a man (socialization of procreative behavior). Proposition 8, unlike the Briggs Initiative, focused exclusively on marriage equality, not public education; yet members of the “Yes on 8” campaign worked diligently to convince California’s electorate that the ballot proposal dealt primarily with gay themes in curriculum. These anecdotes illustrate one of Foucault’s primary contributions to critical theory: power and knowledge are inextricably bound. Debates about gay rights invariably lead to discussions of queer pedagogical practice because the marginalization of LGBTQ people relies on educational propaganda that simultaneously censors and debases sexual minorities. Britzman reminds us that, “The absence of gay and lesbian theorizing in education is set in tension with crucial cultural and historical changes that concern the constitution of bodies of knowledge and knowledge of bodies” (151). “Mom, guess what I learned in school today,” indeed.

The trouble with critiquing the “Yes on 8” campaign’s use of fear appeals is that educational discourse does in fact construct a performative reality. Queer theory is grounded in the language of gender performativity. Butler suggests that gender is a set of deliberate and routinized actions, rather than a fixed state of being, meaning we engender discourses about masculinity, femininity, and sexuality. Schools are not merely homes of historical, scientific, and literary “facts,” they are grand stages of “everyday life performance” (Goffman), where people enact and ritualize the normative. In her theorizing of queer performativity, Butler pulls from J. L. Austin’s notion of illocutionary speech, whereby particular utterances perform the action they describe. Austin’s most cited example of a performative statement is the “I do!” spoken at a marriage ceremony. Butler might describe gay enactments of this ritual, or performative, as an aping of institutionalized heterosexuality. After all, “unlike Austin’s heterosexual first person, our queer spouse has a much less secure or empowering relation to family, witnesses, church, and state” (Edwards 83).
Alternatively, Sedgwick argues that our hypothetical queer spouse engages in a “peri-performative,” meaning he or she explicitly creates a performative discourse about performativity (68). The peri-performative highlights what cannot be uttered in a particular culture and notes the discursive lengths some people travel to describe marginalization that uniquely complicates the lives of gay people. Sedgwick describes the peri-performative as utterances “near, next to, and crowding against” the explicit performative. “Peri-performative neighborhoods have prestigious centers (the explicit performative utterance),” she writes, “but not very fixed circumferences” (68). Like queer people, peri-performative discourse exists in the margins, speaks the master language (the explicit performative), and potentially disrupts performativity’s habituated reiteration.

In the context of this paper, “queer pedagogy” functions as a peri-performative that exists on the margins of traditional curriculum and calls attention to and critiques academic discourses that perpetuate myths of compulsory and assumed heterosexuality. Queer pedagogy may also be described as a practice through which one queers instructional communication and communication about instruction. Explicating queer pedagogy requires a more abstract understanding of what it means to queer an artifact and then specifically what it means to queer the study of human communication.

While some may conceptualize queer as a noun (e.g., a queer) or as an adjective (e.g., a queer woman), many advocates of queer theory see the term as a verb. Queering connotes a form of cultural spectatorship and production that locates and celebrates non-normative expressions of gender and sexuality. Queering challenges hetero-textual essentialism, or the belief that people, places, and objects are straight unless otherwise explicitly marked as LGBTQ (Doty). California State University, Long Beach (CSULB) is, for example, partially queered when many people on campus celebrate National Coming Out Week, a three-day event during which LGBTQ faculty and staff disclose their sexual identities in the school newspaper, and campus community members host and participate in LGBTQ-focused events.

Because queering is inherently an instructional, communicative, and performative act, Communication scholars are uniquely positioned to investigate the potential of queering everyday acts of communication and the formal study of Communication. Gust Yep outlines two primary ways communication studies might be queered. First, queering Communication involves “unpacking heteronormativity” (“From Homophobia” 26), meaning scholars recognize heterosexuality as a historical construct that relies on various discourses and habits to reproduce itself. Unpacking heteronormativity requires pinpointing what Foucault refers to as “structures of intelligibility or regimes of truth that regulate—in a given history—the thinkable, the recognizable, the limits, and the transgressions discursively codified” in educational praxis (Britzman 156; see also Foucault “A Preface”). Second, queering Communication involves a commitment to “queer world-making,” or the presentation of alternate worldviews that run alongside, rather than replace, master narratives. Queer world-making requires more than including gay and lesbian themes in curricula. “Arguments for inclusion produce the very exclusions they are meant to cure,”
Britzman suggests. “Representations in the form of tidy role models,” she continues, “cannot address the problem of identification” (158). Too often, LGBTQ history is treated as specialized knowledge and pushed to the margins, which further highlights the supremacy of heteronormativity.

