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Queering/Querying Educational Spaces: The LGBTQIA2+ Learning and Affirming Challenge

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Queering/Querying Educational Spaces: The LGBTQIA2+ Learning and Affirming Challenge

Introduction

Currently, conservative movements in the United States and globally target education related to LGBTQIA2+ issues and communities as ideological propaganda (Burke & Greenfield, 2016; Sawchuk, 2022; del Valle, 2022).¹ Denial of access to a more difference-affirming curricula reinforces hegemonic cultural norms (Chen & Lawless, 2018), which can be exclusionary and limits learning for all. Research on the college experiences of LGBTQIA2+ identifying individuals indicates a generally chilly campus climate, recognizing that “colleges and universities have historically been shaped by and for cisgender, straight individuals” (Pryor, 2017, p. 36). Educators can play a key role in reshaping hostile realities and expanding knowledge frameworks by co-constructing affirming environments where learners engage with differences in meaningful ways, cultivating their understanding and practices of cultural humility and responsiveness.

Rationale

Queer communication pedagogy (QCP) – a type of feminist educational approach – offers one impactful way to transform cis-heteronormative education and model difference-affirming learning (Atay & Pensoneau-Conway, 2018). Atay and Pensoneau-Conway (2018) define QCP as “shifts in perspectives and decentering cisheterosexuality and cisheterosexual structures to critique and challenge oppressive and discriminatory power dynamics” (p. 6). QCP posits that to queer education is to alter our relationships to learning and knowledge production, including our understandings of what is important to learn, who are the knowers, and how and where learning happens. As an overall orientation, QCP incorporates several interconnected elements that contribute to building more inclusive college cultures.

1. Firstly, it centers LGBTQIA2+ content and voices in curricula.
2. Secondly, QCP is relational: it focuses on relationships as sites of learning and it privileges the creation of supportive relationships within learning environments.
3. Thirdly, in QCP learners have regular opportunities “to question oppressive systems related to sexuality and gender (...) along with knowledge production” (Atay & Pensoneau-Conway, 2018, p. 8), including through oppositional and counter-readings of normative texts and experiences.
4. Lastly, these components come together in critical hope -- new, intersectional and transnational ways to envision equitable futures and actions.

Importantly, Atay and Pensoneau-Conway (2018) note that QCP is not confined to formal educational settings, but “is committed to bridging the gap between classrooms and other spaces where learning can actively happen” (p. 8). Similar “queering” of what we regularly consider as “learning spaces” has been growing in the pedagogical work of academic libraries, which, through programmatic collaborations with faculty and learners, play a “vital role in student development and success” (Kasten-Mutkus, 2020, p. 431).

Drawing on this and on calls for academic libraries to shape social justice efforts and agendas more actively (Morales et al., 2014), in this article we present an interactive week-long asynchronous library program (called a Challenge). It took place in April 2022, with more than 1,400 participants, and continues to provide educators and community members with accessible learning materials and engaging activities to support the growth of LGBTQIA2+ affirming environments. The Challenge bridges to classrooms *and*, at the same time, offers a semi-formal open-community learning space, queering practices of where learning takes place on college campuses, who is included, and how we connect to and produce knowledge.

¹ LGBTQIA2+ stands for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer, Intersex, Asexual or Aromantic or Agender, and Two Spirit.
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Learning Objectives

The Challenge is intended to support educators who can implement and/or adapt it for existing classes or open workshops at their institutions. Specifically, the Challenge supports learners in:

1. Naming/identifying cultural norms and practices related to gender and sexuality;
2. Questioning assumptions and expectations about gender and sexuality;
3. Reflecting on one's own truth(s) and opportunities for growth regarding gender and sexuality;
4. Connecting to credible sources that center LGBTQIA2+ voices, experiences, and knowledge.

