Queering my Praxis

Facilitating a Freirean Culture Circle

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The need for teachers to discuss sexism, misogyny, heteronormativity, and homophobia is a pressing concern amongst educators committed to equity and justice. This self-study, part of a larger year-long inquiry, examines my role in facilitating a Freirean-modeled culture circle amongst high school teachers in a suburban district in Northeastern United States. As a feminist educator, I include gender and sexuality in my classes, but only informally discuss them with my colleagues. These conversations, I realized, held untapped potential. In this self-study, I set out to address the challenges posed by Martin (2014). He argued, "how vitally important it is to discuss gender and sexuality not only with students, but with educators as well. . . to actively promote dialogue that seeks to counter discursive gender assumptions" (p. 155). What would happen, I wondered, if I facilitated a more deliberate dialogue with colleagues about gender and sexuality?

Objectives

I planned a radical collaboration based on Freire's culture circles. A culture circle can describe any community that comes together to problem pose, dialogue, problem solve, and take action in iterative cycles based on issues arising in their lived experiences (Souto-Manning, 2010). Freire (1974) explained, "As men amplify their power to perceive and respond to suggestions and questions arising in their context, and increase their capacity to enter into dialogue not only with other men but with their world, they become 'transitive'" (p. 14). Freire's vision of transitive refers to becoming critically conscious of oppression and more active in the dismantling of that oppression. The concept and practice of dialogic circles may help us become transitive rather than passive by critically examining together how and when and in what ways we disrupt sexism, misogyny, heteronormativity, and homophobia in our classrooms and our school community. This self-study focuses on two dimensions of my experience:

- How does participating in a culture circle influence my approach to gender and sexuality in praxis?

- How does queer theory influence my perception of what it means to lead and facilitate a culture circle on gender and sexuality?

Queer Theory and my Positionality

Feminist theory, queer theory, and self-study share several commitments: critical self-reflection, interactive collaboration, questioning rather than answer finding, and anti-oppressive praxis (hooks,

1994; Kumashiro, 2001; LaBoskey, 2007; Loughran, 2007; Luke & Gore, 1992, Shlasko, 2005; Taylor & Coia, 2014). Several practitioners within the self-study community have called for a more deliberate inclusion of diverse perspectives and attention to matters of social justice (Taylor & Coia, 2014; Tidwell & Fitzgerald, 2006). As such, queer theory as a framework requires deliberate focus on the margins.

Butler's (1990) understanding of gender as performative and relational, is nonconforming and deliberately transgressive (Pennell, 2016). As Kitchen (2014) describes, "queer theory offers a *bent,* rather than *straight,* perspective on people, texts, and contexts" (p. 128). A bent perspective connotes complexity and nonconformity, disrupting my view as facilitator and encouraging me to reframe problems into action.

I identify as a cisgender, heterosexual woman, as well as a feminist educator, an ally, an activist, a questioner, a transcendentalist, and a nonconformist. I do not subscribe to the notion that identity is fixed nor the view of gender or sexuality as binary (Butler, 1990). As an educator who is deeply committed to ally work, I (attempt to) employ queer theory as a way to disrupt my notions of limits and boundaries, my perception of truth, and my reading of the world from a straight lens (Britzman, 1998). I have been drawn to queer theory for its commitment to questioning and disrupting norms, as well as its allowance for multiple truths to co-exist even when seemingly contradictory.

Queer theory emphasizes queer as an action (Britzman, 1998; Ruffolo, 2007; Shlasko, 2005). Ruffolo (2007) argued, "straight teachers can become *queerly intelligible* by *giving an account of queer*" (p. 256). This is not to say that teachers whose identification is straight can take on a queer positionality but they can queer their perspective of what it means to be straight, to see straight, to read straight (Britzman, 1998)—at least momentarily. Ruffolo (2007) explained, "queer theory provides an analytical lens that can create spaces to appreciate the unfixed, unstable, mobile, and fluid identification of subjects—a necessity for projects that envision difference as a foundation for equity" (p. 257). Queer theory provides the lens to continually disrupt traditionally heteronormative spaces, including schools, classrooms, and teacher collaborations. Furthermore, Martin and Kitchen (2019) argued, "LGBTQ educators must be accompanied by equally visible and active allies in the process of *queering* education and teacher education (Goldstein et al., 2007; Zacko-Smith & Smith, 2010)" (p. 5). Thus, I feel compelled to challenge my views of heteronormativity, my privileges from identifying as heterosexual, and my visibility as an ally and activist with the LGBTQ+ community.