Jaclyn Pryor, for example, chronicles how several students in an undergraduate theatre course at the University of Texas at Austin used homophobia as an excuse to miss class when she discussed gay-themed plays like Angels in America. Some of the students emailed Pryor and complained that she focused too heavily on gay and lesbian content and pleaded with her to include more “real plays” that feature “real people” and that “normal people” watch. The implication is that queer people are “unreal, not actual, abnormal, and irrelevant” (Pryor 75). Embedded in their argument for alternative assignments is the “assumption that homophobia [is] a sanctioned excuse for missing class” (73) and dismissing course content. Marginalizing and erasing gay subject matter needlessly constructs both homosexuality and homophobia as institutionally recognized illnesses. Gay themes are treated as viral knowledge that may infect students with homosexuality; conversely, homophobia is likened to a sickness that excuses a student’s absence from class.

Academic institutions, in turn, tend to conceal queer sexuality by way of homophobic policies, both spoken and unspoken (Atkinson). This erasure of LGBTQ personhood facilitates a queer-oriented “soul murder” (Yep “Violence”) of gay students, who are systematically denied positive LGBTQ role models in historical and literary canons and in the immediate context of the classroom. While it is not uncommon for students to hear about a heterosexual instructor’s partner, the mundane matters of queer sexuality are frequently constructed as “too much information” or, as Ross’s committee member suggested, irrelevant to instruction or even teaching philosophy. Calling attention to heteropatriarchal double-standards is a key component of queer pedagogy. Many heterosexual instructors like my colleague may not understand the pertinence of sexuality in pedagogy because heterosexuality is habitually celebrated in academia. Most students learn about the detailed mechanics of heterosexual behavior, sex acts, and romance when they take courses in health, biology, and literature. When queer sexuality is mentioned in the classroom, it is, more often than not, discussed in terms of psychological abnormality and illness (Fox “Tales”).

Narrating Queer Pedagogy

My queer take on pedagogy is in part a tactical response to how more positivistic forms of science tend to affirm heterosexuality’s master narrative and bolster myths about LGBTQ people. Numeric renderings of sexual minorities and their experiences and behaviors have resulted in Kinsey scales and other statistical forms of objectification that pathologize and, in some cases, demonize men and women who violate the heterosexual contract (Warner). Because queer people often lack proper representation in more traditional forms of research, I utilize a method that is grounded and invested in matters of self-representation.
Personal narratives and anecdotes demonstrate why queer pedagogy matters. Tales told in instructional environments function as “definitional ceremonies” (Myherhoff 234), wherein class participants construct and maintain their identities. “Definitional ceremonies,” according to Kristin Langellier,

adhere to a nostalgia for the canonical stories that unify the subject, knowledge, and history to link modernity with traditional society…. [Narrative] here evacuates difference, covers over conflict and power interests, and re-stabilizes identity, meanings, and social relations (it “allows things to stay the same”). (134)

For example, students regularly perform speeches of introduction in basic Communication courses. These presentations are a type of personal narrative, wherein class members narrate the significance of artifacts they bring in from home. Because LGBTQ themes have been strategically concealed in the recent history of academia, many instructors may not have the communicative skills to address potentially charged situations that emerge when students use class presentations and discussions to come out of the sexual closet, nor to appreciate how this sort of assignment poses unique challenges to LBGTQ students who sometimes struggle with self-disclosure and its implications. Alternatively, personal narratives may be used to resist reductive depictions of LGBTQ people that pervade popular academic discourses. Guided by the aforementioned understandings of personal narrative, I reference personal classroom tales to theorize how queer pedagogy might be utilized in communication courses.

