A call to examine queer instructors’ identity disclosures in the classroom

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With new and potentially reformed student ideologies, conversations of disclosing queer identities in academia are paramount. Boren and McPherson (2018) note student attitudes towards queer people have progressed significantly over the past two decades, particularly their notions of queer instructors. Yet, research on instructors disclosing queer identities fails to reflect the diversity of lived experience. The gap in scholarship is alarming, considering preliminary research shows instructors disclosing their queer identities cultivates safe environments for their students to follow suit (Fassett & Warren, 2007). In this critical commentary, I review previous scholarship pertaining to the disclosure of queer identities in the classroom. I then examine three areas impacting the failure of queer disclosure, arguing future scholars should consider these notions when completing their work. I close with a discussion of the necessity of continuing queer disclosure scholarship, particularly in feminist contexts. Because feminist pedagogy challenges traditional worldviews, builds community, and privileges personal experience, I believe feminist scholars should turn their attention to instructors’ queer disclosures (Webb et al., 2002).

Preliminary disclosure scholarship

Disclosing queer identities in the collegiate classroom lacks comprehensive research. Russ et al. (2002) found students perceive their gay instructors as significantly less credible than their heterosexual instructors, noting students with gay instructors report they learn less than their peers with heterosexual instructors. Almost two decades later, Boren and McPherson (2018) replicated Russ et al.’s study, finding a dramatic shift in students’ attitudes toward their queer instructors. Students now rate gay instructors as higher in credibility than heterosexual instructors and indicate no difference in perceived cognitive learning between their gay and heterosexual instructors.

Shifting from student perspectives to those of the instructors themselves, McKenna-Buchanan et al. (2017) offer insight into how lesbian, gay, and queer instructors navigate their identities in the classroom. The authors determine coming out to be a “messy and flexible” process (McKenna-Buchanan et al., 2017, p. 295); instructors must continually come out to their students, though their embrace of the coming out process may distance them from the stigma of queerness. Queerness can also be disclosed nonverbally. Subtle signifiers such as jewelry (Rudnick, 2017), clothing choices (Medhurst, 2024), or even a ring of keys attached to a beltloop (Medhurst, 2021) can communicate a queer identity. It is also necessary to note the structural ideologies that impede instructors from coming out. Sedgwick (1990) notes queer individuals may prefer not to disclose their identities in the workplace, as is not always safe or reasonable. Additionally, concealing a queer identity is sometimes necessary in academia, as identities that do not fit heteronormative standards face issues with acceptance or recognition if revealed (McKenna-Buchanan, 2015). Despite the potential shift in cultural attitudes towards LGBTQ+ individuals, marginalization continues to influence the disclosure of queer identities in the classroom.

Negative implications of queer disclosure

Queer individuals continue to face oppression and, in the most extreme cases, lose their lives on account of their identities (Abdi, 2014; Asante, 2020). The oppression of queer individuals is seen throughout all institutions. The harassment of queer students and instructors remains a threat on college campuses, particularly in the South, where anti-LGBTQ+ policies are
commonplace (Beall & Strunk, 2018). According to Adams (2011), the societal oppression of queer individuals creates unique problems for the disclosure of identities in the classroom. If a queer instructor shares their identity in a hostile environment, they may be stigmatized, rejected, or even face violence. However, not disclosing a queer identity can frame the identity as secret, and instructors may feel they are hiding an integral part of their life (Bennett et al., 2015). Adams (2011) and Bennett et al. (2015) present an interesting paradox: though instructors risk opposition in disclosing their queer identities, remaining closeted may conceal identities fundamental to the instructor.

**Positive implications of queer disclosure**

While there is the potential for negative consequences to queer disclosure in the classroom, instructors sharing their LGBTQ+ identities can cultivate a safe environment for students to follow suit. Schrodt (2013) asserts instructor disclosure is correlated with perceptions of trustworthiness, goodwill, and competence by students. In sharing queer identities, instructors foster better student-teacher relationships, crafting a classroom climate that is accepting of marginalized identities. The acknowledgment and embrace of marginalized identities in the classroom may also be crucial to students disclosing their own queer identities. McKenna-Buchanan et al. (2015) note an instructor coming out may encourage students to do the same, as the instructor’s disclosure creates a supportive space for similar student disclosures. Moreover, Johnson and LaBelle (2015) found students follow the lead of the instructor in self-disclosure. Therefore, instructors’ queer self-disclosure may aid in students sharing their queer identities. This notion is supported by Fassett and Warren (2007), who determine instructors disclosing their queer identity raises awareness of, fosters community among, and builds solidarity with other queer students.

**Who should create this scholarship?**

Calling for an increase in scholarship related to the disclosure of queer identities in the classroom prompts questions of who should be doing this work. While issues of queer disclosure may be of obvious interest to queer instructors, it is important these scholars are not expected to complete this research. Echoing Chakravartty et al. (2018), marginalized scholars should not be the sole creators of diverse scholarship. Assuming queer scholars as only capable of producing research related to their queerness essentializes the queer instructor, erasing their other, nuanced identities. Further, assuming queer scholars will conduct queer research places a tremendous emotional burden on these academics, forcing them to confront their life experiences and potentially their trauma.

All scholars interested in exploring identity in the classroom should produce scholarship that goes beyond traditional conceptions of marginalized individuals. In doing this work, cisgender and heterosexual scholars can use their research to amplify the voices of queer academics, adding to the body of work on queer identities without speaking over queer scholars. A successful example of this comes from Robinson (2018), who shares the work of an anonymous queer academic discouraged from studying queer topics and later finding the freedom to do so. Ultimately, allies to queer individuals can use their privilege to raise awareness of queer experiences through research.
Conclusion

For those interested in feminist pedagogy, conversations of disclosing queer identities in higher education are paramount. Because feminist perspectives challenge hegemony, value community, and validate personal experience, it seems natural for feminist scholars to research queer disclosure. In completing this scholarship, it is integral to note the implications to coming out in the classroom. Because heteronormativity is still the dominant societal ideology, queer individuals remain marginalized, positioning disclosure as a complex issue. Nevertheless, disclosing queer identity in the classroom cultivates safe spaces for students’ queer identities. However, queer academics should not be the only academics to complete classroom disclosure scholarship. With comprehensive research on disclosing queer identities in the classroom, both instructors and administrators can better support queer faculty and students. When institutions support their queer instructors if or when they feel it is safe to come out, they work to create queer-friendly academic spaces.
References


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