"Straightboyz4Nsync": Queer Theory and the Composition of Heterosexuality

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The attention paid in the last decade to issues of queerness in composition studies and writing instruction—as minor as it has been at times—has offered compositionists some opportunities to enliven their courses with provocative materials and subjects for discussion and writing. Many instructors have seen this as a chance not only to "provoke" students but to offer alternative ways of thinking about the world by including insights, narrations, and analyses from lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgendered writers. As such, scholarly writing about queering the composition classroom has focused on the need for creating "safe spaces" for queer students and teachers, introducing queer texts into the classroom, analyzing how students "come out," and negotiating discussions of sexuality and gender that seem to veer out of control. Frequently, to facilitate such introductions and discussions, the Web, other Internet technologies, and various computer communication platforms have allowed us to consider a variety of ways in which students, teachers, and writers of all kinds can express themselves, create dialogue, and consider issues of sexuality and identity from multiple perspectives. For instance, Scott Lloyd DeWitt grapples with the ways in which l/g/b (lesbian, gay, and bisexual) students and others use the Web to navigate their own "coming out" process (234). And, in Alison Berg, et al.'s "Breaking the Silence: Sexual Preference in the Composition Classroom" and Kathleen Boardman, et al.'s "Teacher Involvement and Transformative Power on a Gender Issues Discussion List," the authors consider the promises and pitfalls of using computer-mediated synchronous and anonymous forums, such as email discussion lists, to discuss "taboo" subjects such as homosexuality.

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In addition to advocating for the inclusion of queer subjects and writing in the classroom, Harriet Malinowitz argues in the conclusion to Textual Orientations: Lesbian and Gay Students and the Making of Discourse Communities for a re-centering of writing instruction not only to include but to see (at least in part) the task and process of writing through queer eyes; she says, “The sort of pedagogy I am proposing would entail thinking about the ways margins produce not only outsiderhood but also profoundly unique ways of self-defining, knowing, and acting; and about how, though people usually want to leave the margins, they do want to be able to bring with them the sharp vision that comes from living with friction and contradiction” (252). This, indeed, is the challenge, and for the last several years, I have been using a number of classroom activities and technology platforms—ranging from listservs to Websites to synchronous communication programs—to do such work and to expand on it. Specifically, I have sought to prompt students to query the ways in which sexuality and sexual identity are constructed, narrated, represented, and contested in many American cultures. My aim has largely been a rhetorical one of the James Berlin variety, in which I attempt to demonstrate for students how the languages we use to describe and define our seemingly personal identities are inflected by and interpolated within ideologies seeking to control or curtail action (and even freedom) by delimiting our sense of self. For instance, I have used texts and Websites with queer content to provoke students into thinking about the many ways in which sexuality is represented in our society. Trans sites, such as Leslie Feinberg’s transgenderwarrior.com, provide provocative insights into both how sexuality and gender are narrated, but also how their more “traditional” narrations can be resisted and re-configured in pursuit of different social and political ends. In many ways, as I will describe below, this is the work of queer theory—a “queering” that interrogates our sexualities and their construction from the inside out, as opposed to simply bringing the outsider in to an unexamined inclusiveness.

Recently, though, such work has seemed at times neither particularly powerful nor provocative. My students at the University of Cincinnati have increasingly become “comfortable” with talking about sexuality and sexual orientation; the “edge” is “off” our discussions of these once “touchy” topics. In many ways, this is good. I don’t want the majority of my students to flinch when the topic of sexuality or sexual orientation comes up in conversation—or when I tell them that I am queer. At the same time, their seeming comfort may actually be complacency, an
unwillingness to think more critically about a topic that just seems passé. So there are gay people. Big deal? What does that have to do with us?

As such, I’m left with a nagging question: as queerness “leaves the margins,” are we losing a bit of that “sharp vision” a queer critique can offer? Put another way, is the actual work of queer theory getting done? For instance, are students questioning the naturalized structures of heteronormativity and heterosexism? Are they interrogating naturalized narrations of sexuality, identity, and normalcy? Beyond simply including queer voices into the rhetorical mix, I think that queer theories and scholarship offers us a chance to critically examine the ways in which gender and sexuality are constructed, narrated, and deployed in the creation of identities, modes of being, and community. Such analysis—intimately connected to the stories we tell about ourselves, the narrations we use to make sense of and question our ways of being—opens up possibilities of understanding how meaning is created and narrated for all lives, not just gay and lesbian ones.

What I propose to do in this essay, then, is outline what such a critique might mean—for heterosexual students—in our writing classes. More specifically, I offer thoughts on how my students and their responses to some in-class activities have sparked my thinking about the potentially productive pedagogical use of queer theory. First, though, let’s unpack what queer theory might teach us about a critically informed writing pedagogy.

**Queer Theory and Critique: Not Just for Queers Anymore**

I have thought of queer theory as potentially informing a critical writing pedagogy, one that, à la James Berlin, forwards a “notion of rhetoric as a political act involving a dialectical interaction engaging the material, the social, and the individual writer, with language as the agency of mediation” (692). Borrowing from Raymond Williams, Berlin maintains that “Language . . . is one of the material and social conditions involved in producing culture. This means that in studying rhetoric—the ways discourse is generated—we are studying the ways in which knowledge comes into existence” (693). Thus, for Berlin and others in the critical writing pedagogy tradition, the study of language is necessarily the study of how ideologies are formed and circulated—of how they shape our existence and very sense of being in the world; put another way, “Social-epistemic rhetoric attempts to place the question of ideology at the center of the teaching of writing” (697).
If we accept this approach to the teaching of writing, then we must also consider Michel Foucault's claim in *The History of Sexuality* that, particularly in the last one hundred years, "It is through sex . . . that each individual has to pass in order to have access to his own intelligibility, . . . to the whole of his body, . . . to his identity" (155–56). For Foucault, "sexuality" is the knowledge complex (and complex knowledges) that informs how we understand ourselves and one another, as well as the cultural values that we share—or fail to share. Indeed, placing Berlin's and Foucault's projects in such close proximity has compelled me to think about how the study of sexuality as an *ideological* force permeates language and thus our sense of being in the world, not to mention our culture and politics. Just recently, in a conference presentation with Will Banks, I formulated the connection between sexuality, ideology, and language as linking sexuality directly to important issues of literacy:

Thinking about sexuality in terms of literacy opens the door to considering how our understanding of almost any aspect of sexuality in our culture is shaped by public discourse—a key insight of queer theory. And given the vast number of personal, social, and political topics related to sexuality—topics such as who gets to define what “marriage” is, debates about who is and is not appropriate for military service, control over access to reliable information about sexually-transmitted diseases and infections—it is imperative that students understand the complex connections between discourse, information, identity, and community represented by the term "sexuality." Ignoring a critical inquiry into these connections runs the risk of enabling, perhaps furthering students' ignorance about the strong connection in our culture between sexuality and identity.

Considering the "literacy of sexuality," then, not only promotes a complex rhetorical awareness of an issue of great personal and political importance, but it also promotes students' understanding of how sexuality is used to enable participation in the democratic project for some, and constrain it for others.

Some queer theorists have been playing with such ideas. For instance, in *Excitable Speech*, Judith Butler critically examines hate speech, particularly homophobic hate speech, as a discursive practice. For Butler, language and identity are mutually imbricated—so much so that even our existence as *embodied* beings must be understood through the material effects of language and discourse on identity:
Language sustains the body not by bringing it into being or feeding it in a literal way; rather, it is by being interpellated within the terms of language that a certain social existence of the body first becomes possible. (5)

Given this, for example, the use of homophobic hate, or "injurious" speech has material affects—for both those who use hate speech and those on whom it is used—that construct identities, relationships, and even points of resistance. As Butler puts it, "The utterances of hate speech are part of the continuous and uninterrupted process to which we are subjected, an ongoing subjection . . . that is the very operation of interpellation, that continually repeated action of discourse by which subjects are formed in subjugation" (27).

The question, though, is how do you talk about sexuality in such a way that students do not automatically assume you must be talking about queerness, and thus the "other" that does not pertain to the majority of them? How can we "out" the connection between sexuality, discourse, power, and knowledge in such a way that all of our students will understand this complex of intersections?

Recently, some scholars and theorists have been proposing answers to such questions. Andrew Parker defines queer theory as a "a non-gender-specific rubric that defines itself diacritically not against heterosexuality but against the normative" (qtd. in Thomas 1). Susanne Luhmann suggests that "Queer aims to spoil and transgress coherent (and essential) gender configurations and the desire for a neat arrangement of dichotomous sexual and gendered difference, central to both heterosexual and homosexual identities" (145). More radically, "If queer pedagogy . . . is foremost concerned with a radical practice of deconstructing normality, then it is obviously not confined to teaching as, for, or about queer subject(s)" (151). As such, the call to "work" or think queerness in the classroom should not focus solely on introducing our many straight students to queer lives and stories; rather, working queerness in the writing classroom should be an invitation to all students—gay and straight—to think of the "constructedness" of their lives in a heteronormative society.

For writing students, such a project is also a rhetorical one. My work as a writing teacher in this vein has been influenced by the thinking of both Ken Plummer and Judith Butler. Plummer, in Telling Sexual Stories, examines a wide variety of gay and lesbian "coming out" stories, which are often very self-conscious narratives designed to construct a meaning-
ful story about one’s identity: “Identities are built around sexuality; an experience becomes an essence; and the new stories that are told and written about [sexuality] hold it all together” (86). Examining such stories not only gives students a sense of the world as viewed through “other” eyes, but can also reveal how sexuality is policed in our culture, and how certain identities and values become privileged. Butler, of course, has given us the idea of identity as “performative”—not that we can take our identities on and off willy-nilly, but that, through constant repetition, certain ways of being in the world come to seem natural, essential, and even immutable. In particular, she has used this notion of “performativity” to point out how heterosexual identities are naturalized, often at the expense of or via the exclusion of queer lives (Power 135). Butler’s critique, combined with Plummer’s assertion of the centrality of the narrative of sexuality as central to many people’s identity, prompts me to ask, what is the story of “straightness”? How does one compose oneself or become composed as a “straight” person?

This is a difficult question, particularly for straight students in our writing courses, because being straight is to inhabit and be inhabited by an “unmarked” subjectivity, one whose narration is not “re-mark-able.” As Calvin Thomas puts it, “Straights have had the political luxury of not having to think about their sexuality, in much the same way as men have not had to think of themselves as being gendered and whites have not had to think of themselves as raced” (17). From a rhetorical standpoint, we could say that straights have the “narrative luxury” of not having to consider their self-narration—at least not as closely and critically as many queers have had to. For instance, straights do not generally have to “come out”—itself an act of rhetorical staging and performance, frequently one that is carefully crafted and narrated. As such, “Don’t ask, don’t tell” seems a particularly “straight” formulation. There’s nothing to see here; keep moving along. (In other words, don’t look too closely.)

