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## Queers, Cupid's Arrow, and Contradictions in the Classroom: An Activity Theory Analysis

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## Queers, Cupid's Arrow, and Contradictions in the Classroom: An Activity Theory Analysis

### Cover Page Footnote

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## Queers, Cupid's Arrow, and Contradictions in the Classroom: An Activity Theory Analysis

*Activity systems are not static, Parsonian social forces. Rather, they are dynamic systems constantly re-created through micro-level interaction.*  
—David Russell, “Rethinking Genre”

**Heather Trahan**

### Introduction: Activity Theory as a Still-vital Force

A brief database search will reveal that activity theory continues to be a vital force in various academic disciplines. While specific research for this essay emerges from the related fields of rhetoric and composition, business and technical communications, sociology, cultural studies, and education, it must be noted that activity theory has an impact on more than these (for a comprehensive review of the ways activity theory has proliferated, please see Russell, “Writing and Genre”). In my field of rhetoric and composition, for instance, activity theory is indeed going strong, evidenced in part by the recent provocative “Discourse of the Firetenders: Considering Contingent Faculty through the Lens of Activity Theory,” a piece which uses activity theory as a way to address the inequitable “fully entrenched system of multi-tier faculty roles” (Doe, et al. 429). This analysis “suggests that an understanding of . . . overlapping activity systems within which contingent faculty members work can allow us to take a more optimistic view of the future” (444). In a similar move, this essay will analyze a situation where overlapping activity systems caused a series of distressing contradictions that, in the end, promoted a series of hopeful innovations. While I am writing from the perspective of a first-year composition instructor in a university setting, it is easy to imagine this work as equally useful for those teaching within the broader terrain of the humanities, where, more and more, intertwining concerns about pedagogy and social justice issues are dominating scholarly discussions.

Specifically, this essay takes a long look—through the framework of an extended case study—at contradictions in the physical classroom space. These disruptions may be quite literal (such as students talking over the voice of the teacher), or they may be subtler, sometimes involving the use of material tools that clash with the learning goals of the teacher. The overarching aim is to apply critical pedagogy to activity theory, which seeks to analyze how people come together for activity because of societal motives in order to achieve goals using actions and tools. Using activity theory as a framework for pedagogical reflection can aid in solving the (often quite uncomfortable!) contradictions that can arise within a classroom space.

### Activity Theory: The Basics

Activity theory has its roots in 1920s Soviet Union. Beginning as a radical Marxist-Leninist approach to understanding the psychology of the human mind, activity theorists wanted to answer questions like: Why do humans act? Where does motivation come

from? What is the relationship between an individual and society? What is the difference between larger spheres of activity and smaller moments of action? What is the role of affect in working toward goals? How do humans use material tools and conceptual tools (such as language, societal traditions, etc.) to mediate their work? What is collectivity?

Many scholars agree that the most important early, first-generation leader of this psychological activity theory was Lev Vygotsky. Early activity theorists such as he built upon the work of Frederick Engels (a collaborator of Marx). Vygotsky saw activity as, simply, goal-oriented, mediated work that has social, material, and historical implications (Wertsch 37-71).

Then, in the 1970s, a second-generation of activity theory began as Western scholars began applying these ideas in fields such as education, sociology, and human-computer interaction (Engeström, see "Activity" and *Learning*). An important thinker during this time was A. N. Leontiev, who extended the theory's original framework to further elaborate major concepts such as *object* (the goal or goals of an activity system)<sup>11</sup>, *subject* (an individual who is a member along with other members of that activity system community; often, this is the particular human who is being analyzed in the study), *rules* (these organize and govern the activity system), *division of labor* (which allow certain members to contribute differing types of work within the system), and *tools* (physical items such as hammers as well as conceptual items such as writing and speaking) which mediate an object by making the job more easily done. In this way, mediation effectively changes both the nature of the activity as well as the nature of the subjects who use the tools. Overall, the most prominent achievement of second-generation activity theory was in taking the first-generation concept of mediation and extending its use by applying it to larger social groups (Spinuzzi 69).

A further key distinction from Leontiev during this time is between *activity* and *action*. These two terms are not to be confused as synonymous. Activity, which is begun and done in response to some societal motive (some examples might be to learn, to join community, to receive esteem from a mentor, to make money, etc.), is carried out through specific, daily, concrete, goal-oriented actions. And, sometimes, subjects' actions are performed because of carried-over motives from concurrent activity systems—thus, in these situations, actions do not conform to the societally-driven motive of the activity (Bakhurst).