Narrative inquiry is a good fit for this study because most people use stories to convey exemplary teaching practices. Incoming graduate students at CSULB, for instance, do not receive an instructional handbook that chronicles “teaching strategies and measurable student learning outcomes,” as determined by quantitative measures. Rather, they rely primarily on their peers’ and faculty’s teaching anecdotes to prepare for different classroom encounters. The same was true when I was a graduate student at Arizona State University (ASU). Before we taught our first classes, we participated in teaching workshops, wherein faculty members performed personal narratives about classroom experiences. We also met once a month to discuss pedagogical trials and triumphs. Personal narrative is the primary strategy we utilize in instruction and in instruction about instruction. “Formal [post-positivistic] knowledge is not necessarily a stepping stone to improved [pedagogical] practice,” argue Robert E. Stake and Deborah J. Trumbull. They advocate “naturalistic generalizations” that underscore the importance of pedagogy narratives. They continue:

The naturalistic researcher seeks to present selected raw data-portrayals of actual teaching and learning problems, witnessing of observers who understand the reality of the classroom, [and] words of the people involved… [highlighting] the richness and ambiguities and conflicts which are part of daily experience. The reader can then weigh the given data against her experiences and perhaps confront previous interpretations and temper convictions formerly held. (4–7)

I also use anecdotal evidence to substantiate my claims. Anecdotal evidence describes brief, non-fictional narratives and institutional artifacts that help substantiate the “bigger picture” of my queer teaching tales. Bits of anecdotal evidence are the
parts that comprise the whole of my teaching character, wherein “character” represents my ethos or credibility in (and out of) the classroom and my self-consciously crafted character, or “ethnographic ‘I’” (Ellis), presented in this report. Anecdotal theory emphasizes the partiality of truth claims (Pryor), meaning my tale is not intended to represent all or even most queer teaching scenarios, nor do the narratives paint a complete picture of my own instructional experiences. In this study, I offer personal narratives that animate the consequence of queering pedagogy in and out of the classroom. I specifically focus on Yep’s suggestions for queering Communication. First, I share tales that illustrate the re-iterative forces of heteronormativity in academe. Then, I engage in acts of queer world-making via personal narrative and anecdote.

Unpacking Heteronormativity in Academia

My freshman year of high school was an exercise in enduring homophobia (see Fox “Tales”). I was regularly spit on, called “faggot,” pushed into lockers, and threatened by some of the very boys who starred in my sexual fantasies. I spent my freshman year in a state of prolonged silence, fearing that my peers would denigrate me the moment I made even the slightest contribution to class discussion. When I complained to my guidance counselor about anti-gay abuse taking place in specific classes, she refused to alter my schedule. I soon realized that I would be able to make schedule changes if I improved my grades and qualified for placement in advanced courses. By the start of sophomore year, my academic performance progressed, I felt safe and accepted, and I was more comfortable participating in class. After spending a year in silence, I could not help but speak.

My 10th-grade honors biology instructor, Mr. Gilmore, was perhaps the teacher most annoyed by my jabber jaw. Although rumors circulated that Mr. Gilmore was gay, he never disclosed his sexual identity. Students simply made assumptions about why he was a bachelor, spoke an octave higher than most men, donned a bowtie, and always appeared perfectly coiffed. Mr. Gilmore was the antithesis of the other male science teacher, who was always disheveled, wore sweatpants to work, and coached football at the school. I did not particularly like Mr. Gilmore. He regularly (and rightfully) disciplined me for speaking out of turn. In the deepest recesses of my brain, I feared that Mr. Gilmore was a prophecy of my gay future. He represented a desire that never spoke its name, and worse, an inability to escape the fluorescent lights, drab colors, and homophobia of high school. Three years after I first entered his class, I started my freshman year of college and became a “frequent flyer” at Houston’s queer bars. One night, I ran into Mr. Gilmore at a gay dance club. He went pale the moment he recognized me. “Please, Ragan, don’t tell anyone you saw me here. I could lose my job. Please keep this a secret,” he pleaded.

I am ashamed to admit this but, for a moment, I entertained the idea of telling my former classmates where I saw my former biology teacher. I wanted to hijack and exercise power he once held over me. Our relationship was in large part defined by an intergenerational struggle, wherein many older gay men see hiding sexual identity as
a method of survival, and many younger gay men value queer visibility (Fox “Gay”).
Gossiping about Mr. Gilmore would turn me into one of the high school bullies I
tried to escape when I worked so hard to be admitted into his class. After surviving
years of homophobic abuse in school, the sadist in me enjoyed watching him squirm.
Years of anti-gay indoctrination pulsed through my arteries; the paradox of the
moment dizzied me as I stood in the middle of a gay bar and considered—and was
even amused by—another gay man’s pleas for privacy.

