

Risking Queer: Pedagogy, Performativity, and Desire in Writing Classrooms

Connie Monson and Jacqueline Rhodes

What are the implications of queer theory for the writing classroom? Is it primarily a matter of adding gay and lesbian content to a curriculum of multicultural diversity? Should we support composition classes addressing gay and lesbian issues but likely to appeal to a relative few, a margin on the margin? In fact, queer theory can offer both less and more. Readers seeking a panacea for homophobia, heterosexism, and other very real political ills will not likely find it in this essay; at its best, however, queer theory can offer crucial insight into the constructions of subjectivity, desire, and literacy already operative within the institutional site of the composition classroom, providing a place from which to critique and transform those constructions.

We propose to offer here just such a critique, glossing the construction of writerly subjectivities and the institutional investments that make first-year composition a vexed location from which to take a stand against sedimented practice. As we will argue, the “subjects” of composition—student writers freighted with sexualized content (as indeed are all writing subjects) and caught between contending desires—avail themselves of a fictive and temporary stability in the name of rhetorical action. But because these subjectivities are formed in the crucible of institutional practice, such stability does not automatically or easily result in discursive liberation. Ultimately, in fact, we believe that liberation as an educational goal is at odds with the occulted workings of first-year composition. And yet, as we further argue in this essay, interrogating and disrupting regimes of subjectivity and sexuality such as that of first-year

composition is a crucial endeavor, a “literacy” that lies at the very heart of queer composition.

It is our contention that the multiple intersections of sex, sexuality, and gender already permeate the classroom in ways seldom acknowledged until recently. As one essay puts it: “Queer theory asks not that pedagogy become sexed, but that it excavate and interpret the way it already *is* sexed and, further, that it begin to interpret the ways in which it is explicitly *heterosexed*” (Sumara and Davis 199). Indeed, sex has a central place in modern constructions of knowledge, ignorance, and innocence. Against claims that sex in the present age is best recognized by its repression, Michel Foucault tells instead the story of what he calls its prolixity, the conversion of desire into discourse in the name of religious pedagogy. He writes, referring to Paolo Segneri’s seventeenth-century decree that all sins of the flesh should be confessed as often as possible, by laymen and clergy alike: “An imperative was established: Not only will you confess to acts contravening the law, but you will seek to transform your desire, your every desire, into discourse” (21). The relationship between this early pedagogical intervention and writing is thus made clear:

Whence a metamorphosis in literature: we have passed from a pleasure to be recounted and heard, centering on the heroic or marvelous narration of “trials” of bravery or sainthood, to a literature ordered according to the infinite task of extracting from the depths of oneself, in between the words, a truth which the very form of the confession holds out like a shimmering mirage. (57)

To some extent, this direct confessional mode still holds sway in writing classrooms in the form of personal narrative, in which students “write what they know.” More indirectly, writing classrooms—particularly first-year writing classrooms—exact confessional duty from student writers in that they often emphasize the necessity of students’ finding an “authentic voice,” so that even in purportedly “impersonal” genres of academic writing, there is the demanded discursive shadow of the “personal” within the text. But Foucault’s dictum also describes an entire apparatus of personal revelation and “truthtelling” that constructs the writing subject as one who holds sex as its secret core. Thus, self-knowledge, and ultimately all knowledge, is seen to be sexual. Pedagogy, taken in its general sense as the cultural disciplines of knowledge, furthermore elicits as part of its task such self-knowledge to do the work of moral fashioning.

As Sharon Crowley points out in *Composition in the University: Historical and Polemical Essays*, literacy education has never been separate from moral education. The universal requirement of first-year composition, she argues, constructs the course as a site in which student subjectivity is monitored, disciplined, made “appropriate”; Crowley writes that the “continuing function of the required composition course has been to assure the academic community that its entering members are taught the discursive behaviors and traits of character that qualify them to join the community” (8–9). The universal requirement, that is, ensures that first-year composition courses do the work of molding character according to the lights of liberal education. In a similar vein, Susan Miller writes of the “infantilized” subjectivity required of the composition student, which she takes to be obvious

Not only from characterizations of the composition course as a transition to college life and its reliance on pedagogies often used at much earlier levels, but also from the persistent objectification/subjectation of the student that follows from requirements, from placement and “diagnostic” exams, and from the absence of choice among the emphases or conduct of sections of one course taught by those described in class schedules as anonymous “staff.” (*Textual* 102)

Furthermore, in the course of shaping an “appropriate” writerly persona, pedagogies in general require an investment in normative sexuality that has appeared in certain lights as desexualization. That is, students (as well as their teachers) learn rules for talking and writing and behaving sexually, according to prescribed gender roles and position within the classroom. Ursula Kelly claims, for example, that female students are enjoined to act passively, to inhibit expressions of their own desires, and to function as a receptive slate for the appearance of others’ desires (99).

