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

Jennifer L. Bonnet
University of Maine, jennifer.l.bonnet@maine.edu

Liliana Herakova
University of Maine, liliana.herakova@maine.edu

Tausif Karim
University of Maine, tausif.karim@maine.edu

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalcommons.calpoly.edu/feministpedagogy

Part of the Gender and Sexuality Commons, Gender, Race, Sexuality, and Ethnicity in Communication Commons, and the Library and Information Science Commons

Recommended Citation
Bonnet, Jennifer L.; Herakova, Liliana; and Karim, Tausif (2023) "Queering/Querying Educational Spaces: The LGBTQIA2+ Learning and Affirming Challenge," Feminist Pedagogy. Vol. 3: Iss. 4, Article 10.
Available at: https://digitalcommons.calpoly.edu/feministpedagogy/vol3/iss4/10

This Social Justice Strategies is brought to you for free and open access by the Journals at DigitalCommons@CalPoly. It has been accepted for inclusion in Feminist Pedagogy by an authorized editor of DigitalCommons@CalPoly. For more information, please contact digitalcommons@calpoly.edu.
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). 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.
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), 3) multimedia resources for further development and engagement (e.g., videos, media and peer reviewed articles, podcasts), and 4) personal reflection questions. 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).

**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.
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.

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 work\(^3\)
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).

**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.
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. 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?
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.
About ⅓ 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.”
- “The comments at the end of each unit were really informative and helped get me thinking in greater everyday detail about the material presented.”
- “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.”
- “The resources were good, except a few were a teensy bit dated or misinformed.”

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.

References

Acknowledgments
We would like to recognize Nancy Lewis, the librarian for Women’s, Gender, and Sexuality Studies, who provided consultation and input into the design of the Challenge, as well as the people who piloted the program and provided suggestions for the initial draft of the Challenge. We would also like to thank the numerous Challenge participants who provided feedback after completing the program, which helped it to evolve.