Currently in its third-generation, at least two interacting systems are the focal point for study. A major force has been Yrjö Engeström, who built upon the work of Leontiev, theorizing an additional concept for activity theory—that of *contradictions*. This tension-filled element is an unavoidable product both within a single system and between systems that overlap. Contradictions arise any time diverse individuals interact for the purposes of activity. Their backgrounds, morals, experiences, hopes, talents, and levels of learning will have an effect on the overall composition of the various activities involved. To put it another way, when humans come together in a single activity system to "do" an activity, some of these folks will necessarily interpret and/or carry out the activity in a multitude of assorted, often contradictory ways. According to Kari Kuutti, over time these structural

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<sup>11</sup> Note that this is not the typical use of the word "object." In activity theory, object is not like "the subject/object divide." Rather, think of object as "the object of a game."

tensions—either inside the system or between systems—accumulate, which then manifest as “problems, ruptures, breakdowns, clashes” (qtd. in Murphy and Rodríguez Manzanares 1063). However, these contradictions are actually beneficial because they push for much-needed updates in the activity itself. Contradictions, then, ultimately help analysts perceive how innovation occurs. In our personal lives, workplaces, and school settings, to stay current, flexible, and relevant, one must “learn new forms of activity which are not yet there”; one must learn, create, and update rules, policies, and ways of being within and between activity systems simultaneously as a response to contradiction (Engeström, “Expansive Learning” 138).

Lately, the notion of contradictions has taken on an even more heightened role in analyzing how activity systems compose activity *networks*—activity systems that are intersecting, woven, spliced, and/or overlapping.<sup>12</sup> A number of recent articles in education (at both the secondary and post-secondary levels) have utilized activity theory’s notion of contradictions as a primary lens. Gunther Dippe, in his analysis of a Swedish online education system, reveals radical contradictions between how the program was intended and how the program was truly carried out (1). Charles Nelson and Mi-Kyung Kim argue for the use of activity theory as a helpful framework for thinking about how international students approach a first-year composition course. And a recent article by Elizabeth Murphy and Maria A. Rodríguez Manzanares analyzes contradictions between the virtual and physical high school classroom. The authors claim that in this third generation of activity theory, the notion of analyzing contradictions is the best way to learn, negotiate, and improve teaching theory and practice, especially as digital technology forces a reimagining of our learning objects.<sup>13</sup> Perhaps the most prominent advocate is currently technical communications scholar, Clay Spinuzzi. He argues for the maintenance of activity theory’s potency as well as outlining ways that activity theory must recognize its own contradictions and thus evolve. Spinuzzi hones in on the concept of contradiction as a dominant element in understanding activity; he writes that these are the “engines of change: they provide the impetus for the sorts of reorganizing, reconceiving, and reworking that characterizes a living activity system or network” (73).

Indeed, activity theory, at its core, accounts for development—and its accompanying concept of contradiction can aid in reflection about how students learn, grow, expand, change, shift, and gain agency. In sum, activity theory proposes thinking about *how humans can most effectively come together*. It is not an isolationist lens; rather, it sets up collective activity as its basic unit of analysis. Moreover, critics such as Leesa Whellahan do not hold much weight when they say activity theory is not focused enough on individual creativity or agency—that it “tends to oversocialize the individual” (185). Critiquing activity theory

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<sup>12</sup> A currently contested issue: whether or not activity theory advocates interacting activity systems in network(s) are “spliced” rather than “woven.” The problem is that the notion of “spliced” emerges from the rival theory of actor-network-theory (ANT), with which many activity theorists do not want to mingle. Clay Spinuzzi, however, strongly argues for the meshing of activity theory and ANT. He states that in order to remain relevant in our rapidly-expanding technological age, we *must* begin to adopt spliced understandings of interacting activity systems.

<sup>13</sup> The authors give the example that in a physical classroom, the object is to “teach students”; whereas in the virtual classroom, the reformatted object is now to “help students learn.”

for its obsession with communities is like critiquing zoos for being too obsessed with animals. Activity theorists study individuals who come together with other individuals, who then come together with more individuals. No lack of agency here—only the clash of contradictions that arise from each individual's thrust of agency, which is unavoidable.