Put another way, one of the consequences of the circulation of desire through pedagogy is the disciplining of the body. Lacanians and Foucaultians would contend over whether such discipline takes the form of sexual suppressions or sexual incitements (we would say, guardedly, both/and), but “if literacy education is “about the production of literate subjects, these subjects are gendered subjects. Feminine subjects [and, as we believe, other marked or queered categories] are also sexualized subjects” (Kelly 100).

Studies such as Crowley’s and Miller’s remind us that any study of student writer subjectivity must take into account the peculiar institu-

tional site that is first-year composition. Subjectivities do not spring fully formed from the subjected bodies of student writers—or any writers; as Foucault might insist, it is the interplay of materiality, discourse, and desire, channeled and disciplined through the nexus of power, that informs cultural pedagogies, that makes subjectivities possible. The required disciplining and infantilizing of student writers forms a specific relationship to desire for all participants in the institutional site of the composition classroom.

Miller interrogates first-year composition as a “disciplinary” site for student subjectivity in several of her works, perhaps most notably in her *Rescuing the Subject: A Critical Introduction to Rhetoric and the Writer*, in which she makes the case for a “textual rhetoric” and a “writing subject,” which mediates uniquely “between actual and symbolic linguistic domains in ways that place [the writer] in a separate and hitherto undescribed textual world” (11). For Miller, then, a textual subjectivity is one of not just temporary and ever-shifting positionalities, as might be suggested by her insistence that composition studies is a “distinctly postmodern, textual field” (10), but one of fictionalized stability as well; it offers a double move that acknowledges the deceit of persona at the same time as it depends on a logic of persona for its impetus to action.

While Crowley appears to share Miller’s conclusion that *something* needs to be done about first-year composition, she, unlike Miller, comes to reclaim rhetoric rather than to textualize it. Crowley’s historicization links the rise of the modern college curriculum, complete with its “research ideal,” to the demise of rhetorical education. Crowley points to nineteenth-century educators’ recasting of “English” as a subject for study rather than an object of pleasure as a turning point in the history of modern curricula. These educators, writes Crowley, defined English as a subject from which its speakers are alienated; to know the scope of and redress for such alienation, educators needed to test prospective students. The tests soon constructed a newly “deficient” class of English users, and universities in turn constructed courses to address that deficiency (61). Thus, writes Crowley, was born the entrance examination, which served to justify English as a university-level field of study.

Crowley, then, like Miller, argues that the “student writer” is a constructed subjectivity. Crowley wants to abolish the site of that subjection and replace it with a “vertical elective curriculum in composing” that would teach students to engage in acts of critical literacy—

understanding and articulating the intersections of composing and intellectual life (262). Miller, rather than abolishing the site of subjection, sees the constructed subjectivity as itself subject to emendation within the material considerations of the classroom. A textual rhetoric, she claims, places “writing and writers in a position of agency in a history and theory of discourse” and also demands that we “look at composition instruction in higher education as a historically grounded phenomenon, the logical cultural product of changes in conditions for producing discourse” (*Rescuing* 149).

What purpose does the subjection—in the term’s several senses—of first-year composition serve? Miller would claim that composition now does the dirty work of literary study, constructing, monitoring, and disciplining those who would enter into college-level discourse; students are taught from their first day in the writing classroom—indeed, from their very presence in the class at all—that they are not authors; that their writing is not literary; and that they must continue to write anyway to provide the not-genius against which genius defines itself (162). Students are thus caught in several double-binds, including that of the seemingly contradictory expectations that they write “originally” and yet not as *originary* authors, and that of the problematic intersections of “private” and “public” in the classroom.

