DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 422 587 CS 216 479

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TITLE Passing as Teacher: Constructing a Lesbian Feminist Pedagogy.
PUB DATE 1998-04-00
NOTE 12p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Conference on College Composition and Communication (49th, Chicago, IL, April 1-4, 1998).
PUB TYPE Guides - Classroom - Teacher (052) -- Speeches/Meeting Papers (150)
EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Critical Thinking; Higher Education; *Homosexuality; *Self Disclosure (Individuals); *Sexual Identity; *Teacher Responsibility; Teacher Student Relationship; *Writing Instruction
IDENTIFIERS Controversial Topics; *Feminist Pedagogy; *Homosexual Teachers; Social Reality

ABSTRACT

This paper describes some problems one teacher has had trying to develop a feminist pedagogy for a composition class that does not elide sexual orientation as an identity facet in the classroom. The paper focuses on two essays, Mary Elliot's "Coming Out in the Classroom: A Return to the Hard Place" (1996) and Susan Jarratt's "Feminism and Composition: The Case for Conflict" (1991). Seeking to combine both these approaches, the paper invokes Donna Qualley's argument that teachers should consider students' developmental stages when teaching critical thinking and theoretical concepts. It contends that coming out in the classroom is essential--for gay and lesbian civil rights, for human rights, for individual and social improvement--and it offers suggestions for working through problems associated with personal disclosures. According to the paper, the context of the composition classroom varies with the content, the thematic focus, the institution, the instructor, and the students' identities. The paper suggests that a pedagogy aimed at teaching students to reconsider gender assumptions and how these are reflected and perpetuated in language seems to be a more productive strategy for advancing the long-term goal of changing social conditions. It suggests shifting the focus solely from the teacher to involving students actively in examining the institutions of gender and sexuality. (NKA)

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Presentation at CCCC 1998, Chicago

Passing as Teacher: Constructing a Lesbian Feminist Pedagogy

Whether or not teachers should disclose their sexual identity in the classroom is an important and controversial topic. Despite all the recent contributions scholars have made to considering this question, I am still ambivalent and careful about this decision. In my struggles to figure out how I feel about coming out to students, I have found myself in a mire of self-examination, doubt, and scrutiny about my personal and political identity and my basic assumptions about teaching. My paper today exemplifies the fear--ramblings, advances, retreats, nods to both sides, and fear of alienation. The process of coming out to oneself and others is long and fraught with ambiguities and inconsistencies. In a similar way, coming to know ourselves as teachers is also a long process replete with hesitancies and self-reflection. Who we are as teachers is a matrix of various personality facets; which of those we foreground in our presentation of ourselves as teachers is what I am exploring here. In this paper, I will describe some problems I have had trying to develop a feminist pedagogy for a composition class that does not elide sexual orientation as an identity facet in the classroom. I will focus on two essays, Mary Elliot's 1996 College English article on the emotional toll of coming out and Susan Jarratt's 1991, "Feminism and Composition: The Case for Conflict." In seeking a way to combine both these approaches, I invoke Donna Qualley's argument that we should consider students' developmental stages when teaching critical thinking and

theoretical concepts. Coming out in the classroom is essential--for gay and lesbian civil rights, for human rights, for individual and social improvement--but in this paper, I want to focus on some of the problems associated with personal disclosures and offer suggestions for working through these problems.

Mary Eliot explores the emotional toll of coming out in her College English essay. Her concern is not the "resistances of political and cultural conservatives--these are old and familiar obstacles--but our own resistances as gays and lesbians to acknowledging the emotional and physical tolls of public self-disclosure that most coming-out narratives reveal" (694). She notes that most recent work privileges coming out rather than not, but that little attention has been paid to the emotional aspect of "giving away the secret, that terrifying crossing of the abyss" (694).

Further, Eliot argues against the game of "indeterminacy," which seems safe and appealing to me. She argues, however, that "if indeterminacy becomes a means and an end in itself, does it not perpetuate the invisibility of gay and lesbian teachers and students who are already threatened socially, physically, and emotionally precisely because their presence is not sufficiently visible, legible, audible in their families, classrooms, and communities?" (700). She suggests that de-contextualized disclosures are not necessarily an effective strategy, and that she tells her students in "golden moments" when the topic seems appropriate to class discussion (705). Finally, she suggests that in a gay and lesbian studies course, "[she is] vocally and unproblematically out as lesbian [so that] the students then need to read what kind of a lesbian [she is], even as they read what kind of person, woman, teacher [she is]. But in this situation [she] become[s] contextualized not within a heterosexual

paradigm, where [she] can only be a lesbian, but within the lesbian paradigm, where [she] can occupy and speak from and to a multiplicity of sexualities and identities" (705).

