Undoing the Absence of Asexuality in the Classroom

Canton Winer
Northern Illinois University, cwiner@uci.edu

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Undoing the Absence of Asexuality in the Classroom

Asexuality, a spectrum and an umbrella term that generally refers to those who experience no or low sexual attraction, is often colloquially defined through absence. Unlike other sexual identities that are defined through experiencing a *presence* of attraction (to the “opposite” gender, to the “same” gender, to various genders), asexuality is often understood as denoting a “lack.” Yet, in a society deeply organized around sexuality, to experience no or low sexual attraction is a presence in and of itself. To claim asexuality is to defy the ubiquitous assumption that all humans do—and should—experience sexual attraction. Perhaps, then, the most remarkable absence of asexuality is its absence in the classroom, particularly in the feminist classroom.

Feminist scholars have been indispensable in demonstrating the importance of studying society’s margins (see, for example, Collins, 1986; Crenshaw, 1989). Misunderstood and marginalized both in heteronormative and LGBTQIA+ settings, asexuality exists at the margins of sexuality. Given the centrality of sexuality to a great deal of feminist theorizing, the absence of asexuality from almost all feminist syllabi is all the more striking. In this essay, I highlight several ways undoing the absence of asexuality can benefit feminist instructors and their students.

Deepening Explorations of Sexuality

Asexuality can help instructors and students think through core feminist concerns, including one that has animated decades of debate: the relationships between sexuality, oppression, and liberation (Rubin, 1984). Although the “feminist sex wars” of the late 1970s and early 1980s have cooled, feminists continue to wrestle with the question of whether women’s sexuality is repressed or compelled. Including asexuality in our considerations rapidly reveals that sexuality is repressed *and* compelled—and that both can act as tools of social control. Sexual deviance is, as students are quick to recognize, often repressed. Compulsion is often harder to see, though no less pervasive. Turning our attention to asexuality studies, scholars and asexual community members can add nuance to foundational feminist concepts, such as compulsory heterosexuality—the enforcement of heterosexuality as normal, preferable, and supposedly universal (Rich, 1980). Through asexual perspectives, we can see that *compulsory sexuality* (Gupta, 2015; Przybylo, 2019), or the idea that sexuality itself is assumed and enforced upon people through the assumption that everyone experiences sexual attraction, is a hidden building block of compulsory heterosexuality.

This is not the only way that asexuality disrupts current understandings of sexuality. Indeed, asexuality complicates a core assumption of contemporary sexuality—the queer/heterosexual binary. In my own work, for example, I have interviewed people who simultaneously identify as asexual and heterosexual. Within the asexual community, it is common to differentiate attraction, in which various types of attraction (e.g., sexual, romantic, platonic, sensual, etc.) can operate independently from one another. This leads some to combine sexual identity labels, identifying, for example, as asexual to describe their sexual attraction and heteroromantic (or even heterosexual) to describe their romantic attraction (Winer et al., 2022). Hetero-oriented asexuals blur the line between heterosexuality and queerness by identifying as heterosexual while also having a claim to queerness. After all, the “A” in LGBTQIA+ stands for asexual (among other queer identities), and it is certainly queer to identify as asexual in a world
that assumes universal sexual desire. By straddling queerness and heterosexuality, these individuals provide stark evidence for feminist queer theorists’ contention that queerness is better understood as defined through opposition to heteronormativity rather than heterosexuality per se (Cohen, 1997). In this way, asexuality provides a window for instructors and students to engage in classical concepts from queer theory with tangible, empirical examples.

**Intersectional Approaches to Asexuality**

Feminist classrooms can also benefit from applying an intersectional approach to asexuality. People racialized as Black, subjected to controlling images of both hypersexuality (through tropes like the Jezebel and the Buck) and of desexualization (through tropes like the Mammy) are denied access to asexual identification in ways that differ from people racialized as white (Miles, 2019; Owen, 2018). Hypersexualization and desexualization each shape the accessibility of asexual identification, with the former framing asexuality as a violation of a harmful stereotype and the latter framing asexuality as a confirmation of a harmful stereotype. The hypersexualization of Latinx people and East Asian women and the desexualization of East Asian men, East Asian women, disabled people, and other groups similarly influences the accessibility of asexual identification (Chen, 2020). Thus, asexuality can help feminist instructors and students consider the intertwined nature of sexuality and race.

The intersection of asexuality and gender is similarly revealing. In my forthcoming work, I find that not only is asexuality erased as a legitimate sexual identity for both men and women, but also that this process is deeply gendered. For men, asexuality is often perceived as impossible. For women, it is often perceived as unremarkable. Meanwhile, nonbinary asexual individuals see both their gender and their sexuality erased. These assumptions lead to similar outcomes—namely, the denial of asexuality as a legitimate sexual identity—but follow very different paths to arrive there. Importantly, these gendered paths can help students consider the relationships between gender and sexuality. For instance, this gendered erasure underscores the centrality of (hetero)sexuality to masculinity; it is supposedly so core to manhood that to be asexual and a man is “impossible.” Simultaneously, the gendering of asexual erasure indicates that women are stereotyped as sexually responsive rather than as active and agentic sexual subjects. This situates women’s supposed lack of desire as a challenge (heterosexual) men must overcome or even “fix,” thus also helping us to understand the scaffolding of rape culture. Undoubtedly, as asexuality studies continues to grow, the intersections of asexuality and disability (Cuthbert, 2017; Kim, 2011), class, and other vectors of power will be similarly fruitful for feminist classrooms.

**Interpersonal and Personal Impacts of Including Asexuality**

Above, I have focused primarily on the academic and theoretical value of including asexuality in feminist curricula. To avoid the perils of sharing incorrect information about asexuality, instructors should also consider inviting asexuality scholars as guest speakers, including content made by people on the asexuality spectrum in their lectures, and inviting asexual activists to share their experiences. But in the feminist classroom, it is also worth considering how undoing the absence of asexuality benefits students in a non-academic sense. Simply put, most people have not heard of asexuality. By including asexuality in our curricula, instructors will undoubtedly be providing some students with their first exposure to a new sexual
identity. For some, that identity may be resonant, giving them language to understand their own experience of the world. Even for those who do not find resonance in asexuality specifically, learning about the identity may present a paradigm shift that encourages them to question and explore their sexuality in new, liberatory ways. Perhaps, for example, students may see how compulsory sexuality negatively affects them even if they are not asexual. As a queer, non-asexual person who studies asexuality, I can personally attest to this potential. Moreover, undoing the absence of asexuality also sends a signal to students who already identify as asexual that their experiences matter—and that asexuality has a vital place in feminist coalition building.
References