The following case study will shed light on how activity theory can continue to be a vital, powerful theoretical force in the academy, especially as we begin to understand classroom contradiction not as failure, but rather as a much-needed request for pedagogical reflection, and, ultimately, change.

### The Case of a Budding Romance

On the first day of a first-year composition course, Zack and Edward (both names are pseudonyms) began the semester sitting on opposite sides of the room. By the third or fourth class, however, I noticed they arrived together and chose desks next to each other. My “gay-dar” (a colloquialism in the LGBTQ community, referring to a psychic radar that can detect whether someone is queer) was beeping loudly. Yes, Zack and Edward seemed gay—I was almost sure of it—and, it seemed, openly so. What was significant is that these appeared to be the first gay students that had ever been placed in a course of mine since I began work at this particular school (a university located in a fairly small, conservative Midwestern town).<sup>14</sup> I was thrilled.

As a double sexual minority (I am both bisexual and polyamorous) who is mostly “out,” I’ve had a long history of LGBTQ affiliation.<sup>15</sup> I have been involved in door-to-door campaigns and in-the-streets protests, and I’ve stood in the rain asking for signatures. My partner and I have volunteered for and supported local youth queer clubs and safe spaces. After earning a B.A. in English, I began working as a freelance journalist, covering queer issues/events for community newspapers and websites. In the past few years, during my M.A. and Ph.D. programs, I’ve begun to devote a majority of my research to merging insights from sexuality studies, feminist studies, and queer studies into my home field of rhetoric and composition. If there happens to be on-campus events regarding anything LGBTQ, I make sure to spread the word to colleagues and students. In my teaching, I’ve made it a point to regularly select readings from queer writers, and when I’m explaining concepts, examples relating to queer issues (and other social justice issues such as racism, ableism, classism, ageism, sexism) are usually some of the first to pop into my mind.<sup>16</sup>

As this brief history demonstrates, I was *ready* for Zack and Edward to be in my class. As an educator and activist holding these ethical/political values regarding human equality, I was already heavily invested in these two young men.

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<sup>14</sup> Only three years ago did this town finally pass—and it passed by a very slim margin—legislation which protects against employment and housing discrimination based upon sexual orientation.

<sup>15</sup> For more about polyamory, please refer to the work of one of the pioneers in the poly movement, Dr. Deborah Anapol.

<sup>16</sup> For instance, I use a PowerPoint slide each term to teach how to write thesis statements. Many slides touch upon LGBTQ issues. One particular slide states: “An example of an excellent, contestable thesis is: ‘Gay marriage is not so radical; in fact, it is passé because it fits into a conservative, status-quo capitalist paradigm.’”

After books were purchased, after introductions were spoken, after course policies were reviewed, and after first assignments were explained—after the class really began to get underway—I began appreciating how often both Zack and Edward contributed to class-wide discussions. Both were incredibly enthusiastic, gregarious, humorous, and didn't mind attempting to answer questions that they weren't entirely sure they knew the "right" answers to. Edward especially impressed me. He often, bravely, took stabs at the most difficult queries while holding a modest, cheerful attitude. He worked hard, thought hard, but didn't have a huge ego about his efforts. One day after class, early-on in the term, as my students were packing up their books and departing from the room, I thanked Edward for being so vocal. He grinned, blushed, waved his hand to the side in a gesture of *no big deal*.

I pressed him, saying, "No, *really*. Thank you! Class wouldn't have worked at all today without you."

In response, he said that it was fun. "I like the deep questions you're asking," he said. As Edward walked away to his next class, I remember thinking that the rest of the term would surely be smooth sailing—would remain as delightful as this. Edward and Zack would continue to be leaders, helping me motivate my more reserved students.

By the third week of the term, my suspicions were confirmed: Zack and Edward were indeed in the throes of a romance.<sup>17</sup> I found this out because both men had each been scheduled for an early-term "getting to know you" conference in my office, in back-to-back time slots. When I saw them both standing in the hallway outside my office, waiting, I quickly decided to change the schedule and confer with them simultaneously. During our conversation, they revealed that their relationship was a result of their meeting for the first time in my class. As the three of us talked, I asked my standard question: "What is something you've done in your life that you are especially proud of?" Without much hesitation, Edward divulged a long narrative about how he had come out of the closet to his parents and his friends when he was fifteen ("a traumatic event" he called it). After this, I revealed to them that I was "in the family" (lingo meaning "a member of the gay community") and told them briefly about the various activism I've been involved with.