This is a crucial point I'd like to consider: How do we establish a contextualized identity within a "lesbian paradigm" in composition classes with thematic focuses other than gay and lesbian studies? A problem with coming out in these settings in that the class's attention is focused unduly on the personal experience of the teacher--either in legitimizing her experience, arguing against her, or in false assent in order to get a grade. The context of the composition classroom varies with the content, the thematic focus, the institution, the instructor, and the students' identities. While it is a microcosm of society in some ways, it isn't necessarily a cross section of society, nor are our goals the same as goals in other institutions or settings. In other words, I question the relevancy of any personal disclosure I make to students: why do they need to know that I am a Southern baptist preacher's daughter? A middle child? I choose which details to reveal for their relevancy to the students' learning--all of the facts are true, but as a teacher, I highlight those facts with the most relevance to the case at hand. As Eliot notes and others have argued, coming out may foreclose the possibility of students' thinking through issues for themselves, which is the goal of my composition class. A pedagogy aimed at teaching students to reconsider our gender assumptions and how these are reflected and perpetuated in our language-use seems to me to be a more productive strategy for advancing the long-term goal of changing social conditions. A personal disclosure may work in some classes; in others it may thwart debate. In

my praxis, when I do share personal information, I do so in contextualized ways, and I try to make sure I am not focusing on my needs, but using the details for a point. Students should also be held equally responsible and be given the opportunity for exploring how their personal experiences shape and inform their ideas.

My fear about trusting the students with personal disclosures is a holdover of two myths that have guided my pedagogical thinking: first, the teacher should lead by being a model of disinterestedness, showing how reasonable people can come to sound conclusions; second, that classrooms should be safe, nurturing environments where students explore personal experience in supportive surrounding, unfettered by the teacher's, society's, or tradition's monolithic authoritative stance. While I know the first to be false, applying it to my praxis is difficult. The second myth, that a classroom should be a place for personal exploration also must be complicated by the acknowledgment that our social, political, religious, gendered identities affect the relationship between teacher and student, and pedagogies that encourage writing and sharing personal experience must take into account these variables.

Susan Jarratt notes that one commonality in many expressivist and feminist pedagogies is that each in various ways has emphasized that the classroom should be an environment in which students are taught to bring forth their personal experiences as valid ways of knowing and writing. Of course their methods and rationales vary greatly, but I would like to explore here the pedagogical, social and political efficacy of focusing solely on the personal as background for thinking about the effects of teachers' personal disclosures. Jarratt traces the feminist theories that

suggest that traditional types of discourse are "hierarchical, male-dominated system[s] of logic and learning that [are] oppressive to women" (106). Jarratt cautions against what she has seen in her classroom--that her "endorsing the clichés of competitive self-interest . . . perpetuates a system of racism, sexism, and classism still very much a part of American culture" (109). She argues that in these expressivist pedagogies, "the ideal is homogeneity" (109). The decentering of authority in the classroom also has detrimental effects when a woman teacher takes "a nurturing role in a class of men and women" (111). This practice potentially replicates "the exercise of patriarchal domination to which every man in our society is acculturated" (111).

Jarratt calls for a theory and practice that is sensitive to social and political dynamics that exist in the classroom and in our society at large (111). She finds appealing the pedagogies in which conflict is central, specifically those of Kathleen Weiler and bell hooks (118). For Weiler, the teacher's role "in a feminist critical pedagogy, varies greatly depending on the makeup of the class in relation to the teacher's subjectivity" (119). This point has important applications for gay and lesbian teachers, who are in vulnerable social positions in society. Negotiating students' homophobia and misogyny from this vulnerable social position is precarious. Students' and teachers' personal claims are valuable starting places, but Jarratt makes clear the necessity of developing a praxis that allows politicized and contextualized adjudication of these conflicts and competing claims.

Thus, I am not suggesting that the students' and my personal experience have no role in composition classrooms, but as Jarratt and others argue, these experiences

and disclosures are never neutral, never without social and political ramifications. Adrienne Rich argued recently in Houston (March 6) that women's studies in the 80s became synonymous with "safe place" where our sameness can be celebrated, rather than becoming places to critique, examine, and change social and political structures. It is her notion of safe place and neutral "personal experience" I am arguing against, not the right to express and argue from personal identities and ideas in a classroom free from suppression.

In addition to the danger of uncritical personal expression, a second concern I have with personal disclosures is the problem of becoming the spokesperson. Susan Jarratt's sophistic model of conflict based on the teacher's membership in a group in opposition to the class's (119) is compelling, but the danger is that the teacher, or any other sole representative of a group in the class, might become the spokesperson for that group. Part of being a point of conflict for students may mean starting with their assumptions and conceptions about homosexuality--which may very well be essentialized, stereotypical ideas, which is generally the way many of us come to learn most things--general categories with varying degrees of complexity. Especially in the case of members of oppressed groups, however, the risk is being put in the position of constantly educating and explaining to the dominant culture. Another danger of becoming the spokesperson for lesbian rights is that it places the responsibility for social change only on the oppressed group; instead, I suggest shifting the focus solely from the teacher to involving students actively in examining the institutions of gender and sexuality, both hetero- and homosexuality.