With this in mind, how do we elicit from students the “story” of straightness, or prompt them to consider “straightness” as a story itself, with a wealth of narrative twists and ideological turns? I could ask for students to narrate the story of how they “became” straight or how they “know” they are straight, but I have often mistrusted such narrations offered by students, primarily because I worried that students would “tell me what I wanted to hear.” In contrast, I think that Calvin Thomas asks the right question: “What does reading queer theory tell the straight reader about being queer, about being straight, about being, about
becoming, what one putatively is, what one (supposedly thereby) is not, the permeability of the boundaries between the two, the price of their maintenance” (12). Yes, but I don’t want just to unleash a bit of queer theory on my students—or unleash my students on a bit of queer theory. It’s easy to write from a paradigm, and I don’t want students to simply use a little queer theory to begin replicating—dare I say, naturalizing—stories about the social construction of heterosexuality. Jonathan Ned Katz has already given us a wonderful analysis of the invention of heterosexuality in his book by that title, and it would be too simple, too convenient for students to apply Katz’s thinking to their own lives: just add queer theory and mix. Rather, I have wanted to disrupt, in as much as I can, thinking about “normative” lives, to help students excavate some of the ideological constructions and assumptions that go into the creation of the “norm.” My question is comparable to the one Lauren Smith asks: “How might I move students further in the direction of disruptive or self-conscious narratives and away from naturalized representations of self and world?” (81). Or, to borrow from Jim Berlin, how can I prompt my students to understand how their “knowledge” of themselves, specifically as straights, “comes into existence” (693)?

**Disrupting the Narrative of Straightness, or, Performing a Hoax**

Inevitably, it’s easier to say you’re going to disrupt something than it is to actually disrupt it. But I am convinced that straightness can—and should—be “queried.” But how? Calvin Thomas suggests that “there can be nothing more terrifying to what Monique Witting calls ‘the straight mind’ than being ‘mistaken’ for a ‘queer’” (26). Since declarations of one’s straightness seem most common when that straightness is called into question or doubt, I have theorized that we could “tease out” for examination a narration of straightness by playing with this “soft spot” in the straight subjectivity—by poking at the point where straightness must maintain itself as an identity over and against queerness. Butler suggests that the act of subverting the norm—or, in her words, “working the weakness in the norm”—is a “matter of inhabiting the practices of its rearticulation” (Bodies 237). In other words, performing a narration of straightness, inhabiting its story, might work its weakness from the inside out. Just one problem: how can I, as a queer man, “inhabit” or perform straightness?

In attempting to answer this question one term, I took a clue from “hoax sites,” such as The Onion online, and I postulated that I might be able to create a website that did my theoretical poking for me. For
instance, one of the first hoax sites I ever used in a composition class was the Senator Kelly “Mutant Watch” campaign site (www.mutantwatch.com), which is a “hoax site” serving as an advertisement for the film *The X-Men*. The site seems like a campaign site for Senator Kelly, the arch-conservative who wants to keep the world—and your children—safe from the “evil” mutants. (Sound familiar anyone?) What’s wonderful about this site is how cleverly—and closely—the site designers mimic both a campaign site and the rhetoric of an unthinking, knee-jerk conservatism, and many writers and fans have noted how the anti-mutant rhetoric deployed on the site is startlingly similar to that of anti-gay conservatives such former conservative senator Jesse Helms. Using such sites in class offers an engaging way to examine how rhetoric is used to create, sustain, and promulgate various ideological stances, often based on misinformation, unfounded assumptions, and, frequently, the demonization of “others.” As such, a hoax site seemed a good vehicle to queer various rhetorics, to push at the soft spots in certain ideological constructions.

I wondered: could the same medium be used to push at the soft spots in heterosexuality? And what would this look like? With such questions in mind, I created a hoax site, a personal homepage, about a straightboy, Dax, who has a “secret.” His site, “Straightboyz4Nsync,” is about a college-aged male student who is trying to “come out of the closet,” as it were, about this fascination with the boy band Nsync. His homepage is a “fan site,” largely about his interest in the band, and it contains links to other Nsync fan sites and a developing short story (to which you can contribute) about a straightboy’s fascination with a boy band. Like many other fan sites, “Straightboyz4Nsync” also has pictures, a short bio, and even a link to a Yahoo! Group so that other straightboy fans of Nsync can communicate with one another.

My creation of such a site readily reveals my pedagogical—and personal—investments, which is not to say that I’m a fan of Nsync. I’m not. Really. And “Straightboyz4Nsync” is not just a revenge fantasy—virtually giving a straight guy a “shameful” secret he has to hide for fear of rejection or castigation. (Ok, maybe it’s a little of that, but not much.) Rather, “Straightboyz4Nsync” is an attempt to provoke discussion about the ways in which “straightness” is “performed,” is narrated, is constructed and maintained as an identity. What would happen if students were confronted with a “straightboy” with a “secret”? How would they “read” his sexuality and his self-narration? What insights about the narration of straightness might be teased out with a site in which someone
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marks himself as "straight"? More generally, what thoughts, insights, or even defensive reactions about straightness might the site evoke, or disrupt? By giving a self-identified "straightboy" a secret—a secret that could homophobically bring his "straightness" into question—I hoped to prompt discussion about how one's "straightness" is constructed and maintained. In other words, I hoped to ask—and provisionally answer—the question, what is the "story" of "straightness"? Moreover, what might teasing out that story tell us about the politics—and rhetoric—of heterosexuality in our culture?

I decided to use a website because, as Charles Cheung points out, a personal homepage acts for some as a site of "emancipation," in which "those who want to present 'hidden' aspects of themselves—things they are cautious to reveal in 'real life' because of fear of rejection or embarrassment," can do so virtually (48). Of course, since Straightboyz4Nsync is a hoax site, its "author," Dax, could not be "liberated," but I hoped that the site would provoke discussions that might at least lead students to think more critically about some of the ways in which narrations of sexual identity take shape in our culture.

But the site taught me much, much more.