For Crowley, first-year composition constitutes the residual tail of the intellectually coercive project of general education. She argues that even as liberal education and general education were “couched in the language of democracy and freedom,” they actually constituted a program of greater institutional control at the expense of students (186). Most obviously, she writes, “they reduced students’ freedom to study whatever they like, to determine how many hours were required to get a degree, and to select their teachers”; less obviously but more seriously, general and liberal education regimes “offered the university a new rationale to support the universal requirement in introductory composition. It takes considerable rhetorical chutzpah to tout a universal requirement as a liberatory practice” (186). Reading Crowley and Miller, whether they speak of double-binds or the machinations of institutional control, we are asked to question the very site of composition, particularly as that site channels and refracts institutional desires for and of student writers. Somewhere in the crosshairs, both writers argue, we find a nigh-impossible, extremely conflicted student-writer subjectivity responsible for the negotiation of its simultaneous enculturation and liberation.

Desiring Minds Want to Know

First-year composition, then, might be said to insist upon and cultivate its subjects' discontent as part of its own function within the larger curriculum of higher education. Kelly observes, "The condition of discontent, in Lacanian terms, is contemporaneous with entry into language" (33). And, we would add, the condition and promotion of discontent is necessary in the capitalist project of higher education to the subject's entry into the specialized language of the university. Kelly continues, citing Kaja Silverman, that "in this sense . . . 'the subject not only learns to desire within the symbolic order, it learns *what* to desire.' The ways of pleasure, then, according to Kelly, are "earmarked" over and over through the social (33).

We define desire here and throughout this essay as a multiplex whose manifold implications are most evident when its object is seen to be shifting, unattainable, and finally unnameable. Nonetheless, for our purposes here, we might specifically distinguish between the pressures comprising *institutional* desire (to mold particular behavior/character) and those comprising *student* desire (nominally for knowledge and status, but always already susceptible [complicit, resistant] to the demands of the institution). We insist, however, that to highlight these two forms is not to cancel out the sense in which Foucault uses the term, above, nor his intuition that eros centers the pedagogical project of desire. In fact, erotic desire itself is implicated in the shoring up of institutional frameworks:

The intersection of desire and power, within the wide-spread frameworks of capitalist economy, compulsory heterosexuality, White supremacy, and male privilege, often produces desire that advantages or maintains those frameworks. The promise of pleasure at the root of such hegemony is the persuasive means by which the Other is sustained by the cultural gaze from without and within. (Kelly 105)

Like the radically unstable object of desire, then, literature is "contentless," Terry Eagleton writes, a moral philosophy that demands that its adherents be "sensitive, imaginative, responsive, sympathetic, creative, perceptive, reflective . . . *about nothing in particular* (qtd. in Miller, *Textual* 98). Miller notes that this "radically depoliticized formalism" in literary studies finds its most receptive seedbed in first-year composition, claiming that "composition has displaced literary values to reproduce the subject of literature in the composition student who has few publicly

involved reasons to write" (*Textual* 96). While process pedagogies have improved upon grammar-intensive current-traditional rhetoric, Miller writes that these more recent pedagogies' "most prominent quality is an emphasis on intransitive processes that appear to have no particular products as results. . . . These are not activities that do anything in particular, that reflect on anything in particular, or that have 'meaning' about anything in particular" (97).

Additionally, Kelly calculates the social project of "literacy" as an explicitly regulatory practice. Reading a literacy advertisement that depicts a perceived sexual threat quelled by the practice of reading bedtime stories, she writes, "The anxiety signified here, intended or not, finds its place in an equation between education/literacy and sexual safety" (98). We can see this anxiety as akin to the abjection of a perceived Other to make way for a safe, orderly space. As part and parcel of the heterosexual matrix, institutions (including or perhaps in particular educational institutions) have a vested interest in excluding or repressing that which they perceive to be a threat. The threat of non-normative behaviors, figures, ideas, particularly as those things may manifest themselves within the first-year writing classroom—the vulnerable, socially sanctioned site of academic literacy—must be quelled, even as the institution's teachers may emphasize that site as one of resistance. "Literacy," in this sense, can have at best a vexed relationship with non-normative points of view.

Thus, in terms of present politics, the first-year writing curriculum does not constitute a neutral ground upon which desiring students might stake their claims to liberation, or even a contested site within which difference can be managed or brought into consensus. Kelly writes, "As subjects—teachers and students—we come to our classes already desiring, and bearing a history in which often deeply contradictory patterns of desire have already been established" (131). That is to say, the classroom, far from being an ivory tower separate or separable from power relations at large, necessarily inherits and refracts them. Students emerge as docile bodies whose desire is mediated and shaped by language and ergo by pedagogical prescriptives on discourse. This desire is directed through "acceptable" channels (for knowledge, nominally), masking other workings of desire (the professor's, the institution's, libidinal investments) and in effect colonizing those bodies. Yet, it is important to resist the notion that because those power relations are *written into* the writing classroom, there is a necessary end to the writing itself; where desire and power are inscribed, they are vulnerable to erasure, intervention,

reinscription, recapitulation, the con/text of the classroom functioning as other con/texts do.