Overview of Strategy

A graduate student with an interest in QCP and in enhancing LGBTQIA2+ representation in general education courses at our rural, public university conceived of the *LGBTQIA2+ Learning and Affirming Challenge*. He recruited a team of faculty and staff to co-create the program. The collaboration included a faculty member who teaches in Communication and in Women's, Gender, and Sexuality Studies, and the liaison librarian to Communication Studies who has experience designing and implementing learning Challenges. In addition, the librarian for Women's, Gender, and Sexuality Studies provided consultation and input. We collected data as part of this project, for which we received IRB approval from our University ethics committee. However, here we are describing the activity we developed rather than the research.

Our online, asynchronous program included five days of content, with brief tasks designed to learn, listen, share, and take action around topics related to sexual orientation, gender identity, intersectionality, and LGBTQIA2+ affirming curricula. Consistent with the four elements of the QCP framework, each day we 1) featured LGBTQIA2+ content and voices, 2) fostered relationships through collaborative learning, 3) guided learners through oppositional readings, and 4) offered opportunities for imagining transformation. Each day also scaffolded the coming day(s), and generally included four sections that aligned with the above QCP elements: 1) information on the day's topic through short readings and/or videos, 2) interactive engagement with questions emphasizing that day's learning (using Padlet),¹ 3) multimedia resources for further development and engagement (e.g., videos, media and peer reviewed articles, podcasts), and 4) personal reflection questions.² Although the pilot version was intended as a learning resource for a wide audience, we created the Challenge with the express purpose that parts of it, or all of it, could be utilized in various instructional settings.

The [Welcome page](#) set the stage for the week's work (see Figure 1), with definitions of terms and suggestions for ways to interact with the content and experiences of the Challenge (such as being prepared to engage, learning with discomfort, setting expectations, and speaking one's truths). Also included were several acknowledgments that recognized the designers of the program, the indigenous homelands where our university is situated, the choices people might make in defining their own gender and sexual identities and expressions (i.e., an LGBTQIA2+ affirming and acknowledging statement), and the limitations inherent to the program. The *Welcome* page further featured an image from the 2015 Rainbow Rally organized in Bangladesh, with which one of the Challenge co-creators has a personal connection. The intention of this

¹ [Padlet](#) is a software used to create and share content, and can be used as an open forum/discussion board.

² At the end of each day, we asked participants to reflect on the following:

- Were there any emotions that you felt after exploring today's resources and activities (discomfort, joy, happiness, anger, sadness, no emotion)? If so, what were the sources of those feelings?
- What was an important learning experience for you in today's challenge?

welcome was to center LGBTQIA2+ presence from the beginning. We wanted to be explicit about transnational perspectives on the precarious positions of LGBTQIA2+ communities globally *and* to emphasize our collective relational responsibility to transform such realities through learning and action (Atay & Pensoneau-Conway, 2018).

LGBTQIA2+ Learning & Affirming Challenge
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Welcome

Day 1: Re/situating selves

Day 2: Un/resettling understanding

Day 3: Engaging queer connections

Day 4: Queering/querying inclusivity

Day 5: Re/affirming commitments

Welcome to the LGBTQIA2+ Learning & Affirming Challenge.

My silences had not protected me. Your silence will not protect you. Audre Lorde, black, lesbian, mother, warrior, poet (link opens in a new tab)

This program is intended to provide a supportive space to learn, share information, and take action in order to create LGBTQIA2+ affirming learning experiences. The acronym LGBTQIA2 stands for **L**esbian, **G**ay, **B**isexual, **T**ransgender, **Q**ueer, **I**ntersex, **A**sexual or **A**romantic or **A**gender, **2** Spirit; The **+** sign added at the end of the acronym symbolizes affirmation for additional identities and communities who challenge dominant cultural norms around gender and sexuality. For more information on important terminology, you can visit the [Rainbow Resource Center website](#) (link opens in a new tab). We're glad you are joining us on this journey.

Before we start, we want to share with you our hopes for living our LGBTQIA2+ affirming commitments as we interact with the content and experiences of this Challenge (commitments were adapted from Singleton and Linton's "[Courageous Conversations](#)" - opens in a new tab). We hope participants will honor the following processes:

Engaging - Engaging with the content is a personal commitment that we can make towards understanding aspects of gender and sexual identity that need to be taken into consideration in our learning spaces (broadly defined).