My intention in the remaining pages of this essay is not to present you with an "experiment" that I conducted in deploying queer theory in the composition classroom. I do not have enough "data" for such an enterprise, and, frankly, I remain unsure what such an analysis would tell me. Rather, my goal here is to discuss an exercise I have used in a few classes—two first-year writing courses and one sophomore-level course focused on understanding the cultural impact of the Web—and work through some theoretical implications of that exercise for my understanding of the possible uses of queer theory in the composition classroom. As such, my enterprise here is not to present a quantifiable "study" as much as it is to explore how my students' responses to an exercise have enlarged my understanding of the potential pedagogical efficacy of queer theory in the teaching of writing.

Protesting a Little Too Much: Comments from Students

I used my hoax site in three separate sections. Two were fairly identical courses, both third term (on the quarter system) first-year writing courses, which serve as "capstone" courses in which students write long, argumentative research papers. My focus in this course was on issues surrounding HIV/AIDS—personally, socially, and politically. Students participated in service-learning assignments, composing pamphlets, text
for websites, and other projects for local AIDS service organizations. The other course I used the exercise in was a “Web Literacies” course that I designed for our communications program; this course examined the Web in its sociocultural dimensions, as a tool for individual identity performance, community building, and even political organization and activism. In all three classes, we eventually discussed issues pertaining to homosexuality and homophobia, noting, in the writing classes, the continued association of AIDS with gayness and, in the communications class, the use of the Web by many queers to experiment with identity and find community. Since all three classes met in computerized classrooms, I frequently had the opportunity to show students queer-themed homepages and sites for discussion, both face-to-face and electronically enabled. I began to think, though, that it was easy for many students to understand such sites as “other,” as indicative of queer experience, and as thus having no connection to their own, avowedly straight lives. “Straightboyz4Nsync” was designed in part to queer that.

After viewing the website, students were asked to respond, comment, and discuss via a Blackboard Discussion Board. I encouraged openness of discussion and response, directing students only to think about the site, its author’s possible intentions and purposes, and the site’s potential effects on visitors. Of course, class context is important in framing discussions, and I used this site in three separate courses: a sophomore-level Web Literacies course in which we discussed “fan communities” on the Web; a first-year writing course in argumentative writing in which we explored issues of social movements; and a first-year capstone writing course focused on sexuality issues. Oddly enough, responses from all three sections—disparate as they were—followed very comparable lines of discussion and analysis. Moreover, I could not detect any clear “split” in opinion or response along racial or gender lines; women were just as likely as men to respond “negatively” to the site, and black students seemed just as likely to be supportive of this Nsync-loving white straightboy as other white straightboys and girls. No one in any of the classes, to my knowledge, was openly gay, and no one had disclosed his queerness to me privately.

Some students responded to the site negatively because of its, admittedly, unoriginal Web design. I must admit that this actually surprised me—not because I think the site is particularly well designed, but because I was interested in students’ responses to the content of the site, not to the site’s layout. However, comments about design are revealing:
well, disregarding the content, the site is easy to navigate and clear on what is where. As for the attractiveness of the site, it is kind of lame. It's a little boring, a little too straightforward, yet he handled the subject matter OK. Overall, I don't like it, and there doesn't seem like much time and effort was put into the web design.

Yeah I didn't like this so much. I like I just told you thought that this site was very obnoxious

But enough of my rambling, apparently the guy had about as much skill in web design as he had musical taste. . . .

This website really sucked. The pics were distorted and if this is supposed to be a fan club about NSYNC why don't they have any facts about NSYNC or something like it?

I didn't really care for this NSYNC fan club site. They could've put a little more work into it.

I think this is a really bad website. It has very limited amounts of information and pictures. Disappointing, really.

One could view such comments as perhaps skirting the issues raised by the site, but I also want to take them at face value, particularly as they suggest that—for a few students—the medium _will_ make or break the message. In fact, I would argue that students' attention to aspects of design _over_ issues of content reveals the extent to which "production values" are significant for our often media-saturated and media-savvy students. And a failure to impress with aspects of "visual rhetoric" will often equate to a failure to communicate.

Many others, though, _did_ respond to the site's content, perhaps because they felt they had to as part of the assignment—or perhaps because they were intrigued. Regardless of what motivated their responses, student comments about the content of "Straightboyz4NSYNC" covered a range of opinions and offered many opportunities for further discussion.

Some students' responses could be characterized as representative of the "extreme ends" of the possible response spectrum: homophobic on one hand and supportive on the other. Only one response seemed blatantly homophobic, the student suggesting that Dax's "straightness" _should_ be called into question; the "reasoning" offered, however, merely linked Dax's potential queerness less to his liking a boy band and more to his apparently questionable taste in music:
WHAT IN THE NAME OF ALL THAT IS HOLY IS THIS GUY THINKING!?!?!?!? Of course people would wonder about his straightness, this band consists of an undertalented group of pretty boy singers with monotonous songs, no song writing ability and some snazzy dance moves. FOR GOD'S SAKE PEOPLE PLAY A FREAKEN INSTRUMENT!!! A giutar, the drums, an accordian SOMETHING!!!!

In contrast, some responses seemed very sympathetic, attempting to understand and even support the site’s stated aims and goals—to provide a “safe space” online for straightboys who want to express their appreciation for a popular boy band:

Ok this looks like a site for male insync fans only. Obviously this site is necessary because it seems strange to most people that males are fans of insync too. It must mean that people may think your gay if your a male and like insync. This it what the title of the web page seems to suggest.

i think that this site is trying to get guys to admit that they like bands like Nsync and that it is ok if they do—it doesn’t mean that they are gay if they do—i think it could be successful—people might think its cool—and funny—and go along with it—others might reject it—you never know—i think its cool for a guy to admit that he likes nsync—its cute.