Context and Methods

Our school district, situated in an affluent suburb of New York City, requires faculty members to participate in two professional learning communities (PLCs) each year to fulfill professional development responsibilities. Most commonly, small groups meet with their content and grade-level teams to write curricula or address content-specific issues. But, as one colleague and participant in our culture circle noted, "We were never even provided with any real expectations of what a PLC was supposed to be or look like" (meeting notes, 7 October 2019).

While for some, the lack of direction was a frustration, I saw it as an opportunity to disrupt norms. While revisiting Freire (1970/2004; 1974) and discovering Souto-Manning's (2010) enactment of culture circles with groups of teachers, I realized that a PLC provides the basic structure for a culture circle to form: a) community with shared values and concerns and b) dialogue (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009; Freire, 1970/2004; Souto-Manning, 2010).

Souto-Manning (2010) explained the role of dialogue in a culture circle: "to bring multiple perspectives to an issue, to empower participants, and to break down the monological parameters of what they should be and how they should live their lives. It is a complex process, yet a powerful one" (p. 40).

Our culture circle is made up of fifteen teachers across three disciplines: nine English teachers, four history teachers, and two special education teachers. Thirteen members identify as female; two identify as male; one identifies as LGBTQ. Members of the group either responded to my email request sent to the entire faculty or were invited by another participant. At our first meeting, we negotiated norms, expectations, and goals. We agreed to meet one to two times per month after school to dialogue about feminism, sexism, misogyny, heteronormativity, homophobia in relation to our experiences as educators. I used audio-recording and transcribed our collaborations. The idea of negotiating norms together was a deliberate choice to challenge notions of traditional leadership. Beyond our meetings we continued to collaborate and further negotiate our expectations through email, Google Classroom, passing in the hallways, and over coffee and lunch breaks. (Bohny et al., 2016; Coia & Taylor, 2009; Cook, 1992). We used a Google Classroom site and co-constructed Google docs to share and co-develop ideas, dilemmas, questions, and plans. I used these items as data sources to supplement my main data source: a researcher's journal where I examined my participation in the group, my role as a facilitator of the circle, and my praxis as an English educator. Following most meetings, I wrote for 15 – 45 minutes documenting and reflecting on questions, concerns, ideas, and critical incidents. I wrote additional entries several times to capture my thinking and my feelings about our collaboration.

LaBoskey (2007) outlined standards for rigor in self-study: go beyond self-reflection into action, challenge assumptions with a group of critical friends, and make reflective work a transformative and public part of praxis. Self-study promotes transformative practice and action (Loughran, 2007). To transform talk to practice, I began analysis immediately (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Using the constant comparative method (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016) and Shlasko's (2005) description of queer pedagogy, I coded for themes. Using queer theory as a lens, I focused on norms, boundaries, limits, and binaries. As Hamilton and Pinnegar (2014) note, "dialogue becomes a crucible in which knowledge is shaped, becomes linked to evidence and gains authority" (p. 49). I offered my journal and analyses to members of our culture circle to gather their insights. In sharing, my colleagues pushed me to examine from different angles (LaBoskey, 2007, Loughran & Northfield, 1998; Wilkes, 1998). Additionally, I invited my colleagues to reflect on our discussions and share them with me (Freidus, 2002; LaBoskey, 2007).

Outcomes

I note three findings related to how our culture circle influenced my praxis and how queer theory challenged my notions of leadership and facilitation: a) a renewed commitment to directly and purposefully address heteronormativity and homophobia in planned lessons; b) the uncertainty and discomfort of negotiating leadership and power with peers; and c) the importance of supportive collaboration in ally and activist work. These feelings are not distinct but intersecting and overlapping.

Deliberately Disrupting Homophobia in Praxis

Being part of this culture circle spurred me to reflect on how I have been addressing issues of

heteronormativity and homophobia in my classroom. While I have made it a habit to call out derogatory language students use, I realized that I could push my curricula choices further in planning to address homophobia proactively rather than reactively. In several meetings we discussed the power of language and began to discuss how our curricula could more explicitly engage students in critically reflecting on their own language choices.