While collecting artifacts for this essay, I desperately searched for a picture of Mr.
Gilmore. I knew that seeing his face would help me in emotional recall activities
whereby I revisit past experiences before creatively re-rendering them. Much to my
chagrin, I was unable to locate his photo in any of my four high school yearbooks. I
cannot help but wonder about his absence from books that document both the
mundane happenings of high school life and the people and events in which we took
pride. Like Craig Gingrich-Philbrook, I look at the nonappearance of a specific gay
man and wonder “how to address something which has not disappeared—some
‘thing’ that remains remarkable when removed, demonstrating that what has gone
missing never enjoyed a guarantee, despite the accident of having actually existed at
one time” (454–55). Mr. Gilmore’s absence from my high school yearbooks echoes
the secret I kept for him after our paths crossed at a gay bar called Heaven. Years later,
I ruminate on the complexities of that secret. Was I a queer ally by performing the
silence that Mr. Gilmore always expected of me? Or did my silence make me complicit
in heteronormative structures that render LGBTQ people absent in academia, despite
their presence?

Randolph C. Head and Daniel E. Christensen claim that, “One may apply the
notion of performativity to cases where reality is established through silence”
(emphasis added 262). Performative silence may be linked to Foucault’s “repressive
hypothesis,” which argues that attempts to censor talk about particular sex acts and
sexual subjectivities have resulted in a “countereffect, a valorization and intensifica-
tion of indecent speech; an institutional incitement to speak about [sex], and to do so
more and more” (History 18). He goes on to contend that, “What is peculiar to
modern societies, in fact, is not that they consigned sex to a shadow existence, but
that they dedicated themselves to speaking of it ad infinitum, while exploiting it as the
secret” (History 35). Calls for the absence and silence of LGBTQ people magnify their
presence. Take, for example, Tennessee State Senate Bill 49, also known as 2011’s
“Don’t Say Gay” bill, that aimed to ban public school teachers from discussing
LGBTQ topics before high school (see Campfield). Agents working to omit LGBTQ
themes and people from Tennessee’s curriculum ended up generating and inciting
multiple discourses about the legal controversy, including legislative documents,
protest rhetoric, press descriptions of the catalytic event, and opinion and editorial
essays for and against the bill. The repressive hypothesis also explains why, despite
Mr. Gilmore’s silence about his “personal life,” students filled in the missing blanks of
his sexuality. Absence is a broken promise.

My high school peers’ verbal and physical abuse may be interpreted as efforts to
diminish my voice and body; but bullying, as a disciplinary mechanism, multiplied
discourse about my presumed sexuality. Negations took the form of “faggot” and homoerotic lines spoken by muscular young men who beckoned me with, “Want to suck my dick, gay boy?” (Probably!) The more vocal the anti-gay chorus grew, the more silent I became; but my personal silence was coupled with the multiple ways their speech and violence rendered my sexuality exceedingly present.

To unpack heteronormativity, one must understand the sometimes discrete and insidious ways heterosexuality is communicated as the only real social and personal option. Heteronormativity gains much of its reiterative force when people embedded in an institution both implicitly and explicitly rely on concomitant metaphors of contagion and containment to marginalize and omit LGBTQ themes and people. Compulsory heterosexuality relies on a myth that exposure to LGBTQ people and subject matter produces a viral effect. In other words, knowledge of LGBTQ people is infectious. A teacher, via acts of communication, infects his or her student with homosexuality, much like somebody with the flu passes along the virus with a handshake or sneeze. Once exposed to the gay virus, the infected person may consider LGBTQ subjectivities and behaviors as a viable life option; which, in turn, disrupts the dangerous lie upon which heteronormativity is premised, namely that heterosexuality is the only choice. Because LBGTQ people have long been misrepresented as child molesters (Pryor) and Western civilization is partially structured by a need to “protect children from ‘contaminating’ sexual knowledge” (Biddulph 17; see also Foucault History), young people are seen and depicted as especially vulnerable to the gay virus.

The viral implications of gay-related knowledge are magnified on the Internet, where even the most mundane aspects of a person’s life may be documented and made available to the general public. Digital communication provides new ways of potentially exposing students to knowledge that (gasp!) their teachers are sexual beings who sometimes discuss sexual topics and go to (hold on to your hats!) gay and lesbian bars. Social networking has blurred public and private spheres and significantly altered educational landscapes. Social networks have also made LGBTQ academics more available to be gazed upon and disciplined. In fall 2006, I was settling into a tenure-track position at CSULB, when a colleague entered my office, shut the door behind her, and asked if we could have a private conversation about my MySpace profile. “Sure,” I replied. Like a mood ring, blood rushed to my cheeks and burned them rose red.