Some students, of course, felt that the website didn’t raise any problem that they had:

well i guess it is none of my business if that kid likes those boy bands, i dont agree with him, but its his problem not mine.

When I queried this as a response, I received the following post:

i didnt mean problem in terms of acutal problem. i meant its not for me to think about and worry about; nor should it be for anyone else. but people obviously have a problem with the fact that a boy likes a boy band, no question there, esp if you have a discussion board about it. i think instead of problem, i more mean waste my time on the subject of something that is not my business

These responses seem to suggest simultaneously an understanding of Dax’s dilemma and a desire to distance themselves from it. On one hand, the posters understand the pressure of norms, particularly around sexuality and gender, but, on the other hand, it’s not their problem; if you do
not occupy a subject position substantially outside the norm, then you (a) have nothing to worry about and (b) need not become involved in discussions of those who might have something to worry about. In a way, these are exactly the students I wanted to “queery”—students whose sense of sexuality is, perhaps, so normative, so unquestioning, that it is easy for them to dismiss a sense of sexuality as in need of questioning, critique, and interrogation.

The majority of comments offered via the Discussion Board fall into two categories that, I think, invite and are willing to engage critical discussion of sexual orientation and its construction in our society—albeit in ways that are often surprising and in need of further interrogation. First, some students seemed to understand exactly what I had intended in posting the site for discussion, and they responded to the site critically, specifically pointing out the norms through which sexual orientation identities are maintained and the double-binds in which they place men:

I personally think there is nothing wrong with a guy liking a boy band, however, it is just not the “norm” with society. Boy bands are seen as gay by society, so when a male likes a boy band they are seen as gay also.

It [the site] might bring up the controversial “norms” of sexuality and why it is okay or not okay from one to stray away from these “norms.” This is a typical example of what happens when somebody steps out of the “normal” boundaries: when guys like boy bands they are thought to be gay, why can’t a guy just like a boy band?

Such responses serve as useful “jumping-off” points for discussions of both how and why such “norms” are in place, as well as how difficult it is to “come out of the closet” as a transgressor of gender or sexuality norms. Indeed, we discussed Straightboyz4Nsync in terms of the “closet,” suggesting that straight men’s sense and performance of sexuality and gender are often carefully self-regulated to maintain the straight/gay and even masculine/feminine binaries. Again, such a discussion quickly leads to consideration of why such norms need regulation and policing, as well as to an examination of whose interests they serve. In the process, students think critically about how sexuality and gender are tied to our senses of identity. In particular, the following comment directly alludes to the connection between gender identities and sexuality, particularly as they apply to men:
guys care too much if people think their gay. That's the real issue. I went to lilith fair, most people think of that as a lesbian thing. But I don't really care what people think, it's just good music. No lifestyle comes with it.

The student's comment is quick to dismiss the issues as seemingly trivial, but oral discussion in response to this comment revolved around our culture's careful policing of the boundaries of maleness as opposed to femaleness, the implied sexism of such policing, and the use of strict concepts of masculinity and femininity as a tool to maintain a delimiting division of labor as well as a marketing ploy to create distinct categories of consumers. The discussion was wide ranging and varied, and I was impressed that some students could use the "Straightboyz4Nsync" site as a launching pad, as it were, for making connections between gender, sexuality, economics, and politics. More significantly, in terms of queer theory's questioning of the normalization and naturalization of certain identity formations, students questioned why certain gender categories and expectations exist. A student asking a simple question—such as "why can't a guy just like a boy band?"—seems simplistic, but it can introduce good discussion about the construction of social, gender, and sexual roles.

Such conversations were delightful, but the majority of students debated a very different aspect of the site—one that led to our most "disruptive" discussions about identity and sexuality. These students addressed the supposed intent of the site, questioning why Dax felt the need both to create the site and, more radically, identify himself as "straight." The discussion began with several students who, seemingly sympathetic to Dax, were concerned that Dax might be a bit homophobic: it kind of seems that he has something against gay men, and he seems to speak of them pretty stereotypically

This guy seems a little too homophobic. When people act like that, their heterosexuality is debatable. This kid's beliefs seem highly dubious.

he feels the need to defend his sexuality for some reason . . . maybe a little homophobic?? or a little unsure about himself??

i think that the site is fine. although i am a little confused about why he had to make the point that he is straight. it's fine if you like n'sync . . . whether you are gay or not. . .
This last question sounds so ironic to my queer ears; how many times have we, as queer people, been asked why we have to “flaunt” our sexuality or “make the point” that we are gay? More curiously, though, I was pleased that the students seemed to respond negatively to homophobia, as though it isn’t “cool” to be a homophobe; like what you like—and you should be fine.

The comments, though, also point in another direction: a questioning of Dax’s sexuality and self-identification. Indeed, some students seemed particularly concerned that Dax had taken the time to construct a website about Nsync, as though that in and of itself raised a “red flag.” For instance, “men who do enjoy insync and make and ELABORATE website about them, are not completely normal.” Or, as another student put it,

i think it brings up gender issues bc it is very girly to like boy bands and for this guy to cross that boundary and actually admit he is a fan, is very unusual. i will give him credit, i do think that it takes a lot of courage to admit such an obsession! that is right, obsession. he actually cares so much as to make an entire website devoted to them.

One pair of comments, from a young female poster, is particularly telling along these lines, summarizing several points already made:

Well . . . I mean Is this more of a personal webpage Im some what confused. The fact that he likes NSYNC is fine I dont think its that big of a deal. The only thing is that he has to say StraightGuys for NSYNC and if hes straight then why does he have to announce it. The same as if he was gay he would need not to say Gayfor NSYNC it just stirs unneeded contravercy and here say, from my opinon. It has nothing to do with a preference in music hes some what sterotying but then again Tis His Own!!:

I suppose some need to announce it b/c of what others think thats what it boils down to right? I mean at some time in his life he was probably called something derogitory and now he feels the need to stand up against it. Or he has fallen into the stereotype that only gay guys would like boy bands and he feels the need to publicly announce that he is not part of that. I dont know really b/c i dont know him so I dont want to pass judgment but thats what I got from what his site.

