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A. Brooks

K. Edwards

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For Adults Only: Queer Theory Meets the Self and Identity in Adult Education

Ann Brooks
Kathleen Edwards

Abstract: This article brings the perspective of "Queer theory" to the field of Adult Education as a way of examining critically the notions of self, identity, and sexuality as they have been taken for granted within the field. Adult Education, like most fields of practice and research, assumes the Western ideals of the monadic self, clear and undisputed identities, and heterosexuality. However, the intersection of a strong postmodern voice in both academia and the popular culture, the increasing exploration of other-than-hetero-sexualities in the media, and the foregrounding of sexuality in the work of adult education researchers (Brooks & Edwards, 1997; Edwards, 1997; Hill, 1995; Edwards, Grace, Henson, B., Henson, W., Hill, & Taylor, 1998; Tisdell & Taylor, 1995) forces the question of what relevance Queer theory has for adult educators.

The Birth of Queer Theory

The term "Queer theory" was first coined by Teresa de Lauretis (1991) in a special edition on gay and lesbian sexualities in a feminist cultural studies journal. Queer theory continues the postmodernist project of playing with the boundaries of such sacred binaries as male-female and black-white by deconstructing the heterosexual-homosexual bifurcation of sexual identity. The lavender-haired stepchild of postmodernism, Queer theory has quickly developed a multidisciplinary or even "postdisciplinary" approach to theorizing, attracting scholars from a wide array of social science disciplines.

Sociologist Steven Seidman (1996) attempts to describe the advent of this academic adolescent:

Queer theory has accrued multiple meanings, from a merely useful shorthand way to speak of all gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgendered experiences to a theoretical sensibility that pivots on transgression or permanent rebellion. I take as central to Queer theory its challenge to what has been the dominant foundational concept of both homophobic and affirmative homosexual theory: the assumption of a unified homosexual identity. I interpret Queer theory as contesting this foundation and therefore the very telos of Western homosexual politics. (p. 11)

In spite of the fact that Queer theory has at its heart a state of permanent rebellion reminiscent of critical theory, challenging the hegemony of indelible identity categories and presumably making space for new ones, many marginalized social groups find Queer theory to be a serious threat to

identity politics. Certainly many gay and lesbian political activists fear the erasure of the lives of real people in the complexity of Queer theory's linguistic theorizing.

For adult education, a field with a strong commitment to organizing and political action, such apparent academic detachment, dissolution of polarized identities, and destabilization of a bounded and clearly designated self, Queer theory can be seen as an unwelcome newcomer. This is all the more so in that Queer theorists view themselves as bringing with them a radical and liberating new perspective, a mission with which adult educators have frequently identified. In many ways, Queer theorists seem to be coopting the mission of radical politics, but diluting its strength by doing away with clear identities around which to organize. Still, the opportunity to question the unitary and bounded nature of the self and the singular and permanent nature of identity deserves the serious consideration of all social science scholars.

Three theorists stand out as early contributors to what has become known as Queer theory. The first is Michel Foucault whose History of Sexuality Volume 1: An Introduction (1978) first utilized sexuality as a source of knowledge to problematize power, and to position discourse as a form of resistance. Eve Sedgwick (1990,1993) situated same-sex desire at the center of her epistemology and her scholarly dissection of the heterosexual-homosexual binary led to the legitimization of gay and lesbian studies in academic settings. Finally, Judith Butler (1990, 1993) illustrated the performative nature of gender and brought the male-female binary into question.

While the initial aims of Queer theory were to deconstruct and trouble the heterosexual-homosexual binary taken for granted in our culture, its purpose of critiquing "normal" may be expanding as Jagose (1996) describes:

Queer has tended to occupy a predominantly sexual register. Recent signs indicate, however, that its denaturalizing project is being brought to bear on other axes of identification than sex and gender. Sedgwick (1993:9) makes an even stronger claim when she observes that, in recent work, 'queer is being spun outward along dimensions that can't be subsumed under gender and sexuality at all: the ways that race, ethnicity, postcolonial nationality criss-cross with these *and other* identity-constituting, identity-fracturing discourses, for example.' (p. 99)

It is through the problematization of normalcy that Queer theory offers the most important challenge to the "taken-for-granted" of adult education. Tierney notes:

The point of saying, 'We're queer,' is that it highlights difference in an effort to expose norms. In effect, we are outlaws--socially, intellectually, and linguistically. . . .we should challenge commonly accepted notions of reality; by doing so, we become academic outlaws. (1997, p.29).