When it was Zack's turn to answer my question, he didn't brag as Edward had, but instead shared with me his struggles as a student over the years. He admitted to having trouble caring about school—that other matters seemed more pressing to him. He told me, "I'm not smart." When I pressed Zack to brag to me about something, he continued to resist, telling me that he really wasn't proud of much, not academically. When I asked him to brag about something he'd done outside of school, he had no response to that either. Overall, however, while Zack did not take the opportunity to brag about himself as I'd hoped he would, I *was* pleased that Zack felt free enough to confide in me about his problems with school—and, although perhaps not intentionally—revealing general problems with self-esteem. When the young men exited my office, I felt content, even

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<sup>17</sup> In the discourse of polyamory, this early phase of a relationship is fueled by what's called *new relationship energy* (NRE). It's a time when the world seems to shrink down the size of one's new lover. All attention is focused on exploring and enjoying the new relationship. Other responsibilities and cares and affiliations seem less important by contrast. For more on concept of NRE, please see my dissertation blog: <http://rhetcompolydiss.wordpress.com/tag/nre/>

pleased. I felt I'd connected with them as both a mentor and as a human being. This term was going to be a special one.

### Contradictions Between Overlapping Systems

During the fourth or fifth week of the term, I began to notice moments during classroom meetings that began as disheartening slight distractions, and then as they continued to build momentum, began to feel as if a thick cloud had descended over all of us in that room. *Contradictions* in the making.

Edward and Zack were beginning to act in (unintentionally, I felt) disrespectful, disruptive ways, both toward their peers and myself. They began to ignore my injunctions to please calm down at the start of class. Again and again, those two seemed to be the last ones to stop talking. I noticed that I'd started sounding like a broken record, saying, "Let's begin" or "Can I have your attention?" over and over and over—until they finally heard me. As our class met for only fifty minutes three times a week, I felt we did not have the luxury of those few lost seconds (sometimes minutes) at the start of each class period as Zack and Edward talked and joked with each other and those seated nearby. On the other hand, I did appreciate the fact that the typical beginning-of-term uncomfortable silences were quickly disappearing—our class was moving toward friendliness, toward community, and this seemed to be helped along by Edward's and Zack's presence as the two who'd been hit by cupid's arrow. At the same time, I wondered about the cost. What was being lost as I tried in vain to get my students' attention at the start of class? And how was this negatively affecting my ethos as a leader in that space? Clearly, my students were becoming friendly colleagues. I knew that the success of peer reviews and class-wide conversation depended almost solely upon students feeling comfortable around each other. Yet their desire for *too much* conversation at the start of class sessions was indeed a contradiction within the activity system of our classroom: Zack and Edward (and nearby students) had made their *object* and *action*, upon entering the classroom, the enjoyment of non-academic conversation, of socializing; this was in contradiction to my *object* and *action* upon entering the classroom, which was to harness students' attention in order to facilitate a learning environment.

The chit-chat continued during those middle weeks of the term, and then it began to bleed over into the rest of the fifty minutes. Most frustrating perhaps, their conversations began to erupt right over other student voices. One particular moment stands out in memory: Melanie (a pseudonym) was sharing a story about how her father was probably going to lose his job due to the immanent Ohio legislation which would ban all unions. As we listened to her worried words, Edward and Zack began whispering. Whatever they were talking about must have been fascinating, because soon, a group of four or five students sitting close to them had joined in—at this point, not even bothering to whisper. I gently interrupted Melanie by saying, "Please hold that thought, Mel"—and then turned to Zack, Edward, and the rest. I stood there silently, mustering a facial expression of pure displeasure. But by the time they realized I was attempting to stare them down, whole minutes had passed. After the class grew silent again, I asked Melanie to please finish her story. But the moment had passed. She'd apparently forgotten her train of thought (or, perhaps, was feeling embarrassed that her story had been ignored by some of her peers),



and simply shrugged, saying, “Whatever. I was finished.”