I appreciated this student’s understanding of the “trap” of stereotyping, and we had a good discussion about how such stereotypes do not just
demonize others (queers) but are used to support and maintain seemingly "normative" (straight) identities.

In many other ways, though, the concern that Dax is announcing he is "straight" is itself a problem, the gesture that calls his straightness into question: "if he’s straight then why does he have to announce it." Indeed, Calvin Thomas reminds us, straights do not generally have to "come out of the closet"; they do not have to announce their sexuality since it is normative to be straight. Conversely, marking one’s straight sexuality is not without penalty. Some students stated directly their feeling that Dax is “protesting too much” on the site:

I am going to have to say that the creator of the web-site is having some sexual identity crisis. I mean really, straightboyzforNsync or what ever. I don’t know, I think it’ a little fishy. I agree with his web site, but he needs to get real with himself.

i thought the website was a little bizarre. the story was strange . . . i’m not a big fan. and as for the sexuality aspect, why does he feel the need to create something called “straightboyz” (dumb name anyway) but why cant he just create an n’sync website for all sorts of other people instead of limiting it to straight guys . . . seems a little questionable to me.

UMMM. . . . This website is WEIRD! I think this guy makes a point too many times to say that he’s not gay, and that he likes the band, which to me seems like he really might be gay deep down, and is afraid to say something. I really don’t think it’s a big deal if a guy likes the band, I know a lot of guys who like them. ????????????

In a follow-up comment to this last posting, one student summarized many other students’ general feeling:

I don’t know to me this guy isn’t safe with his manhood? i think i read “i’m not gay” or “fag” in this website way to many times! If you like i n’sync great but why make a websit about it?

Interestingly, the word “fag” doesn’t appear on the site, Dax never says specifically that he isn’t gay, and he really doesn’t mark his sexuality explicitly.

As such, the vociferous questioning of Dax’s sexuality suggests a dynamic at play that deserves more attention. Specifically, I could read such comments as questioning my ability to “perform” straightness!
Rather, I think the comments serve as useful jumping-off points for provocative discussion. For instance, these self-identified straight kids largely seem to think that being homophobic is "not cool." And that's good. At the same time, many of these students are quick to identify even a hint of homophobia in someone else as potential queerness. And, contrary to what I had originally thought, it's not so much liking Nsync that is problematic; when we examine the comments and when I reconsider classroom discussion, it becomes clear that, for the most part, liking Nsync is not the issue; many students seem willing to accept Dax's interest in Nsync at face value, and I had a few young male students say—out loud and proud—that they were Nsync fans. At the same time, Dax's implicit self-identification as "straight"—a rhetorical gesture to forestall questioning of his sexual identity and affix his heterosexuality—actually calls that heterosexuality into question. One of my intentions in creating the Straightboyz4Nsync site was to prompt discussion of homophobia, but it seems that Dax's concern with being read as "gay" is itself read as insecurity about his straightness—perhaps a "questionable" inability to keep his story "straight."

How can we explain this dynamic? Perhaps just bringing up the topic of gayness—or straightness—is itself grounds for questioning one's straightness. But why? Queer theory offers one possible answer. Calvin Thomas, a self-proclaimed straight man, uses Judith Butler's notion of performativity to elaborate a queer understanding of "straightness," suggesting that "The terror of being mistaken for a queer dominates the straight mind because this terror constitutes the straight mind" (27). More specifically, "According to some queer theorists, heteronormativity, 'straightness as such,' is less a function of other-sexual desire than of the disavowal or abjection of that imagined same-sex desire upon which straightness never ceases to depend" (27). In other words, heterosexuality as an identity is dependent upon gayness for its social, cultural, political, and personal legibility. Or, as Katz puts it, heterosexuality is an "invention," with a traceable history, dependent on its supposed opposite—queerness—for its very meaningfulness. More radically, heterosexuality must suppress knowledge of this dependence on queerness in order to situate itself as normative; after all, what kind of "norm" would heterosexuality be if it openly acknowledged the queer for its very meaningfulness. So, for a queer theorist such as Thomas, "to profess straightness is to claim an identity within an economy that assumes that one identification can only be purchased at the expense of another" (30). In terms of the Straightboyz4Nsync site, it seems that
Dax’s calling attention to his straightness simultaneously raised the specter of queerness—a queerness that is supposed to remain suppressed; and such raising of the repressed other rebounds into questioning, doubt.

In light of such theorizing, students’ comments seem, well, homophobic, perhaps a slightly more advanced game of “spot the queer.” But they can also be used to introduce other possibilities of discussion, leading students to think about why straightness is “unmarked,” unremarkable. Such an encounter reminded me of Richard Miller’s discussion in “Fault Lines in the Contact Zone: Assessing Homophobic Student Writing,” in which he analyzes ways to address student writing containing specifically homophobic themes or content. Miller maintains that “The most promising pedagogical response lies . . . in closely attending to what our students say and write in an ongoing effort to learn how to read, understand, and respond to the strange, sometimes threatening, multivocal texts they produce while writing in the contact zone [of the classroom]” (252). Indeed, as we talked and wrote about the site, it became apparent that students were not necessarily eager to accept the queer theoretical position that straightness is dependent on an unacknowledged queerness, but I think it was revelatory for several to consider that straightness may be dependent on not calling it into question. As such, straightness—and its privileges—remain unexamined, normative: it just feels so normal because we don’t have to think about it. Or, to use Miller’s formulation, perhaps straightness depends on not acknowledging the “sometimes threatening, multivocal texts,” or identities, that it produces.