As adult educators the opportunity to challenge our pedagogy, our scholarship, and our own identities as academic outlaws is one we can hardly resist.

Why Care about Queer?

One of the questions we have to ask ourselves as adult educators is why we should care about Queer theory? We might especially wonder this if we have never thought of ourselves as "queer" and have more or less taken it for granted that we are "straight". A discussion of a few of the possibilities are explored here:

(1) Sexuality as a site of learning. Charles Lemert, in his preface to *Queer*

Theory / Sociology (1996), tells us that the reason all of society (and we would add adult educators) should care about Queer theory is that it challenges the limitations we place on how we structure and label our lives:

Queer theory is one of the most important developments in social theory today precisely because it has so devastatingly completed the process of queering the naïve assumptions of our most cherished traditions. Earlier developments in race, feminist, and postcolonial theories have disabused the social and human sciences (as well as sturdier souls in the general public) of the naïve modernist notion that "all men are created equal"--that humans are, thereby, of one ideal, universal kind. Queer theory, in effect, completes the process, which, as Seidman reminds us, Weber called the disenchantment of social life. Once gay and lesbian social experience is disenchanted of its negative status as a form of deviant behavior, we who have neither enjoyed nor suffered the experience itself begin to see just what we have denied for so long. We can see that desire and sexuality are very much more than mere, even minor, features of social life. They are, in fact, constitutive elements every bit as central as race, gender, or class. (p.viii)

So the foregrounding of sexuality in research and education serves to break the silence that has traditionally surrounded sexuality in scholarly settings. Sexuality is a subject fraught with moral and commercial exploitation. We have few sites within our culture within which a person or group of persons can explore their own sexuality or sexuality as a social phenomenon. As adult educators, we must help open spaces where sexuality can be explored rather than exploited.

(2) Normalcy as an obstacle to learning. Perhaps no greater barrier to learning exists than the hegemony of normalcy and the specification of deviancy. Individuals who deviate from the norm are typically viewed as morally bad, intellectually wrong, psychologically pathological, politically incorrect, or socially inferior. However, if we can truly engage the differences in others and ourselves, the differences are what are likely to be our most powerful teachers. In fact, the privileging of "exorbitant normality" (Spivak, 1992) enables just the sort of blindness that inhibits reflection and critical reflection on ourselves and our societies and permits the smugness and bigotry that can no longer have a place in a multicultural world. In sexual terms, Warner

(1993) refers to the normative assumption that heterosexual relationships are the only form of sexual intimacy in this society as "heteronormativity." Such a taken-for-granted perspective on sexuality has kept us from making space for and acknowledging other sexualities among those adults with whom we work, and has made us blind to the questions of heterosexual development, not to mention queer sexual development. (3) Building learning communities on identities of difference. Identity has traditionally been seen as an individual "possession" that links us to others like us and allows us to form communities. Identity politics have always depended on separateness and exclusion for its political power.

In this vein, many other-than-heterosexual identity communities have proliferated over the last three decades. However, the struggle with naming that occurs in the attempt to be inclusive can border on comical. Are we gay and lesbian or bisexual, gay, lesbian, and transgendered, or what? The appeal of Queer is that it offers an identity label of sexual possibility. Rather than being limiting, identity becomes mutable and contextual. As recent research on women's sexual development is beginning to indicate (Brooks, 1999), sexuality for women at any rate is not at all the stable experience most people assume. Queer theory enables differences that may defy current categorization to emerge, and it makes space for the unimaginable as well as the silenced. Relevant to our discussion of adult education, Britzman (1998) notes that pedagogy must be seen ". . . as a technique for acknowledging difference *as the only condition of possibility for community*" (p. 56). To build the open learning communities adult educators value, we have to build on identification with our differences, not our similarities.

(4) Creating learning by exceeding the Self. Westerners are extremely attached to Self. Much of our identity is derived from our individual, unitary, and bounded Selves. We guard the boundaries of the Self against all encroachments. Our assumptions and beliefs about Self are jealously protected and only given up on a one-to-one exchange basis after much thought and angst.

Kathy recalls her sister expressing concern about some behavior her teenage niece was exhibiting that her sister feared would reflect poorly on her parenting skills. In that disdainful voice that only a teenager can assume her niece responded, "Oh mother, get over yourself." And indeed, the message about learning is that we all have to "get over" our Selves. Only by surrendering Self and allowing our learning about others' differences and identities to exceed our own Selves can we ever hope to be the adult learners and educators we want to be. Certainly sexuality with its multiple stigmatized positions and many private meanings puts pressure on our ability to exceed our Self in order to learn.