The special education co-teacher for my 10th grade American literature classes, Alex1, is also a member of our culture circle. In reflecting with Alex, we discussed pedagogical approaches to teaching Sherman Alexie's (2007) *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian*. In particular, we examined how to take a more direct and deliberate approach to address the homophobic remarks in the book. According to Lin (2014), *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian* "provides ample opportunities to work as queer*ing* literature" (p. 48) despite the fact that the novel has no openly queer characters. The main character, Junior a 14-year-old heterosexual male, his two best friends, and one adult all casually use derogatory terms to accuse heterosexual identifying males of showing emotions, declaring friendship, and being sensitive. In the following excerpt, Junior interacts with his best friend, Rowdy's father, who Junior knows verbally and physically abuses his son:

> Rowdy's dad took the cartoon and stared at it for a while. Then he smirked. 'You're kind of gay, aren't you?' he asked.
>
> Yeah, that was the guy who was raising Rowdy. Jesus, no wonder my best friend was always so angry.
>
> 'Can you just give it to him?' I asked.
>
> 'Yeah, I'll give it to him. Even if it's a little gay."
>
> I wanted to cuss at him. I wanted to tell him that I thought I was being courageous, and that I was trying to fix my broken friendship with Rowdy, and if that I missed him, and if that was gay, then okay, I was the gayest dude in the world. But I didn't say any of that" (Alexie, 2007, p. 103).

In the past, I have acknowledged the homophobia in class discussion but usually tangentially and without a plan. I have never made homophobia the focal point around which I designed the lesson.

In queering my practice with this culture circle, I realized that I could—and should—be doing more. Ruffolo (2007) explained, "Straight teachers can give an account of queer through understanding how they are constituted as intelligible subjects that reproduce normative ideologies that privilege some and subordinate others" (p. 260). Unexamined, the homophobic remarks could be understood as mean but normal and the idea that Junior's masculinity is inadequate because he is sensitive would likely be reinforced (Kumashiro, 2008). In the passage, Junior recognizes that Rowdy's father's behavior is anger-filled and that the anger is passed to his son. Junior gently pushes against traditional forms of masculinity by expressing friendship and considering the ways in which he could respond to an adult's homophobia. In reflection, I wondered: "How can I make this lesson safe for LGBTQ+ students and all students? How can I challenge [students'] notions of homophobia and masculinity?" (9 October 2019). In thinking about LGBTQ+ identifying students, I shifted my heteronormative gaze. Usually, my concern is challenging straight identifying students who I anticipate will hold internalized homophobia. In reflection with our culture circle, my priorities now focus on queer and gender nonconforming students in the classroom who may feel exposed or unsafe in a classroom discussion about homophobia.

Ready to disrupt our lesson, Alex and I co-created a PowerPoint presentation and accompanying handout that defined heteronormativity and homophobia. We decided that it was important to identify the father character as homophobic from the outset (rather than letting students arrive at this idea). In class, we began with definitions and expectations. I pointed out the Pride flag hanging in our room and reminded students that I identify as an ally committed to making our classroom a safe space. In discussing the term heteronormative, I gave the example that people often (wrongly) assume everyone in the room is heterosexual. We listened to the audio recording of Alexie reading this chapter. Next, we had students journal in response to the following questions: What was hearing this scene like for you? How did you feel when you heard Rowdy's dad use the word "gay" to insult Junior? Journaling is one pedagogical approach to engaging students with a topic that maintains their privacy, minimizes their risks, and lessens the pressure of LGBTQ+ students to reveal their identities (Kavanagh, 2016). By asking them to turn inward, Alex explained, "Instead of us telling them how to feel . . . we [asked] them to look inward and notice their feelings. We put our judgment on Rowdy's dad and not on them as students" (Google doc, 28 January 2020). On their handout, students identified the actions and emotions Rowdy's father is referring to when he calls Junior "a little bit gay" (103). Then, we looked closely at Junior's interior response. I asked students, how does Junior accept or reject Rowdy's dad's idea of masculinity? And finally, I encouraged students to consider Sherman Alexie's point in including this scene.