Once we, as a class, saw how straightness depends in part on a silenced queerness for its existence as an identification, it became easier to see straightness as a “performance” and to spot the ways it is “performed.” One final example from the Discussion Board underscored for students both this performative nature of a straight identity and the silences that surround such a performance. A young male student, perhaps a bit tongue-in-cheek, expressed his own liking of Nsync: “Yes I must admit Justin Timberlake is the man. He had the sexiest girlfriend in the world. Now he can just do as he pleases and get with supermodels. I wish I lived the lifestyle of JT. The website is ok . . .” It’s hard not to read this posting as simultaneously authentic and sarcastic, with the sarcasm acting as a rhetorical defense mechanism. Also, note that this student does not say he is straight, but rather he performs his straightness by commenting on Justin Timberlake’s “sexiest girlfriend in the world.” The website,
though, is just “ok.” Again, straightness lies in its performance, not in self-identification.

The student’s girlfriend, however, can comment about his straightness, and she offered this follow-up post: “in regards to the site . . . someone that i know . . . really looks up to justin timberlake. he like the clothes he wears, how he sings, as well as his curly hairstyle. He watches all of his videos and likes his ex-girlfriend. he is not at all ashamed of having justin as his idol and rolemodel.” Again, we could read this as playful, but its pedagogical value should not go unremarked. For instance, I questioned the class about this discussion, asking if the male student is not ashamed of having Justin Timberlake as his “rolemodel,” then why doesn’t he say so explicitly in his own posting? Again, students here have the opportunity to see not only the rhetorical binds of straightness but also the ways in which one can—and can not—perform straightness.

A caveat is useful here. Some readers might think that I am misreading Butler’s understanding and development of “performance” in her work. My intent is not to mistake “performance” for chosen identity representation, much like choosing a set of clothes in the morning: who will I be today? Rather, I firmly believe with Butler that performativity “consists in a reiteration of norms which precede, constrain, and exceed the performer and in that sense cannot be taken as the fabrication of the performer’s ‘will’ or ‘choice’. . . . The reduction of performativity to performance would be a mistake” (234). And I think my students and I were developing, through this exercise, a better sense of how restrictive our identity performances actually are. We see this in comments such as, “It is just not the ‘norm’ with society. Boy bands are seen as gay by society, so when a male likes a boy band they are seen as gay also,” and “This is a typical example of what happens when somebody steps out of the ‘normal’ boundaries: when guys like boy bands they are thought to be gay.” This last comment is followed up by the obvious question: “why can’t a guy just like a boy band?” Because the performativity of straight masculinity “precedes, constrains, and exceeds the performer.” Queer theory asks only that we begin acknowledging such performances as available for questioning.

Rereading Straightness
As I reflect on this exercise, several observations come to mind. First, in many ways, the hoax site and discussion board helped my students and me turn a critical lens on “straightness,” disrupting my own and my students’ sense of the normal so we could question how identities are narrated, life
stories constructed, and a rhetoric of normalcy and the normative maintained. Specifically, we explored how "straightness" must be performed, and, as Butler would suggest, it must be performed again and again to maintain its seeming "naturalness." As such, we saw how simply labeling or identifying something as "straight" becomes problematic in that the identification itself questions the naturalness of the category, rendering opaque what once was not seen as needing clarification or identification. Further, students began to develop a sense of how narrations depend as much on certain silences as they do on certain annunciations.

Second, the use of follow-up discussions was crucial in interrogating student responses and interpretations. Deborah Britzman suggests that "the beginnings of a queer pedagogy" might lie in an "ethical concern for one's own reading practices and what these have to do with the imagining of sociality as more than an effect of the dominant conceptual order" (67). Did students learn to "read" with the "ethical concern" Britzman proposes—imagining "sociality as more than an effect of the dominant conceptual order"? That might be stretching it, but I think that steady and sustained examination of our combined online and in-class discussions revealed some surprising insights into the silences and oversights that bolster our sense of the "norm."

Third, an unexpected lesson about website design: even with a hoax site, good design is key in attracting and maintaining the interest of some students. I could, for many I think, successfully enough mimic the basic design of a "fan site," but others were unimpressed—and for good reason.

As I've discussed this exercise with fellow teachers and other composition scholars, I am inevitably asked if I eventually let the students know that "Straightboyz4Nsync" is a hoax site—and, moreover, a hoax site authored by their instructor. I did, and their reactions are surprising in a number of ways, though I can only summarize because I did not think at the time (alas!) of collecting written commentary about their responses to being "hoaxed." But to summarize from discussions with them, it seemed the many were unsurprised—itself surprising. What can account for such lack of reaction? Perhaps the following. I had used the "Mutant Watch" hoax site in an earlier class exercise, and many students had already encountered numerous hoax sites on their own, so I think that the idea of being "hoaxed" was neither estranging nor alarming for these students. In some ways, we as literacy teachers can take comfort from that: these students are not accepting everything they read on the Web at face value, and we can use the Web to foster a sense of critical literacy and information evaluation.
More specifically, I think students weren’t surprised because they understand—either intuitively or as part of their experience of Web surfing—that homepages are themselves performances and that not all performers tell the whole truth and nothing but the truth. Cheung may figure homepages as “emancipatory,” but many seasoned Web surfers suspect, I think, that personal homepages can be as much carefully constructed projections of idealized or even fabricated selfhoods than revelatory of deep-seated truths. Cheung himself notes that homepage authors engage in “self-censorship” and that the Web is home to an “unavoidable existence of a certain degree of deception and overstatement” (49, 51). As such, I think, increasingly, many Web surfers view personal homepages with a grain of salt. You can even see such skepticism lurking in some of my students’ responses to “Straightboyz4Nsync”; just who is this guy?!