In and Out of the Queer Classroom

In discussing her own concept of queer pedagogy, Deborah Britzman (1995) asks the question, "Can gay and lesbian theories become relevant not just for those who identify as gay or lesbian but for those who do not?" (p. 151) As adult educators, our work is much less encumbered than public school educators by the culture of fear and history of persecution directed at those whose sexuality or gender identifications are different from the norm. For many of us, the barriers to "queering" our classrooms are those we maintain ourselves. To test this, we can ask ourselves the questions, "When was the last time I facilitated a discussion or introduced material about

sexuality in my classroom?" or "What do I do to make it safe for those who are sexually 'different' to talk (or not) about their lives?" What follows are a few concrete suggestions for "queering" adult education, regardless of how we ourselves are identifying at the moment.

(1) Acknowledge our own positions as learners. We cannot be the only "knowers" in the classroom when it comes to difference. While it is risky to admit ignorance for any teacher, knowledge claims in relation to identity can only inhibit learning. It is only in a spirit of inquiry that we can hope to engage those with identifications different from my own. In the area of sexuality, we are all ignorant of positions other than our own. Silence about sexuality has to be broken for dialogue to occur.

(2) Admit our own mistakes. Annie once taught an advanced research class in which 80% of the class were minorities. One of the white women made a racist comment that struck the class silent. Out of her own fear and embarrassment Annie moved on with the content. Only after reflecting on the class for a week was she able to return and admit to the class that she had made a mistake and that if we cannot discuss conflicts around difference in the classroom, where can we discuss it? The ensuing student-driven discussion filled the entire class time.

(3) Affirm difference by making space for students to speak from their own "different" experience. Set this climate by asking different class members about their experiences. By privileging difference, we can assist our students in developing affinities and alliances with each other that lend themselves to learning, although not necessarily to comfort and harmony.

Still, in terms of sexuality or any other differences, students need to be able to make choices about engaging their differences in public. For example, a common assumption in today's times is that a person who identifies as gay or lesbian should just "come out" in the classroom. In reality, the subtleties of sexual identity are more complex than that, and we have no right to take away students' choices about what they share about their lives, particularly their sexual selves. Even a simple icebreaker that asks students to identify as single or married can put the person with a non-heterosexual identity in a quandary of how to answer.

(4) Abandon the search for certainty. As educators we often find comfort and security in presenting ourselves to our students as knowers and experts. This tendency is exacerbated by students' expectations on us. Nevertheless, by leaving knowledge permanently partial and holding our own assumptions in abeyance, we can be more honest in our teaching.

Relevant to sexual identity, we cannot have answers, only questions. If sexual identity is indeed as fluid as Queer theorists suggest, then we can not discuss sexuality with any degree of certainty at all. We can only hold our own learning open and refrain from premature foreclosure ourselves, and thus model permanent disruption and inquiry ourselves. (5) Think beyond the boundaries. Much of education and scholarship has been focused on bounding knowledge--ordering it in hierarchical categories in order to make it simple and understandable. But, as Robert Kegan (1996) points out, we are truly "in over our heads" whether or not we wish to be. With the complex change we confront daily, we can no longer pretend that knowledge can be tightly bounded. In fact, the learning project of this generation of adult learners must be to loosen the

bonds and break the boundaries we have spent centuries creating. Thinking "out of the box" cannot happen when the box is so tightly sealed.

The heterosexual/homosexual binary is the product of an epistemology of closure. The terms did not even exist until recently. Sexologists at the turn of the century medicalized and stigmatized sexual behavior by creating neat categories of deviancy ostensibly to "treat" sexual disorders. (Katz, 1995) But just as Queer theory calls upon us to think about sexuality beyond a man and a woman "doing it" in the missionary position, it also compels us to identify other areas of knowledge we have looked at so narrowly. Queer theory not only makes sexuality visible again, it also asks us to disrupt other bounded areas of knowledge and bring to the forefront the voices those taxonomies of knowledge have produced.

Queer theory uses the mostly silent stories of sexuality and desire to question the ways in which we limit our own and others' lives and learning. It raises the question that if as a field we accept uncritically the categories and narratives conventionally provided us by our culture and society, are we both limiting the ways in which adults can grow and constraining the ways and places in which adult educators can help adults learn. Queer theory brings sexuality and desire into adult education practice, forcing us to address the ways in which they are present in our classrooms, our own identities, and our own learning as adults.

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