The concept of desire, most often keyed to the language of freedom, an interval awaiting fulfillment upon the lifting of an onerous repression, itself begs to be read critically. Circulating through and inflected by the social, desire holds out the fantasy of satisfaction while helping to maintain a dissatisfaction advantageous to regimes of power and Othering. Kelly offers insight into the nexus of pedagogy, desire, and subjectivity, writing that “literacy was and remains a social and moral project, an inseparable blend of notions of the civil and the literate, a domesticating practice with specific, identifiable interests, those of nation(-making) and state(-controlling)” (9–10). Similarly, Miller writes,

Content, the body of knowledge within a field, also implies a human subjectivity of a particular sort, a characterization of those who learn and profess its methods, solve its problems, and take seriously its most prominent issues. And this subjectivity works to create a field’s content, often in covert ways. A subject is thus not a static body of knowledge, but an affective space. (*Textual* 84)

Miller further writes that “it would be questionable even to look for a ‘content’ of a course apart from a kind of subjectivity, supposing that a value-free body of ideas or neutral processes might exist apart from an academic institution’s desires for a particular kind of thinking resulting from study in any discipline” (95). First-year composition is, theoretically and technically, the institutionally sanctioned site of academic functional/cultural literacy. To what extent does it follow that first-year composition is the institutional site of sanctioned desire?

Personal Effects

James Berlin writes that one role of writing classes is to intervene in the constructions of subjectivity, to locate the conflicts “in order to make them the center of writing” (111). It is the emphasis on locating *oneself* within these constructions that informs much critical pedagogy, in particular those pedagogies that seek to “liberate” students through attention to discourse and conflict. We would argue, however, that those conflicts are already the locale of writing, if not the “center.” The “personal,” then, forms a particularly weighted locale, one that seems to proffer the very notion of a subject(ivity) as its *raison d’être*. However,

if we hold to the idea that subjectivity is the effect, not the origin, of multiple and often conflicting discourses, then it follows that what is written in those conflicts are multiple subjectivities, multiple effects, multiple “im/persona/ls.” Any move toward the authentic is a feint, a rhetorical maneuver, a knowing, schooled, often deliberate invocation of persona. The process of writing oneself/f/ves, even of fictionalizing stability in order to act, is weighted differentially depending on issues of sexual (and other) identifications. Within the conflicts of identification and desire, writers construct self/f/ves through site-specific literate acts—one component of which is the articulation of positionality.

The conflicts between *teacherly* desires—the joint occupation of and resistance to the institution from which and in which teachers work—are, like other conflicts within the writing classroom, locales from which acts of literacy might emerge. It is crucial, however, to question the iconic value of the “personal” (and, particularly, the *resistant* personal) in engaged and other critical pedagogies. In the scope of the queer writing classroom, the issue of the resistant personal takes on dire weight. As Eve Sedgwick has shown, ignorance is a valence of power. Subjects whose “resistance”—whose prior investments in the heterosexual matrix—takes the form of a refusal of knowledge scarcely anchor a pedagogy of liberation. Susanne Luhmann points out in her essay “Queering/Querying Pedagogy?” that queer notions of education can “render suspect the very basics of pedagogy and its appeal to rational subjects capable of toleration or consolation through accurate representations” (146). Further, she comments, emphasizing the teacher’s position (either as didact or liberator) misses the point:

The rationale behind this search for an adequate method is that the teacher’s pedagogical skills—her instructional talents, as well as behaviors—will reflect in the students’ progress of learning. Learning is then relegated to the teacher’s effort and to good teaching, an assumption that gives way to some fantasmatic investments in the role of the teacher in the learning process. (148)

Indeed, many compositionists and cultural studies scholars have noted that liberatory and critical pedagogies often elide both the complicity of the teacher and the students’ *resistance to resistance* in order to reduce the critical writing classroom to a site of teacher-liberator/student-empowered.