Despite my students’ seemingly relaxed or unruffled response to being hoaxed, using such material raises some interesting ethical questions about “tricking” students. To what extent can I “closet” myself as the author of a site in order to talk about the “closet”—and still maintain my ethos as a teacher, or scholar for that matter. Put another way, to what extent can any of us use trickery and deceit to talk about the various tricks and small deceptions we all commit to protect aspects of our lives from close scrutiny, bigoted attack, and rhetorical, if not actual, violence? Many pedagogues and scholars have talked about the usefulness of “outing” oneself—as gay, lesbian, queer, even straight—in the hopes of alerting students to the presence of both queers in the social sphere and the circulation and construction of sexual and gender identity throughout our culture. In particular, Didi Khayatt has argued well, recently, both pro and con for “coming out,” and she maintains that “the decision whether to come out in class and how to come out must remain with the jurisdiction of the individual teacher” (46). She argues for careful consideration of this so that no instructor is simply reduced to a “sexual category.” The emphasis here, rather, is on disclosure, on bringing the hidden and marginalized into the open—and doing so in pedagogically productive ways.

In terms of fostering such productive discussions, I’m wondering if presenting students with images—and experiences—of not just “outing” but of “closeting” might accomplish the goal of talking about how discourses of fear, prejudice, and homophobia impact the lives and self narrations of many queers, and even some straights. It took a lot of courage, as I’ve pointed out, for my straight male student to “out” himself
as an Nsync fan; a closer examination of the closet he constructed to hide that fandom might be revealing. More broadly, sharing with students a bit more openly my own process of constructing the “Straightboyz4Nsync” site, borrowing as I did from my own very personal experience of inhabiting the closet at various points throughout my life, might have produced a more intense and rewarding discussion about sexuality, discourse, and the public construction and performance of selfhood. If I use this exercise again, I will certainly explore such issues, perhaps “outing” my own many “closeting” moves—both personally and teacherly—and risking them for some (hopefully) productive discussion.

Other thoughts are worth considering as well, particularly when we reflect on the intersection of identities—sexuality, gender, race, and class. Of course, we were looking at a white guy grappling with his interest in other white guys. I fully recognize that other cultural situations, as they are inflected and shaped by issues of race, ethnicity, and class, might have led to very different discussions about the construction of normalcy, straightness, and sexual identity. And speaking of construction, in first sitting down to create “Straightboyz4Nsync” I realized that I was attempting to craft a “straight” persona, or perform a “straightboy” identity. All sorts of interesting questions began to pop up as I worked on the site. For instance, could I “pass” as a straightboy? Could I use the identity-masking features of the Web, as many people do, to create an online persona that is not me, and would others accept it as “legitimate”?

But maybe this question of “legitimacy” is the point: to question the seeming “naturalness” of identity, to use the widely acknowledged ability of the Web to simultaneously mask and construct online identities to question the construction of identity itself. In “On the Myth of Sexual Orientation: Field Notes from the Personal, Pedagogical, and Historical Discourses of Identity,” Margot Francis suggests that “Perhaps the instability of the term queer can pose the production of normalization as the problem. In this context the interrogation of binaries themselves—normal/deviant, biological/social, straight/gay—can open up quite a different approach” (73). And I think this is exactly what the Straightboyz4Nsync site began to do: pose the production of normalization—particularly on the Web—as a “problem,” or at least an issue to be considered.

Ultimately, though, I must ask myself if this pedagogical exercise has a critical pay off, can it in future iterations, and is it worth trying again.
William Spurlin, in his introduction to *Lesbian and Gay Studies and the Teaching of English*, points out that theorizing “queer difference as a lens through which to read, interpret, and produce texts, or as a way of reading the classroom and indeed the world . . . in itself is not sufficient to move us toward a more critical pedagogy” (xix). And Butler herself says that “there is no guarantee that exposing the naturalized status of heterosexuality will lead to its subversion.” Regardless of whether or not I might want to *subvert* heterosexuality (and I don’t, really—most of the time), I can’t help but ask if “Straightboyz4Nsync” is *more* than just a Webbed-up exercise in reading through a queer “lens”? I hope so. How might I be able to tell? How might it lead to students *not* taking their heterosexuality—and its many privileges in our homophobic culture—for granted? Susanne Luhmann suggests that productive “learning becomes a process of risking the self, much like Foucault . . . suggests: ‘the target . . . is not to discover what we are, but to refuse what we are . . . .’” (151). When one of my straight male students started to “risk” himself by “coming out of the closet” as an Nsync fan, I could see a student willing *not* to take his heterosexuality for granted, willing to adopt a risky position, willing to identify with what many other students thought of as a suspect, *queer* performance of straightness. What such identification might lead to, I cannot tell, but I also can’t help but think of this as progress.

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**Notes**

1. See my own earlier work, “Out.”
2. I think that part of the problem has been a concentration on queerness, specifically—gay and lesbian lives. And we really can’t blame ourselves for this. It’s often been exciting and invigorating to bring in to class *queer* material. Moreover, I am certain that bringing in queer texts for study and analysis has made students more comfortable with queer materials.
3. The address is http://www.geocities.com/straightboyz4nsync.
4. Early in the quarter, I receive written permission from students to quote from their work and to discuss assignments and teaching methods and situations. I offer them the option of being acknowledged, either directly or pseudonymously. In this case, since some students elected to have their real names used and others did not, I only refer to students anonymously and by perceived gender.
Works Cited