The disruptive action continued. On another particularly frustrating class meeting, we moved our desks (for the first time that term) into a friendly circle (as opposed to the less-friendly formation of all desks facing the front of the classroom) to discuss an article. Once I made the announcement to shift desks, Zack announced that he had forgotten his textbook, and I suggested that he share with someone. A mistake! The two young men now had an excuse to snuggle up, fully ignoring the discussion, and instead making gooey love-eyes at each other. And then, for the first time, they began to pass notes to each other—an action which was now easy, for their notes did not have to be passed through the air (which would have been awkward), but instead, in this new circle formation, notes could simply slide from one desk to the next. What really bothered me about that day’s note-passing was that they were not at all subtle about it. I’m sure many other students noticed; and even when I stared squarely at them a few times, mid-pass, they continued to do it.

I can sense your questions.

Why was this the extent of my reprimand? Why did I not speak up and ask them to stop passing notes? The only explanation I can supply is this: At first, when I began to notice their behavior, I was still in a state of rapture over the fact that these two brave, good-humored, intelligent gay men had been placed into my class. So, the part of me that was rapturous was also the part of me that was reluctant to totally accept what was going on in the classroom. In activity theory’s terms, I did not want to make my *object* that of discipline, that of control. I was reluctant—for I so wanted to be a friend, a supporter of these men. So, I second-guessed the developing situation. I asked myself: Was it *really* Zack and Edward who were promoting the lack of respect during class discussion? Was it *really* they who were hampering efforts to start class each morning? Was it *really* their actions that were disrupting the learning-and-teaching activity?

At midterm, finally beginning to come to terms with the implications of the situation, I found it helpful to apply activity theory to these problems, to better understand the dynamics of what was going on. Figure 1 is a representative graph that illustrates the complex pedagogical situation.

This representation is characteristic of a third-generation activity analysis, because there are at least two systems interacting with each other, ultimately forming an activity *network* (Murphy and Rodríguez Manzanares 1062). As a result of this particular network of various objects, tools, affiliations, motivations, and communities coming together, *the space in the very center of the representation, the space where the three overlap*, contradictions developed: “a fundamental disagreement about how they should relate” (Spinuzzi 12).

So, how to deal with the fact that Zack and Edward were not focusing during class? How to motivate them to care about writing more than romance for fifty minutes three times a week? And, in the language of activity theory, what new *innovations* were necessary to solve the contradictions and move forward? In this network of three overlapping activities—the activity of romance, the activity of the LGBTQ community, and the activity of the academic course—how could we come together as a community to get our work done? And how should I, the teacher, adapt? How could I push Zack and Edward to shift their behavior—but in a gentle manner, without embarrassing them? (Making them sit on opposite sides of the room came to mind, but I did not want to do that. I