Learning with discomfort - Considering topics of sexual and gender identities can be challenging. Yet, there is much for any one of us to learn when we identify and unpack our own relationships and understandings of these identities.

Setting expectations - The complexity and intersectionality that go into making living and learning more LGBTQIA2+ affirming cannot be fully addressed in a 5-day challenge. However, we can treat this as a starting point to bigger conversations and work we can do moving forward.

Speaking (y)our truths - An important part of this challenge is questioning (y)our truths (experiences, knowledge, assumptions, and identities), reflecting on them, and, when appropriate, sharing them with others. This can be challenging, but allowing ourselves to bring our authentic voices will help us to learn and grow as an LGBTQIA2+ affirming community.




Figure 1: Welcome page excerpt

[Day 1: Re/situating selves](#) (see Figure 2) focused on language and norms and included a Padlet discussion that asked participants to consider ways that labels can be harmful and/or empowering, depending on how they are used and by whom. Applying QCP from the very start, learners engaged in oppositional readings by considering and questioning taken-for-granted language that may be exclusionary in reinforcing cis-heteronormativity (Atay & Pensoneau-Conway, 2018). Such conversations about labels and their functions could support affirming learning in any class, as part of constructing community agreements.

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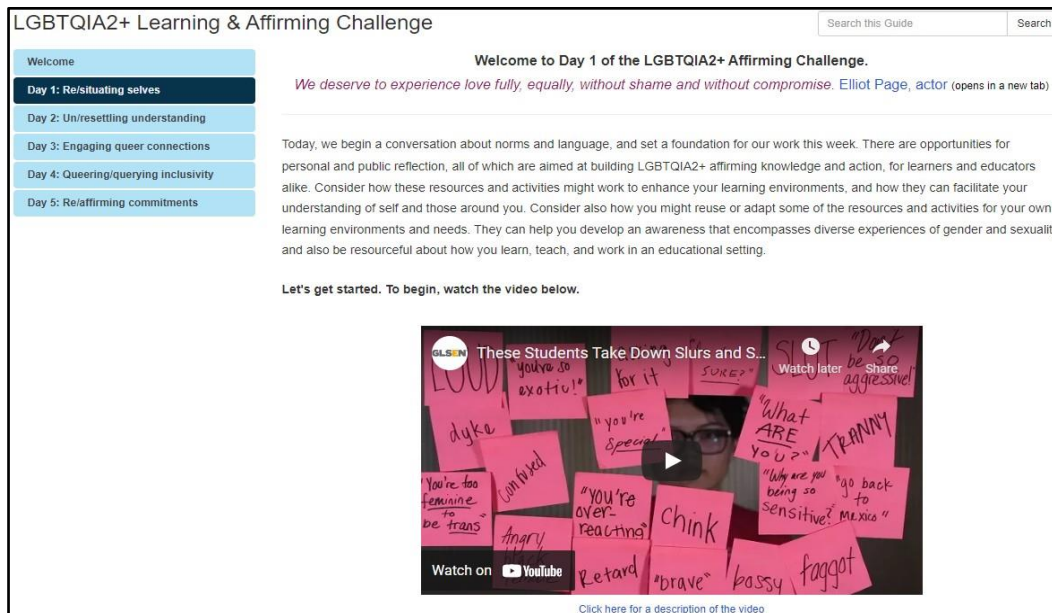


Figure 2: Day 1 excerpt

[Day 2: Un/resettling understanding](#) (see Figure 3) emphasized the prevalence of cis-heteronormative language and behaviors. By critiquing them as West-centric, the day’s activities denaturalized them and moved participants to imagine decolonial ways to tackle cis-heteronormative assumptions (Atay & Pensoneau-Conway, 2018). In classes on various subjects, educators can adapt this module to model how to name and further question binaries and categories that are taken-for-granted in a specific field.