From what, then, do we liberate students in liberatory pedagogies, if we cannot liberate them from incommensurable conflict? We cannot even “liberate” ourselves from multiplicitous desire running through the site of composition studies—nor should we put our energy into such a project. However, if we, as somewhat complicitous, somewhat radical, always desirous, always lacking “literacy workers” (teachers/scholars/tutors/students) seek ourselves to articulate positionality, we move toward an understanding of a performative, *queer* pedagogy that does not rely on a false personal for its critical energy. The multiple locations of the conflicts should be—*need* to be, *will* be in such a pedagogy—exploded, inhabited, written into, written about. As Pamela Caughie notes, to engage in this process means to jump knowingly into “passing as pedagogy,” a pedagogy that “brings into play within the classroom the very structures of authority that form the subject of critique” and “enable[s] us to act on, and act out, the very different positionings that are both acknowledged and obviated in cultural studies agendas . . .” (90). Such a pedagogy would make those multiple locations “part of the dynamics of classroom exchange, not simply a topic of discussion” (90).

Praxis, Praxis, Praxis

Even should such views of subjectivity underpin writing classroom dynamics, however, teachers, students, and casual observers still enter the classroom imbricated with the relational histories of identity. Mary Bryson and Suzanne de Castell, in their account of teaching a Women’s Studies course entitled “Lesbian Subjects Matter: Feminism(s) from the Margins,” write of the impasse between poststructuralist theories of subjectivity and the need for stable, even essentialist, constructions of identity:

In a period in which uncertainty and ambivalence are the order of the day concerning the ostensibly liberatory projects of modernism’s critical white knights . . . we envision praxis—typically conceptualized as reflexive, reconstitutive action—as a necessary corrective to the often overly abstract, aesthetically indulgent, politically ambivalent, and obtusely textualized forms of postmodern theorizing. . . . (272)

In attempting to enact such praxis in “Lesbian Subjects Matter,” Bryson and de Castell pushed students to locate themselves within the discourses of sexuality and desire, and to interrogate how those shifting locations

might trouble the waters of hegemonic power within the classroom. Choosing not to intentionally define “lesbian” or “sexual orientation” or to set up lesbian material as that-which-is-not-heterosexual (that is, no oppositional definitions) in class, they stipulated that there were to be no “voyeurs” or “consumers”—that all participants would have to risk articulations of identity, privilege, authority, and sexuality. Bryson and de Castell’s results were mixed; most heterosexually identified women in the class refused to problematize their own privilege, content to “pass” as lesbians and to turn in (largely) traditional “academic” essays. Other students, however, turned in a variety of final projects, working against the standard essay form; projects ranged from collages to lesbian safe-sex posters to videos on identity and difference.

Bryson and de Castell conclude that for many of their students—particularly those students whose subjectivities formed, unwittingly, the content and object of the course—access to alternative media of representation contributed to an attempted restructuring of unevenly positioned discursive relations (277–78). While their experience of the course was ultimately frustrating—they report that it is impossible to speak as a lesbian subject, that lesbian subjectivity within the classroom always constitutes either an object for voyeuristic study or a material risk to lesbian students—Bryson and de Castell still insist that we can “queery” pedagogy, that elucidating a queer praxis is still a worthwhile endeavor. That is, they write, “praxis makes im/perfect; that is to say, an eclectic *mélange* of the wonderful, the awful, and the in-between. And perhaps, in pedagogical matters, im/perfect outcomes are necessarily the norm” (285).

It is our contention that the writing classroom serves as a prime location for a queerly im/perfect praxis, a praxis that insists on “the deliberate production of queer relations and . . . the production of subjectivities as deviant performance—that is to say, a kind of postmodern carnivalesque pedagogy of the underworld, as agitation implemented deliberately to interfere with, to intervene in the production of so-called normalcy in schooled subjects” (Bryson and de Castell 284). Such praxis may “enact rather than endorse” certain subjectivities—and thus perhaps subvert those subjectivities even as they are invoked (Caughie 78). Beyond the idea of literacy as a commodity, a facility with basic functionality within a limited discursive regime, then, we look to “literacy” within a queered praxis as an iterable mobilization of representational strategies, a technology of alterity. Queer theory at its best points

toward a critical, situated, eminently rhetorical literacy; a queer pedagogy invites us to strain against and yet celebrate our double binds—to risk “self-betrayal” (Caughie 78) in our im/perfect praxis, our fictive and temporary stability, our momentary selves.

*Emory University
Atlanta, Georgia*

*California State University
San Bernardino, California*

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