“Cynthia recently visited your MySpace page and saw that you refer to yourself as a ‘bottom.’ She thinks you should make your profile private so that none of the Communication students will be exposed to it.”

I blinked thrice and tried my best to make my gaping jaw form words. “I never asked students to visit my MySpace profile.”

“Maybe you can just take down the part where you mention that you’re a bottom?”

“Absolutely not. If I hide my profile, I may also have to halt publication of my poetry collection. In my first book, I have poems in which I reclaim the term bottom and question the negative connotation commonly associated with the label. Being a bottom, in the context of the gay community, isn’t just a sexual position; words like ‘top’ and ‘bottom’ are ways that gay people communicate social identities. Cynthia
may be offended because she’s straight and doesn’t understand the complexity of terms with which I identify.”

Implicit in my well-intended colleague’s request is the notion that my sexual and social identity might expose students in our department to contaminative sexual knowledge. Making my MySpace profile private is a disciplinary exercise in gay containment and erasure. Heterosexual sex is not subject to the same scope of corrective measures. Students in my junior high school, for example, learned about heterosexual sex in painstaking detail. We watched films about men date-raping women and viewed graphic videos about heterosexual sex and reproduction (Fox “Tales”). I distinctly remember the school’s sex education teacher handing out diagrams and pictures that literally mapped out the biological terrain of heterosexuality. But the term “bottom” on my MySpace profile is considered excessive and dangerous to college students? Expectations to conform to heterosexuality are so routinized in Western academic settings that communication about any option that violates the heterosexual contract—no matter how mundane or removed from campus—is considered obscene. The Internet has transformed universities into panoptic beasts with eyes that see far beyond the institutions’ architecture and may peer into LGBTQ professors’ lives when they are not at work. The abovementioned conversation with my colleague exemplifies digital extensions of panoptic gaze, whereby institutional members convince one another that they are always being watched (Foucault Discipline); that LGBTQ professors must always police and conceal communication about their sexual identities; and that their students are both children prone to gay contagion and menacing prison guards.

Unpacking heteronormativity requires instructors to call attention to and resist acts of gay erasure, whereby LGBTQ people are omitted from curricula, bullied into silence, and denied opportunities to engage in peri-performative acts, or to communicate about the intersectional aspects of their identity. First and foremost, this pedagogical strategy challenges one of the most treacherous and fallacious myths upon which heteronormativity gains its performative power: that knowledge of sexuality—particularly an awareness of gay people—sullies children, destroys families, and poses a threat to the future of humanity. Homophobic biases in education comprise some of the most fundamental “structures of intelligibility” (Foucault “A Preface”) that constrain and enable our senses of citizenship, humanity, history, and art.

Queering Academia

I am no stranger to queering educational institutions. When I was in the eighth grade, gender-ambiguous clothing covered my bone-thin body, and long and crimped hair obscured portions of my soft, feminine face. I regularly used a piece of white cotton cloth to hold back my flowing locks (Figure 1). Substitute teachers regularly mistook me for a female and many of my classmates ridiculed me. My white headband became a proverbial line-in-the-sand for some of my peers and their parents. One day, the family across the street stopped talking to me. The mother in
particular refused to make eye contact and re-entered her home when I skipped outside. Over the course of a single year, I became the neighborhood pariah. I never understood why my neighbors gave me dirty looks and stopped communicating with me until a boy named Scott moved into a home a few streets down from mine. Scott and I became fast friends. We played in the woods behind his house, smoked cigarettes in the bayou, and listened to a lot of the same music. One morning on the bus, Scott told me that his parents no longer wanted us to hang out.

The blood pumping in my face felt as if it turned to marble. “Why?” I replied. “They’ve become good friends with Tommy Alan’s parents and they told my mom and dad that you’re gay.” All the raised eyebrows, disapproving nods, callous whispers, and closed lips now made sense. Long before I came out of the closet or kissed a boy, my neighbors made assumptions about my sexual desire and tried to contain it. Because of this, I grew up hating what they assumed to be true about me. I hated my sexual identity. I suppose I hated myself. “Stop calling him gay. He isn’t gay,” my friends yelled at bullies; yet none of us had the tools or wherewithal to ask the question, “What is so wrong with being gay?” In the 1980s, mainstream education about gay people came solely from the media, which focused almost exclusively on the relationship between gay men, HIV contraction, and AIDS-related deaths. Television, newspaper, and magazine reports provided the worst sort of
LGBTQ-related education, which had profound performative implications for the ways people communicated with and about gay men.