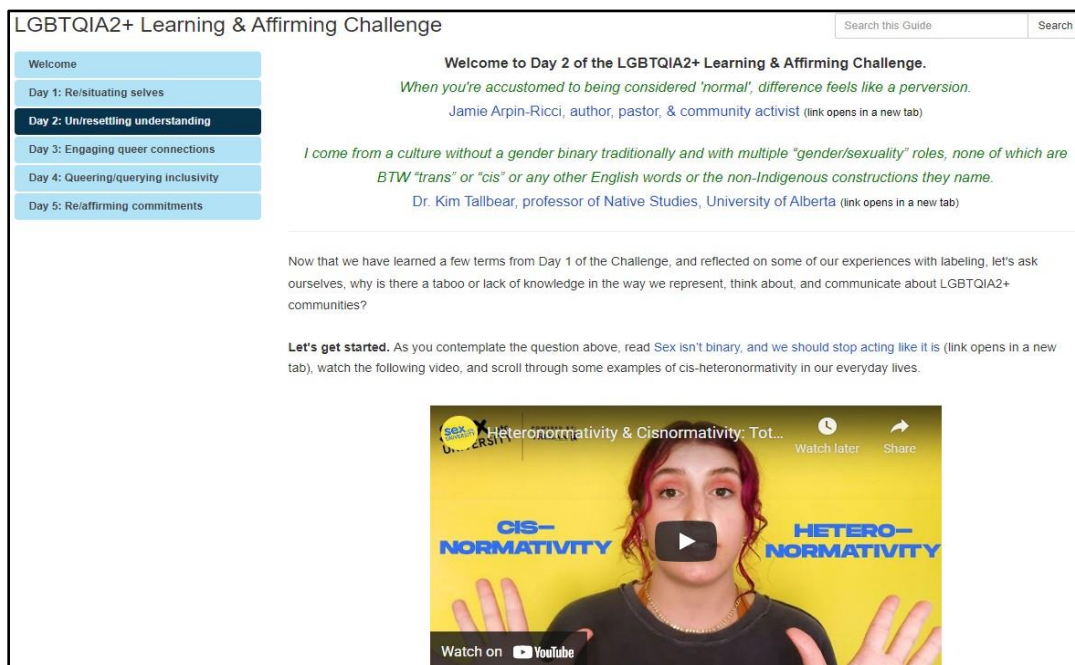


Figure 3: Day 2 excerpt

[Day 3: Engaging queer connections](#) (see Figure 4) highlighted the role intersectionality, plays in our understanding of the overlapping, intersecting social realities and oppressions a person or community may experience. Consistent with applications in QCP (Atay & Pensoneau-

Conway, 2018), information and activities drew on Dr. Kimberlé Crenshaw's foundational work³ and on personal experiences shared by people who both define and re/claim their multi-layered queerness and its social implications. Educators can use this day's content, which facilitates learner engagement with lived experiences and encourages the refinement and synthesis of complex ideas, to model feminist reflexive practice. This is particularly evident in the ways in which Challenge participants considered their own definitions of intersectionality and presented them within the conventions of social media (in the Padlet forum).

The screenshot shows the 'LGBTQIA2+ Learning & Affirming Challenge' website. On the left is a navigation menu with items: Welcome, Day 1: Re/situating selves, Day 2: Un/resetting understanding, Day 3: Engaging queer connections (highlighted), Day 4: Queering/querying inclusivity, and Day 5: Re/affirming commitments. Below the menu is an 'Optional challenge' section with a podcast cover for 'Asking for a Friend' by Laura McQuire. The main content area is titled 'Welcome to Day 3 of the LGBTQIA2+ Learning & Affirming Challenge.' It features a quote by Sonya Renee Taylor: 'Our beliefs about bodies disproportionately impact those whose race, gender, sexual orientation, ability, and age deviate from our default notions. The further from the default, the greater the impact. We are all affected - but not equally.' Below this is a paragraph about cis-heteronormativity and a 'Let's get started' section with a video player for 'What Is Intersectionality? | Queer 101 | ...'.

Figure 4: Day 3 excerpt

Day 4: Queering/querying inclusivity (see Figure 5) explored ways to design learning spaces that are LGBTQIA2+ affirming. Learning spaces can include the classroom, library, department, student clubs, social media platforms, home life, and beyond. This module was explicit about both the perils and the potentials LGBTQIA2+ individuals and communities experience in educational settings (Chen & Lawless, 2018; Pryor, 2017), but rather than doing so in a (re-)victimizing way, the activities invited critical hope and action, consistent with principles of QCP (Atay & Pensoneau-Conway, 2018). This can be useful to educators in a variety of settings as a way to introduce learning spaces as shared and co-constructed - locations for which we are all relationally responsible.