The lesson was not perfect but it was a better version of the discussion of homophobia in this book than I have had in the past, which bolstered my resolve for altering future lessons in similar ways. In the past, many students dismissed the homophobia in this text as common teenage boy behavior: maybe it's not "okay" but it is, in their view, "normal." In engaging students in reflection and grappling closely with homophobic language, we began to disrupt and question the normalized homophobia that often goes unchecked and unexamined. Two weeks after this lesson, a student came out in a separate journal assignment about facing a challenge.

She discussed the fears she felt initially coming out to her friends, overcoming internalized homophobia, and finding acceptance from her friends.

Struggling to Negotiate Power and Leadership

In addition to pushing my praxis, the culture circle challenged how I sought to decenter my position as "leader." As a feminist, and in spirit with Freire's (1970/2004) culture circles, I wanted our group to share leadership as much as possible starting with negotiation of our norms, goals, and topics (Boomer, et al., 1992; Coia & Taylor, 2013).

Referencing Bohny et al. (2016), I anticipated negotiating the curriculum would be a messy but effective democratic practice (Boomer et al., 1992). Negotiating aligned with Freire's (1970/2004) liberatory pedagogy where all involved are "critical co-investigators in dialogue with the teacher" (p. 81). However, some of the group members were content to let me lead discussions, make topic choices, set the plan, select readings, and schedule our meetings.

Notably, two aspects of my positionality influenced this perspective: 1) my position as the person who initiated our group's formation, and 2) my position as a doctoral candidate researching and studying themes of gender and sexuality. A common theme in my journaling revolved around my tensions in navigating and negotiating the leadership of our group. In my reflection after our first meeting, I wrote:

I did a fair amount of leading today but in the first session that seemed almost unavoidable. Alex told me afterwards that I seemed smart and professional. Is that what I'm going for? I do not want to come across as an expert who is leading a lecture or as a professor who is leading a class. But I'm not sure I can avoid that perception. And maybe I'm wrong to pretend like I don't have expertise and knowledge and experience on the topic when I've been researching it for a while. (researcher's journal, 7 October 2019)

Here, there is visible tension in how I present myself and how my colleagues view me as our facilitator. From Alex, I understood that some group members perceived me to be an expert on gender and sexuality. In this way, I had a perceived authority. However, I was not their authority in any official capacity. We are colleagues working at the same school and experiencing much the same frustrations, tensions, and uncertainties. It made me uncomfortable and uncertain about how I should perform in our sessions. In queering my gaze, I considered how I could disrupt this notion of expertise. I looked to Freire (1970/2004), who acknowledged that students (and teachers in new contexts) are likely to resist and to "distrust themselves" (p. 63). With Freire's reminder, I worked to queer my frustrations that negotiating power was not as easy nor immediate as I expected. In turning back to Bohny et al. (2016), I realized that they too experienced this resistance, calling the process of negotiating "inherently uncomfortable" (p. 290) for some members more than others (Coia & Taylor, 2009; Taylor & Coia, 2006). I realized that negotiating the curriculum is not a one time process that happens at the beginning but an on-going process (Blackburn, 2010; Bohny et al., 2016). Cook (1992) argued, "I believe that the negotiation approach does embrace these constraints, by meeting them head on—not by pretending that they don't exist, but by admitting them and working around them once they're out in the open for all to see" (p. 19). So, I acknowledged my concerns, goals, and fears about sharing leadership with the group. Veronica said, "throw [the planning] back on us! Just like we do with our students" (post-meeting, 9 December 2019). In listening back to our audio-recorded sessions, I noted too that the topic of the day often sprouted more naturally from the teachers' stories of what they were experiencing and noticing as a result of paying attention to gender and sexuality.

Finding Support in our Culture Circle

While I struggled with the leadership and worried about not living up to the feminist and liberatory pedagogy to which I aspire, a supportive process of storytelling and reflecting developed as we continued to meet. After our first session, I encouraged members to reflect over the two weeks before our next meeting: "Observe your classroom / yourself. Try to pay attention to the way gender is discussed or dynamics that might be related to gender" (Google Classroom post, 7 October 2019). This "assignment" sparked several conversations over the next few meetings that did not require a leader or facilitator. I made a deliberate choice to minimize the amount of time I held the floor. As the culture circle developed trust, group members shared stories, often wondering if they had taken the correct course of action. We made space for each other to be vulnerable as we discussed whether or not the actions taken were appropriate and effective. At one meeting, Grace recounted a story about her seniors, two of whom had created inappropriate names while using a game-based learning platform which allows students to create anonymous handles. The names they chose were "Ray Pist" and "Fahg Gutz." Quickly, Grace shut the game down. Unable to identify the culprits, she apologized on their behalf to the class and stated flatly that rape jokes and homophobic slurs are never funny. Grace was visibly shaken by the experience. We talked through her response in the moment and her follow up conversation after the weekend. After the meeting, I reflected:

> As issues have come up in our classrooms, we have been there to support one another . . . . We talk about how we handled the situations and mostly just try to validate that a group member did well. I hope this is helping us build confidence in our responses to teachable moments and encourage the younger teachers to respond as well. (researcher's journal, 9 December 2019)

These kinds of misogynistic and homophobic incidents in classrooms are all too common, and they require teachers to act boldly at the moment rather than taking the easier path of nonconfrontation. Having a supportive community held us accountable to one another and allowed us to lean on one another. As my activism has grown, so has my need for supportive relationships and allies. The added risks are balanced by our support for one another. Taylor and Coia (2006) describe their own caring collaboration: "We found the ways in which we care for each other, listen to one another, provide a space for vulnerability and for risk-taking as a strength, not a criticism . . . It seems that for collaboration, as with good teaching, there has to be risk and trust. It is in essence, a caring collaboration" (p. 63). I see evidence of this in the partnership I built with another group member, Joan, as a result of our commitment to the culture circle. I reflected:

> We co-wrote emails and discussed next steps and actions. Sometimes we did this as Joan worked through her prep periods to create the costumes for the upcoming school play. And with the marking period ending and both of us having piles of grading to do. Teachers juggle and juggle and juggle. Is it no wonder why more teachers do not press back on their administrations or on the system? It's exhausting and it feels impossible and it competes with all the other duties and responsibilities that come with teaching. (researcher's journal, 7 November 2019)

Attempting to turn our dialogue into action was exhausting, as activism often is. But our conversations refilled my depleted resources and reminded me of why I was committed to disrupting heteronormativity embedded in our school. Blackburn (2010) acknowledged, "frustration can be an obstacle to our work, to be sure," which is why she encouraged: "Love yourselves for being committed to the work. Support one another in the work" (p. 158).

Conclusion

Freire (1970/2004) said, "Those who authentically commit themselves to the people must re-examine themselves constantly" (p. 60). Self-study and collaborative activism paired with queer theory helped me subvert normative forms of my praxis and leadership as I continually re-examine myself. This self-study examines the struggles and strengths I experienced facilitating a culture circle focused on gender and sexuality. Our culture circle engaged in questioning norms, disrupting boundaries, on-going reflecting, problem posing, and taking action. The process is messy, complex, non-linear—the kind of disruption queer theory, self-study, and Freirean culture circles seek to create. Done in different contexts, other collaborations may have very different experiences and outcomes (Blackburn, et al., 2010).

Queer theory and pedagogy, while gaining in popularity, remain under-researched in self-study of teaching and teacher education (Taylor & Coia, 2014; Taylor & Diamond, 2019; Martin & Kitchen, 2019). Important contributions have been made by teacher educators who identify as members of the LGBTQ+ community (Biddulph, 2005; Kitchen, 2014; Martin, 2014). But the responsibility to disrupt heteronormativity and homophobia does not rest solely on the shoulders of LGBTQ+ educators. Allies

can use queer theory to disrupt their practices and the oppressive norms of their school communities.

1 All names and identifying traits of members of the culture circle have been changed to protect their identities.

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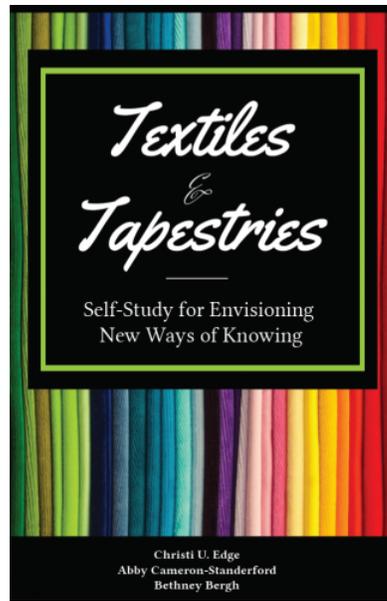
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