Jarratt "envisions a composition course in which students argue about the

ethical implications of discourse on a wide range of subjects and, in so doing, come to identify their personal interests with others, understand those interests as implicated in a larger communal setting, and advance them in a public sphere" (121). As Jarratt suggests, the focus of class discussion should be contextualized and politicized personal experience. Ideally, then, all of us would be forced to examine our perspectives, but the danger is that there is "more conflict" in some positions with the class that others. Thus I advocate employing Jarratt's model with the realization that we should work to ensure that all viewpoints, including the dominant one, be asked to "confront the different truths" in the classroom, rather than focusing solely on the non-dominant position as Other.

Identifying these points of conflict between me and the students can be very frightening, and I am used to performing an authoritative position in the classroom. My ability to claim that authority has most often depended on my educational background, less often on my socio-economic class, occasionally on my gender, and rarely on other personal experience. Forcing myself to do what Jarratt advocates is terrifying, partly because it exposes me as powerless, invisible, lacking authority in mainstream society. I can easily sympathize with my students when I ask them to identify their own biases and assumptions, but I have a hard time placing myself in that vulnerable position with them. But, I am the teacher, and I should have the courage to help them think through these issues even if the thinking through reminds me of a not-distant-enough past when I, too, held some of the same assumptions. I am thirty-two years old and have been grappling with coming out explicitly since I was seventeen--fifteen years now of thinking through

this question on a personal level and even more recently on a theoretical one. Certainly students have the right to explore in the classroom ideas about homosexuality that I now consider naive or even homophobic, but that I continue to work through myself. Let me add here that I do not mean to suggest that teachers should allow "hate speech" to go unchallenged and unexamined in the classroom--and I think it is always appropriate to let students know if certain statements are unacceptable.

Trying to locate myself as teacher from this precarious position, and learning to cope with students' evolving ideas on the subject brings me to Donna J. Qualley's work. She describes her experience teaching feminist theory to a composition class. She argues that "it seems to me that when we begin to translate our current ideas into classroom practice, many of us forget how we came to occupy these theoretical positions ourselves" (26). She recalls a panel on feminist pedagogy at a 1992 NCTE Convention in which a young woman asked the presenter if she had heard of Carol Gilligan. She describes the knowing smiles and "raised eyebrows" of the "seasoned feminists" in the room. Qualley recalls that the presenter took the woman seriously, described her own first experience reading Gilligan, and how her views have changed. Qualley argues that "we cannot afford to forget those 'a-ha!' moments in our own histories. If we are to help our students construct richer, more complex ways of thinking, we would do well to remember our own developmental journeys" (26). Once a student wrote on an evaluation for my composition class that I was patient and kind, and never made them feel stupid for asking questions. This is easy for me in the classroom when the naiveté or errors pertain to grammar, style,

and rhetorical strategies. I forget this lesson when the stakes are so much higher personally and involve my personal evolving consciousness about sexual identity. Qualley reminds me, though, to foster students' personal understanding and growth at multiple conceptual levels. I should remember that society grapples with these questions, and that if I have difficulty with these issues, then many students are likely to as well. Part of my praxis as a teacher should be modeling rhetorical strategies that help students negotiate these difficulties with critical thinking and open-mindedness to various perspectives in the context of personal acknowledgment of our divergent viewpoints and identities.

The pedagogy I advocate means working through our oversimplified notions, interrogating our assumptions, and naming our politicized personal stake in social structures. My goal is to foster students' critical thinking rather than teach them a specific ideological position or use them as audience for my personal dramas. However, my subjective perspective informs my teaching persona and sometimes serves as proof for some of my rhetorical claims. By coming out in contextualized, politicized terms at appropriate times in the class discussion, I do not use my authority to make a personal revelation that students may misconstrue as telling them what to think, nor do I try to pass off a personal perspective as neutral and a-politicized. In classrooms with a higher percentage of gay and lesbian students, or where we are addressing specific gay and lesbian texts, we may be able to delve more complexly into the varied personal experiences we share, but in a largely homogeneous classroom, I may be the only lesbian in the class. In these classrooms, emphasizing other points of conflict may prove more productive for teaching

rhetorical strategies.

Coming out in contextualized situations models the kind of trust I teach my students to have in rhetorical models for making connections between people from varying positions and ideologies. As a teacher, however, I must keep the students' educational needs as my priority and weigh the benefits of contributing my personal experience. The composition classroom is a place to learn about competing rhetorical models and to study the way our language use reflects and sometimes obscures our political and social assumptions. The focus, then, is on students learning about their own language assumptions. This process may be illuminated by examining other perspectives and assumptions. The responsibility for critiquing our gendered language practices and rhetorical models does not simply lie with gay and lesbian teachers or students, with feminists, or with other elided groups alone. Instead, it lies with all of us who use language and practice rhetorical strategies in society, perhaps without considering the gendered assumptions inherent in those strategies. It is my goal to help students bring that responsibility into practice.

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