³ Dr. Crenshaw's foundational work on intersectionality, including defining the term, describes intersectionality as intersecting structures of oppression that affect the ways in which marginalized people experience power and privilege.

LGBTQIA2+ Learning & Affirming Challenge

Welcome

Day 1: Re/situating selves

Day 2: Un/resetting understanding

Day 3: Engaging queer connections

Day 4: Queering/querying inclusivity

Day 5: Re/affirming commitments

Welcome to Day 4 of the LGBTQIA2+ Learning & Affirming Challenge.

Representation - in every aspect of our lives - matters... We cannot sit still and say that our classrooms are a safe space when we choose not to read a single LGBTQ+ story or hang a Pride flag.

Skye Tooley, trans/nonbinary, anti-bias and social justice educator (link opens in new tab)

Earlier this week, we explored together the impact of negative labeling on individuals, and why pronouns play a role in expression. From there, we saw how cis-heteronormativity can be challenged by understanding the layers of Intersectionality and their impacts on individuals and communities. Keeping this in mind, we will now discuss how we can make learning spaces more LGBTQIA2+ affirming.

Let's get started. There are many ways that people would like to be seen and heard. Watch this video for some insight.

LGBTQ | How You See Me

Watch later Share

Watch on YouTube

Next, let's listen to what LGBTQIA2+ students want their professors to know about them. NOTE: Several LGBTQIA2+ students in this

Figure 5: Day 4 excerpt

[*Day 5: Re/affirming commitments*](#) (see Figure 6) was the culmination of the week's work. It included an action plan template that each learner was able to personalize with their own commitments to further developing their understanding of LGBTQIA2+ concerns, issues, and/or advocacy.⁴ This day's activity was also a recognition that this work is not complete after five days, but rather is work that will and must endure. The action plan was of particular significance given that in the United States, where each of the Challenge designers lives, legislation intended to erase LGBTQIA2+ history and harm LGBTQIA2+ people and communities persists (del Valle, 2022).

⁴ An example question from the template: What are the top three things you are going to commit to addressing going forward? To help shape your priority list, consider:

- a. Which LGBTQIA2+ concerns or issues matter most to you?
- b. Why do the concerns or issues above matter to you more than others? What values do you have that inform your priorities?

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Welcome to Day 5 of the LGBTQIA2+ Learning & Affirming Challenge.

I've never been interested in being invisible and erased. [Laverne Cox, actress and LGBTQIA2+ advocate](#) (link opens in new tab)

Throughout the week, we have seen how cis-heteronormativity impacts us on an individual level, and in our varied educational environments, and why it is important to challenge it. We recognize that there is no one-size-fits-all solution because identity is intersectional, and to make our learning more inclusive, we must see identities from different positionalities. On our final day, let's see how we can be better allies in the various spaces we inhabit.

First, either read the following article, "It's not all rainbows and unicorns: Straight teacher allies reflect on privilege" (this link opens in a new tab, and the article is behind a paywall, so it is available to those with an institutional subscription or via your local or university library's Interlibrary Loan service). The article talks about allyship, the importance of straight allies reflecting on their privilege when practicing allyship, and what we can do as allies to support LGBTQIA2+ communities in our learning environments. **Or, watch the video below on allyship.**



With these insights into allyship in mind, and based on your learning this week, let's create an action plan to continue our work to create LGBTQIA2+ affirming experiences.

Use this template to design your action plan (link opens in a new tab). A copy is also embedded below. Either print a copy, or download a copy by clicking on "File" (upper left corner), and then "Download." As you think about your priorities, revisit the resources shared each day

Figure 6: Day 5 excerpt

Analysis of Effectiveness

We shared publicity for the program three weeks before the Challenge began, via national email lists in the fields of Communication Studies and Library Science. Over 1,400 people participated from across the United States. They represented a variety of positionalities in terms of gender, race, age, and occupation, including K-12 and higher education librarians, high school, undergraduate, and graduate students, teachers and professors, and community members with an interest in the topic.