Take, for example, the time I pierced my left ear. Rumor had it that piercing the right one meant you were gay, and I certainly did not want to add fuel to the flames (so to speak). I remember exposing my diamond-encrusted ear to my father. He immediately demanded to know where I had gotten it done. “I used a needle from our sewing kit,” I explained. That night, my father, who was normally cool and collected, had an epic meltdown. “Do you realize you can get AIDS from needles,” he bellowed in his distinct baritone. Perhaps my father understood I would not contract HIV from a needle-and-thread kit and was more afraid by the metonymic representation of a pierced ear, even if it was the left one.

My talent for queer metonymy stuck with me through high school and college. I spent my first year at ASU in flip-flops that exposed toenails painted a glittery gold. Each day I walked past the same parking attendant who regularly commented on my sparkly talons. “Why are your toenails painted?” she asked. Monday afternoon: “Those are some bright toenails!” Tuesday morning: “You realize your toenails are painted, right?” Thursday afternoon: “What on Earth made you paint your toenails?” The repetition of her question infuriated me. “Why do you care?” I thought. Her queries symbolized subtle, everyday forms of interaction that, for years, put my body on display and disciplined me. I am sensitive to seemingly innocuous interactions about my performance of gender and sexuality because this sort of commentary is exactly what greases up the performative machine.

By the time I started my first tenure-track job, and after years of performing queer monologues on theatrical stages, the publication demands of my position required that I focus less on the performance of my physical body and more on a body of work. One need only think of the controversy surrounding Frederick C. Corey and Thomas K. Nakayama’s “Sextext” (see Owen), postponement of Dustin B. Goltz’s show “Banging the Bishop” (see Goltz ‘Artist’s Statement”), or Villanova University’s recent cancellation of Tim Miller’s performance to appreciate how queer bodies of work are put on display; characterized as dangerous, “pornographic,” and illegitimate forms of scholarship (Owen); and dismissed, even by people who admit they have never read or seen the work they claim to disavow. The power of the anecdote lies in its ability to spotlight how and when communication is used to discipline LGBTQ teachers and scholars.

Several years ago, I submitted an ethnographic investigation of gay performance artists to a journal. The guest editor wrote to tell me he was worried about the sexually explicit language I quoted in the essay. His message read: “[The journal editors] are concerned with two main issues: how the more shocking aspects of the text reflect on the journal as a whole, and more so the potential for outright dismissal of the manuscript by readers turned off by its graphic nature.” I immediately wrote a lengthy defense of the piece, which is best summarized in the following excerpt:

The graphic portions of the essay come from communication that I am analyzing, communication that came from a field of study. A call to edit based on the content of the communication I study and not my analysis of the communication suggests that certain people in our culture are not worthy of examination. I’m
investigating a population, a “tribe,” if you will. To run with the metaphor, am I, as a researcher, expected to edit out sacrificial practices of the tribe because the communication might offend people who may (or may not) be disturbed by the group’s rituals? To the editors’ credit, they did not make me censor my informants’ words and, after minor revisions to the analysis, the piece was published.

This anecdote exemplifies how queer communication functions as “implicative performance” (Fox “Implicative Performance”) in academia, meaning queer scholarship implicates the very journals, departments, and institutions that feature LGBTQ people and their words. I spent a long time debating the ethics of narrating this story and including bits of editorial correspondence. My goal is not to implicate and embarrass the aforementioned journal and its editors. I share the tale because it illuminates why Sedgwick’s distinction between performativity and peri-performativity is a crucial component of queer pedagogy. Performing this anecdote in my body of work calls attention to the peri-performative, or “the context of and audiences for performatives” (Edwards 81). Including the tale illustrates how the “peri-performative has more aptitude than the explicit performative for registering historical change” (Sedgwick 79). An interpretive essay that studies performative utterances of queer people may not address performative mechanisms at work that allow utterances about queer speech to be shared.