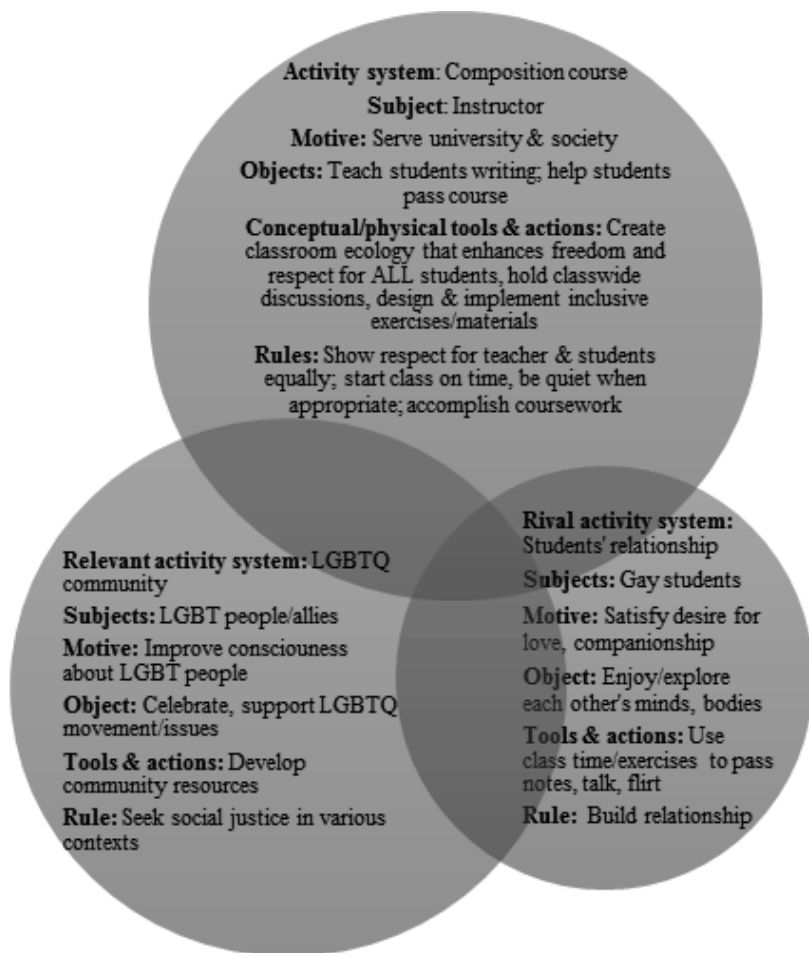


Figure 1: Interacting Activity Systems

wanted to treat them like adults.) Also, I wanted to keep in mind Spinuzzi's warning that contradictions must not only motivate us to reflect, but that we must implement "broader changes" if the links are to "survive" (12). The blank space in my figure, at the center of the three overlapping activities—the place where all three systems touch—had to shift, but not break.

However glad I was about my telling Edward and Zack during our conference that I was "in the family," I wondered: Had that transparency led them to think of me as "the cool teacher"—the one who was on their side *no matter what*? If they had assumed this, they were right. Weeks had passed, and I *still* hadn't done more than occasionally say "Zack and Ed, please be quiet, okay?" My few reprimands had a rather tentative quality,

ending with a high-pitched (maybe even whiny) “please?” or “okay?” My activity as a queer-advocate had clashed, for the first time in my teaching career, with my activity as a writing teacher. I was allowing these two students to dominate the classroom in negative ways because, frankly, I *liked them* so much.

### Subtle Innovations

Paul Prior’s impressive work with activity theory in *Writing/Disciplinarity: A Sociohistoric Account of Literate Activity in the Academy* argues that activity is never totally stable, but open, fluid, dynamic, and composed of vastly heterogeneous elements. Prior invokes the term “laminated” to discuss how each social interaction between human beings is incredibly complex:

How to handle such heterogeneity is an issue. Consider a classroom as an example. The complex intersections of social, pedagogical, and institutional forces, the striking asymmetries in motives and actions between teachers and students and among students, and the varied configurations of interpersonal and intergroup relations that exist in classrooms . . . . I am suggesting that activity is laminated, that multiple activities co-exist, are immanent, in any situation. (24)

Each composition class meeting that term was *indeed* laminated. The object of coming to class for Zack and Edward seemed to be a chance to flirt, to bask in each other’s presence. They seemed to be forgetting about other crucial objects, such as learning, becoming better writers, or passing the course.<sup>18</sup> Coming to class for me, on the other hand, meant an object of facilitating scenarios where students would gain crucial concepts, skills, and approaches to academic writing. Class lasted a sacred fifty minutes. Coming to the classroom space for me, also, was infused with my other impassioned activity system—my ever-present desire to infuse the learning space with conceptual tools for coming to a greater awareness of the ongoing discrimination of gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender, queer, and other non-normatively sexed/sexual human beings. I wanted to plant a seed. So the simple act of coming to class then, of *being* in the classroom space, became problematic. Russell, invoking notions from Engeström, writes, “Collectives pursuing different objects and motives interact with one another in a host of ways over time, producing not only micro-level conflicts but also deep, ongoing *dialectical contradictions* within and among social practices at the macro level, in which collectives are at ‘cross purposes’” (“Rethinking” 508).

In writing (thus, re-living) this scenario with Zack and Edward, more than a year after they have departed from my class, I wonder about my pedagogy. How could I have let things get so out of hand? How could I have virtually ignored their disruptive behavior

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<sup>18</sup> I must admit that perhaps Zack and Edward were there to look for love. Maybe their motivation for signing up for class—or even for going to college—was primarily to find a partner or a hot brush with romance. Maybe their daily object upon entering the classroom was to enjoy and explore with each other. Maybe they did not care about the activity system of the classroom, of learning and teaching. Maybe their actions were *not* conflicted, and their passing notes and flirting and talking made perfect sense. Maybe their actions were fully (or mostly) in line with their purpose. I can’t pretend to know these things.

for so long? Yet despite this retrospective criticism of myself, I *can* remember what I was thinking and feeling and wondering.