Receiving and responding to participant feedback throughout the Challenge design and implementation was key to our enactment of a commitment to ongoing learning and action towards LGBTQIA2+ affirming spaces. This included:

- A group of colleagues and community activists who provided initial guidance;
- A post-Challenge focus group to glean feedback on participants' experiences;
- Unprompted emails from participants throughout the Challenge;
- and a post-Challenge program evaluation.

Responses resulted in programmatic changes, as well as a collaborative and dynamic design that enabled mutual learning, in itself embodying QCP (Atay & Pensoneau-Conway, 2018). For example, participants questioned the initial title of the Challenge as possibly exclusionary. Originally called the LGBTQ+ Learning & Affirming Challenge, the feedback led us to rework the title into the *LGBTQIA2+ Learning & Affirming Challenge*.

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About $\frac{1}{3}$ of the overall number of participants completed an anonymous summative program evaluation, revealing that the structure worked well, with 99% of respondents (n=351) sharing that they liked the format. Over 75% of respondents affirmed that they would be interested in participating in a future email-based Challenge, and another 23% said that, depending on the topic, they would also be interested. The vast majority of respondents indicated they would “definitely” or “probably” (75.1%) share Challenge materials with others, with just over 21% saying that they “might or might not,” and only 2.86%, marking “probably not,” and 0.86% “definitely not.”

Open-ended feedback from participants was overwhelmingly positive, highlighting the Challenge’s accessibility and relevance, with comments like:

- “As a queer, genderfluid person who is still figuring out identity things but always willing (and happy) to learn, this was really, really helpful. I found it both personally affirming and validating, as well as informative. I’m excited to share it with friends, and potentially coworkers in the future. Really appreciate y’all pulling it together and putting it out into the world. Thank you!!!”
- “Thanks for choosing mostly videos with CC options--helpful for environments where audio is not an option.”⁵
- “The comments at the end of each unit were really informative and helped get me thinking in greater everyday detail about the material presented.”⁶
- “I was sick for the entire week of the challenge, so appreciated the opportunity to participate at a later time,” and “I wasn’t able to complete all five days but hope to go back and finish by the end of April.”

We also received suggestions for improving the program, particularly around different levels of involvement and choice of learning materials:

- “Geared more toward 101 allyship - maybe have additional material as well to go even deeper,” and “While this might be a big lift, a lot of the early material was topics I had already heard about/discussed/worked through. Having advanced material or a different track for folks in the first day or two who already do this work or have lived through these experiences would be more fulfilling.”⁷
- “The resources were good, except a few were a teensy bit dated or misinformed.”⁸

The Padlets (a.k.a., the anonymous discussion boards) served as sites of collective debriefing for each day’s content. In a formal instructional setting, they could also facilitate formative assessment, effectively queering grading (Atay & Pensoneau-Conway, 2018). These were reflective spaces that invited all participants in the program to interrogate and integrate ideas they were encountering. At times, participants shared informal feedback with each other on their experiences with the program, in addition to responding to the questions or prompts posed in each discussion forum. Rather than a single, cursory follow-up session that one might have in a class setting, the Padlets provided multiple, connected opportunities for people to participate in

⁵ Where a CC option wasn’t available, we provided a summary of the video.

⁶ This feedback refers to the Padlet discussion that was part of each day’s activities.

⁷ At the conclusion of the program, and after receiving feedback from participants, we added content to provide additional depth and nuance for those who have greater familiarity with the topics and want a deeper dive. For example, this included additional material on two-spirit identities, gender as a spectrum, and trans(gender)/gender-diverse aging.

⁸ We heard from several participants along these lines and replaced any original materials that included some outdated language and/or outdated gender constructs.

a shared debriefing and assessment process, responding to each other's knowledge and experience and enhancing learning. The Challenge co-creators also participated in the Padlets, presenting opportunities for reciprocal, ongoing learning.

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