Peri-performativity is a meta-epistemological act that aims to “unpack” taken-for-granted, routinized savoir, or “discursive conditions that are necessary for the development of connaisance” (Gutting 251), where connaisance, in Foucauldian terms, refers to “formal bodies of knowledge such as scientific books, philosophical theories, and religious justifications” (Schurich and McKenzie 846). Savoir guides the unconscious maneuverings of scholars, editors, reviewers, teachers, and administrators, who individually and collectively determine what constitutes an era’s “legitimate,” formal knowledge. Editorial feedback functions as one important, anecdotal form of marginalia, where savoir, or assumptions about knowledge, may be mapped. H. J. Jackson argues that, for centuries, writing, sharing, and analyzing marginalia constituted a scholarly, pedagogical act. He suggests that

conscious agreement and dissent alike contribute to the construction of identity. A marked or annotated book traces the development of the reader’s self-definition in and by the relation to the text. Perhaps all readers experience this process; annotators keep a log. (87)

Queering pedagogy involves revealing the wizard behind academia’s curtain. Peri-performative communication draws attention to implicative performance, noting who is implicated in performative speech and what discourse is cited in a particular speech act. By investigating speech about queer speech, we come to understand a primary way that epistemology and identity are co-constituted and maintained. Understanding marginality sometimes requires visiting pedagogical communication that takes place in the margins—even when it is anecdotal and located in the margins of reviewed manuscripts.
Peri-performative considerations also emerge as salient in the classroom. Take, for example, the group presentation I assign in my undergraduate rhetorical theory class. Groups of six to ten students select a theoretical concept we have covered during the semester, research the topic, present their findings to the class, and use skits to enact theory. Groups typically see me several times in office hours to discuss the outside research they have collected and to pitch possible skit ideas. These visits prove especially beneficial to students who select topics from the third and final unit of the class, titled Rhetoric, Social Movements, and Ideology. Queering is one of the more popular and problematic rhetorical strategies that students select from this unit. One semester, a group primarily composed of jocular, seemingly heterosexual men focused on queering. I worried when they failed to come to office hours to discuss their presentation’s themes and theatrical aspects. When I asked a member of the group why they had not attended office hours, his eyes and smile widened. “Because we want to surprise you,” he boisterously replied. “Trust me. You are going to love our ideas.” Two weeks later, members of the queering group took the stage. Half of the men wore fluorescent wigs, donned matronly dresses, painted their faces with blue and pink glittery makeup, and talked with exaggerated lisps. Their theatrical rendering of queerness reminded me of boys who had bullied me in high school, young men who tripped over elongated “S” sounds when they taunted me with phrases like, “SssSSsso happy to sssssSSSSsssee you, RaGAY. Fucking queer!”

Nearly 20 years after gay and lesbian theorists and activists re-appropriated the term “queer,” I was reminded of a time when “queer” was used against me. I went home that night and spent hours thinking about the (re-)presentation. I thought about the ways in which I was complicit in their performance. I should have realized a single queer theory lecture and a handful of additional reading assignments would not have properly prepared the students to bear the brunt of LGBTQ representational politics; I should have insisted they come to office hours. Conversely, might their production be a fair portrayal of queering’s whimsy and rebellion against identity politics? Might the performance rally against overly simplistic evaluations that situate queer intervention as either successful or a failure? Four of the class’s most masculine, presumably heterosexual men wore dresses and makeup to school, and did so with carefree excitement. They selected an LGBTQ-themed topic for their presentation and read several essays about queer theory. In my initial reaction to their work, I myopically focused on how they implicated LGBTQ people, but I failed to celebrate how they bucked heteronormative pedagogy and implicated themselves in their choice of topic, dress, and other modes of theatricality.

Groups who select queering are now required to visit me in office hours, during which we talk about the “trouble of speaking for others” (Alcoff) and strategies for theatricalizing queer aesthetics in ways that challenge stereotypes of LGBTQ people. I encourage them to be self-reflexive throughout the presentation and explicitly discuss how and who their skits implicate. Noting the implicative aspects of their presentation ensures that they engage multiple levels of performative signification and investigate the peri-performative components of their own speech acts. Queering curriculum is not merely an act of inclusion because inclusion is not enough.
Queering instruction also acknowledges the peri-performative aspects of queer epistemology, or pays careful attention to speech about queer speech.

Writing this essay made me take a sobering and necessary look at my own queer pedagogical practices. Since starting a tenure-track position, I have delivered 25 lectures on queer theory. In each lecture, I repeat themes of psychiatric torture, death, and disease. Rinse and repeat. Torture, death, and disease. Repeat. The problem with this equation is that too much emphasis on marginalization may encourage students to situate queer futures in the most dreadful aspects of queer past. I hope to queer my own pedagogical practices better by telling a more complete LGBTQ story and paying even more attention to the peri-performative aspects of what has been described as “queer literacy” (Vicars).