I remember being terrified. I remember worrying about unconsciously reproducing in my classroom the larger situation in our culture; I remember thinking that it is possible for even a queer like me to hurt another queer; I remember thinking it was entirely possible for me to inadvertently enforce heteronormativity. I remember returning, a few times that term—to the theories of Laurel Berlant and Michael Warner, to passages like this one:

This sense of rightness—embedded in things and not just in sex—is what we call heteronormativity. Heteronormativity is more than just ideology or prejudice, or phobia against gays and lesbians; it is produced in almost every aspect of the forms and arrangements of social life: nationality, the state, and the law; commerce; medicine; education; plus the conventions and affects of narrativity, romance, and other protected spaces of culture. It is hard to see these fields as heteronormative because the sexual culture straight people inhabit is so diffuse, a mix of languages they are just developing with notions of sexuality so ancient that their material conditions feel hardwired into personhood. (194)

And thus, even though writing (re-living) this experience about my overly-careful urge not to create a heteronormative classroom space has been at times quite humbling, it brings me pleasure to remember how, midterm, I sat down in my office, one quiet afternoon, to draw a map (Fig. 1.) which helped me think.

Around week ten, in taking activity theory into further account, I realized that, even though the notes passed between Zack and Edward weren't necessarily making noise—weren't making a physical contradiction to my voice and to other students' voices—they were, in fact, using the tool of the note as a way to mediate their budding romance at the expense of their own educational experience, as well as (probably) sending this subtle message to the other students: *This class doesn't matter*. Thus, innovation had to occur. I wanted to be careful in my approach, creating a solution that did not conflict with my ongoing queer-supportive ethics.

So this is what I did: I simply shifted the physical makeup of the class. I realized that note-passing only occurred during the context of sitting together as a whole group in a circle. Because I did not want to forego this arrangement entirely (I liked the spirit of camaraderie that the circle formation brought to conversation), I simply shifted how the desks were arranged in that circle. Before each class meeting that involved circle-discussion, I arrived at class early, and pushed all of the excess desks into the corners of the room. There were only thirteen students and a total of twenty-five desks taking up space, so this action up a more spacious area for students to form the kind of circle where their desks were not physically touching. When students arrived in the room, the circle was already in place. Because the desks were now each separated by a few feet of space, Zack and Edward—as I predicted—stopped passing notes to each other. In addition, I announced a new course policy midway through the term that if students failed to bring in the required texts to class, they would not receive attendance credit—an innovation which would obviate Zack and Edward's excuse to cuddle-up. My innovation here not only benefited Zack and Edward—by forcing them into separate space, thus helping them focus—but it also helped a few other students too, ones who were sometimes failing to

bring their books and thus not being able to be active discussion participants.

Because I wanted each to think about their situation *as intellectuals* in a class, as opposed to persons *in a romantic relationship* in a class, I decided to discuss candidly, yet finally quite sternly my concerns, frustrations, and desires for the young men to respect the space of the classroom as a place for study. I decided to take advantage of sheer serendipity when Edward (around week eleven or twelve in the term) showed up quite early to class one day, without Zack by his side. With just Edward and me in the empty classroom, I let myself be both a vulnerable human being, expressing my admiration for his intelligence and gregariousness and admitting that I, as a teacher, had been feeling frustrated that he and his boyfriend had been talking over myself and over others and generally failing to stay on task during class time. I told him that future disruption would not be tolerated. Edward listened attentively, and then apologized. When he said, "If you don't mind, I'd like to be the one to talk to Zack about this"—I agreed. Thus, respect and trust had been maintained, despite the contradiction. And the act of shaming that I had worried about had, thankfully, not occurred. Deep in my own queer heart, I understood that these men had been shamed enough.

A few days after that crucial talk with Edward, I emailed Zack, simply stating that if he had any questions about the information that Zack relayed to him that I would be happy to sit down with him to talk. I then quickly listed my expectations for the rest of the term in terms of respect, and then I wished him well.

Other subtle classroom innovations included my formulating small "stable" discussion and peer-review groups that students maintained throughout the rest of the term. I purposely did not put Edward and Zack into the same group. In addition, I asked each stable group to meet at a particular, reoccurring location within the room for each activity, informing the class that my rationale for this was to promote comfort and a sense of routine for their small group meetings, which I suggested would create more free, more creative discussion. The other students had no idea (I don't think) that my placement of Zack's group at the far back right corner and Edward's group in the far front left corner of the classroom was purely for the sake of keeping Zack and Edward apart. Again, no outright shame was placed upon Zack or Edward. This innovation, meant to dissolve the contradiction between the new lovers' desire to bond and my desire to create an environment conducive to learning to write, could have been carried out in a less-subtle manner. I *could have*, in front of the whole class, explicitly said, "Zack and Edward, do not sit by each other anymore—you are being disruptive." But instead, I subtly mediated the structure of classroom activity.

Admittedly, not all contradictions were completely solved. I still noticed frustrating moments—moments, for example, when Zack and Edward would whisper to each other during circle discussion, despite the added space between them. However, I am reminded of Spinuzzi's account of the power of human development through activity. He writes that contradictions can be resolved to a lasting betterment of all involved, that activity theories highlight "irreversible evolution, all performed through the cyclical resolution of dialectical contradictions" (80). Through the inevitable moments of contradiction, a particular activity can become more attuned to the unique, shifting needs of individuals involved to make it work. Taking into account the contradictions between the competing activities of the course, my queer activism, and the budding romance, my pedagogical

toolkit remained rust-free. It remained relevant, and ready to take on new classroom contradictions as they would certainly arise.

### **Conclusion: Undertaking Activity Theory as Reflective Method**

The particular ways I utilized activity theory are, granted, unique. No other teacher will have the same contradictions as I did. However, the generalizability of this article lies not in attempts to adopt the specific innovations that I just explained. Rather, the point is to create a sense of excitement about the overall usefulness of activity theory as a boon to pedagogical reflection. By analyzing the objects, actions, rules, tools, motives, and contradictions inherent in a classroom, innovation may come more quickly. In sum, the preceding case is meant to provoke others' own exploration of activity theory—as a potential method for seeing anew, for re-seeing the dynamics inherent within the classroom space, especially when a course is mired in cross-purposes, in contradictions.

In a grand sense, it is important to remember that, as Spinuzzi reminds us, no matter what field we are in, no matter what jobs we are doing, contradictions are ever-present in living activities, living networks. If we are alive, we will enter contradiction as we rub up against other individuals who belong to other activities. Indeed, “[C]ontradictions form, develop, and eventually lead to large scale transformations of the entire network, and these transformations become the stage for the next contradictions and the next set of transformations” (122). Thus, contradictions do not indicate failure—they indicate *life*. Let us not be discouraged by these, but rather take them as motivating facts.

More particularly, considering crises in the classroom space as contradictions within activity and between activities helps reframe contradictions in ways that lead to possible solutions. The dialectal dance that is activity theory is related to the fact that we, as energetic, diligent teachers, *can never really make mistakes*. For instance, we can turn a “problem course” into the tool of a written essay, which then can be published in a journal such as *JAEP*L (or read by colleagues in a more informal fashion), and then that tool can mediate the ongoing work of teaching within that activity field or between activity fields—not to mention move the teacher-writer farther along toward the object of heightening professional status. In the network of academia, there is no such thing as a mistake *if* we believe there is no such thing as a mistake.

As activity theory can assist teachers in seeing more clearly the competing motivations within members of a particular class community, it can also be useful for instilling an added layer of empathy in our pedagogy. Activity theory can also help us better view how students are negotiating many conflicting pulls when they set foot in the classroom. Conversely, however, too much empathy can sometimes be a negative force, as evidenced by my reluctance to reprimand Zack and Edward for their disruptive behavior. Thus, each teacher must reflect for herself, finding the line of appropriate empathy, and trying to strike a balance between her own ethics and the academic goals of the course, while simultaneously taking into account the realization that students do not always have as much energy invested in the course as we do. In doing so, activity theory can give us a much-needed pause, helping us see and re-see classrooms as holding enormous complexity, as “sociohistorically organized functional systems that weave together heterogeneous trajectories of persons, practices, artifacts, institutions, and communities” (Prior 278).

Coming to grips with that complexity must not overwhelm us, though. Contradictions may temporarily destabilize us, yes. But taking up the lens of activity theory will help us regain, and reinvigorate, our center.

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