**Queer Pedagogy Matters**

The night California voters approved Proposition 8, I felt conflicted. I was overjoyed to witness the first African American president of the United States, yet utterly crestfallen to watch the Proposition 8 train maintain its steam. I remember hearing a black woman on the television news: “Obama unites black and white, Latino, Asian, young and old. There are no more barriers.” I recall how difficult it was for me to continue watching the Prop. 8 poll returns stay at 52.24% in favor, 47.76% opposed (see Wikipedia). I felt selfish for my self-pity and heartbroken that more than half my neighbors were so threatened by the fact that I do, in fact, feel. I wondered how I would wake up the next morning and teach California’s youth; how I would reconcile feeling joy for the victory of a man who touted “change” and “hope,” but, at the time, did not believe I should enjoy full citizenship and equal rights. After hours of masochism, I turned off the TV and cried myself to sleep, just like I used to do when I was 16.

Today, I am more optimistic. Many of my students are eager to learn about LGBTQ people and subject matter. I am, however, not confident that a course focusing exclusively on queer themes and called Queer Theory and Communication would meet minimum registration requirements at my university. For some, registering for such a class would performatively enact coming out of the sexual closet, regardless of primary sexual identification. A course with “Queer” in its title implicates. Several students may not be prepared to explain to parents, friends, and family why they have taken a class in queer theory. I am sensitive to how naming and implication may performatively render uncomfortable contexts for my students. I therefore try my best to weave queer themes into existing curricula, to augment awareness of the ways heterosexuality already shapes epistemological frameworks, and to remain explicit about the peri-performative aspects of my own queer academic world-making.

I include LGBTQ-themed lectures in almost every class I teach, including Introduction to Rhetorical Theory, Communication Criticism, Gender and Communication, Performing Culture, and graduate seminars in Performance Studies and Qualitative Research Methods. When I recently taught a graduate seminar in
Performance Studies, queer epistemology took center stage, despite the fact that terms like “queer,” “gay,” and “lesbian” were not embedded in the course title. The syllabus included the following paragraph:

“Queering” Communication and Performance: Many class readings focus on queer, female, and non-white identities. I devote a significant amount of time to these subjectivities because tales authored and performed by marginalized community members continue to be “unstoried” in most canonized accounts of history and literature. We will spend a lot of time looking at queer performance, because the subject reflects my expertise as a scholar and the content provides a unique opportunity to learn about a controversial, popular, misunderstood, and insightful method of communication inquiry and object of study.

Borrowing from Sedgwick’s spatial understanding of performativity, the above paragraph explores the possibilities of a queer epistemology that exists beside, rather than takes the place of, traditional curricula. Sedgwick elaborates on the potential of the “beside,” arguing that it

is an interesting preposition because there’s nothing very dualistic about it; a number of elements may lie alongside one another. Its interest does not, however, depend on a fantasy of metonymically egalitarian or even pacific relations, as any child knows who’s shared a bed with siblings.  Beside comprises a wide range of desiring, identifying, representing, repelling, paralleling, differentiating, rivaling, learning, twisting, mimicking, withdrawing, attacking, aggressing, warping, and other relations. (8)

The task of queer pedagogy is to be explicit about the ways in which LGBTQ instructors, scholars, students, and administrators communicate about the “beside,” whether the peri-performative speech takes the form of identifying, repelling, paralleling, or rivaling.

If peri-performative speech theorizes articulations that may not be uttered in specific spaces, Communication scholars are perfectly positioned to critique our own performative practices. I wonder, for instance, why our discipline’s flagship journal in instructional communication only invites “social science research related to instructional communication” (Witt). I am optimistic that journals like Communication Education will begin to reflect more fully how communication instructors talk about instructional communication in contexts ranging from everyday interactions to more formal and organized pedagogy meetings and seminars. Communication pedagogy should include tales of how particular people and their methods of investigation are sometimes blocked from participation. The point is not to take the place of social scientific research about instructional communication, but rather to exist alongside it, to allow both voices to enrich one another. “Pedagogy,” as Jill Dolan explains, “is a site at which to work through questions of social and institutional power, yet relatively little attention is given to how the presumptively radical ideas many faculty bring to their scholarship are presented in their everyday practices as teachers” (119). Narrating pedagogical anecdotes provides a space from which LGBTQ scholars may chronicle and theorize their teaching practices. Love has everything to do with it.
Notes

[1] Pseudonyms for students, former teachers, colleagues, and childhood peers have been used throughout the essay.


Works Cited


