# Queer Desires and Critical Pedagogies in Higher Education: Reflections on the Transformative Potential of Non-Normative Learning Desires in the Classroom

Jennifer Fraser, Birkbeck College, University of London

Sarah Lamble, Birkbeck College, University of London

**Abstract:** This article considers what a queer approach might offer in addressing some of the challenges of higher education in the contemporary neoliberal landscape. Despite a rich literature on queer issues in the classroom, most of the existing scholarship has focused on engaging queer students, being a queer teacher, or teaching queer content in the curriculum. Very little work has focused on what it means to take a queer approach to pedagogic techniques or how such an approach might impact educational practices more broadly. We ask: What does it mean in theory and practice to "queer" our teaching methods? What role can queer pedagogic practices play in contesting the marketization of higher education and the shift towards more instrumentalist and consumer-based modes of learning? We argue that a queer approach to pedagogy, which explicitly seeks to open up spaces for non-normative educational desires to emerge, potentially offers fruitful strategies for fostering critical and transformative learning.

**Keywords:** critical pedagogy, queer theory, teaching methods, higher education, neoliberalism, learning desire, conversation

> The teaching problem is not one of developing students' reasoning powers—nor is it really a problem of formulating what Plato or Aristotle would call "proper ends." Rather, the teacher's problem is to help awaken desire at its deepest level. The solution involves developing students' capacity for openness and receptivity to their own and to one another's hearts, minds, and passions.
>
> — Kathleen Hull, "Eros and Education: The Role of Desire in Teaching and Learning"

In her article "Eros and Education: The Role of Desire in Teaching and Learning," Kathleen Hull argues that desire—for learning, wisdom and understanding—lies at the heart of transformative education. If transformative education is a process of learning to understand ourselves, others and the world differently—of coming to know the world otherwise and challenging existing ways of being—then longing for something more is partly what propels students toward that change. For this reason, our efforts might be misplaced if we focus primarily on teaching skills, such as reasoning and argumentation, and neglect the unspoken learning desires that sit below the surfaces of our classrooms. Hence, one of the key challenges for teachers is to find ways to incite and cultivate students' passions and desires for learning.

As teachers, many of us have experienced powerful encounters when we witness or participate in explicit moments of pleasure and desire in the classroom. Perhaps it occurs when a student's face lights up with exhilaration in discovering a new concept; when a student approaches us excitedly to discuss a topic outside the formal curriculum; or when a group of students stays late after class to continue a rousing conversation. In these encounters—when we literally see the desire in students' faces, we hear the joy in their voices, we feel the energy in their body language—we can recognize a longing for something more: a yearning for discovery; a passion for knowledge; a pleasure in learning that is not tied to assessment rubrics, learning objectives or predefined outcomes. While we might think of these moments as somewhat random or serendipitous—as chance encounters when education generates mutual pleasure amongst students and teachers—we would argue that these moments of desire provide an opening to something more, something that exceeds the routinized forms of learning that often characterize the current neoliberal educational landscape. We argue that, as teachers, we need to take these moments seriously because they are instructive about the potential power of desire in the classroom, and can tell us something about pedagogical methods and techniques that we might employ to foster more transformative learning practices.

Yet the task of cultivating learning desires is not an easy or straightforward one. How exactly do we incite, foster and nurture spaces of pedagogic pleasure and desire in the classroom? What precisely does it mean to awaken students' deepest desires for learning? How might teachers enhance students' capacities for openness and receptivity to their own and others' learning desires? And how can teachers meaningfully take up these challenges within the contemporary landscape of higher education? In a period where students are increasingly (and legitimately) concerned about debt, joblessness and limited opportunities, where teachers are frequently constrained by performance indicators, subject benchmarks and prescribed learning outcomes, the deadening effects of instrumentalist modes of learning threaten to quash even the smallest sparks of passionate learning. As such, questions of educational desire arguably take on new significance in the contemporary period.

Taking up Hull's challenge, this article argues that a queer approach to pedagogy, which explicitly seeks to open up space for non-normative educational desires to emerge, potentially offers fruitful strategies for fostering critical and transformative learning. We argue this approach may be particularly useful in resisting the constraining effects of contemporary neoliberal educational policies. We explore what queer pedagogy can offer in responding to the challenges of the neoliberal classroom, and consider how queer educational practices can potentially carve out spaces for critical pedagogies to flourish.


**The Narrowing of Educational Desires within the Neoliberal University**

The challenge of fostering learning desires in the classroom is not new. Teachers committed to critical pedagogies often face institutional constraints that limit possibilities for transformative learning. However, the nature of this challenge is taking new shapes and forms in the wake of increasingly neoliberal educational policies. Opportunities for expressing noninstrumentalist, non-normative learning desires are ever more contained by the neoliberalized classroom. Many scholars have drawn attention to the problems of neoliberalism in education and the particular challenges these pose to teachers who are committed to critical pedagogy (Alexander 2005; Canaan 2013; Cowden and Singh 2013; Giroux 2001; Giroux 2011; hooks 1994, 2010; Sudbury and Okazawa-Rey 2009). However, scholars have not fully considered the significance of these policies for educational desire and pleasure.

We have observed the impact of neoliberal policies on our classrooms in three key ways.[1] First, the new economy of fees, funding and marketization is changing the relationship between student and teacher, such that the student is increasingly positioned as consumer and likewise the teacher as trainer (Carey 2013; Williams 2013; Edmond and Berry 2014; Molesworth, Scullion and Nixon 2011). The recent cuts to funding for higher education in England, especially the withdrawal of funding for non-STEM (science, technology, engineering, mathematics) subjects, and the imposition of fees of up to £9000 per year lend themselves to an instrumentalist ethos, whereby students can approach learning with a transactional framework of paying for services and demanding particular outcomes, which then reconfigures what is expected in the classroom (Evans 2010; McArthur 2010; see also Giroux 2003). Likewise, funding cuts create more pressure for universities to subscribe to market logics whereby institutions treat students as potential customers (Brown and Carasso 2013). These funding changes, combined with broader shifts towards managerialist educational practices, reshape the subjectivities, desires and relationships of teachers and students. For teachers who believe that education is not simply about information and skills transfer—that it should empower students to become critical thinkers, provide spaces to question established norms, and generate seeds for broader social and political change—the current education landscape is daunting.

Second, the marketization of education has facilitated a shift in educational ethos, which reframes and channels teaching practices through discourses of managerialism, audit culture and performance indicators (Deem, Hillyard, and Reed 2007; Lynch 2014; Naidoo and Williams 2014). Some of these discourses originate in individual universities and colleges, while others come from larger umbrella bodies, such as the Higher Education Academy (HEA).[2] On the surface, these new educational frameworks are designed to encourage us to engage more mindfully in our teaching practices. At the same time, they can function as disciplining mechanisms that close down rather than open up space for consideration of what can happen in classrooms. These discourses can be deceptive because they appear to be good for education but are often enacted via vocabulary and procedures that are restrictive in practice.

An example of the tension between good educational practice and the managerial ethos can be found in the concept of constructive alignment. Coined by John Biggs (1999), the term refers to the process of designing a module's assessments to directly align with learning outcomes and teaching activities. Considering the relationship between these three elements clearly can have a positive impact on how we teach and learn. However, constructive alignment can also play into an instrumentalist ethos where learning is primarily assessment-driven, where exploratory space in the curriculum is restricted, and where the possibility of veering off a narrow path is limited. Teaching can then feel like a tick-box exercise focused primarily on helping students achieve good results on assessments at the expense of engaging with other learning desires. Furthermore, when institutionalized, constructive alignment can function as a disciplining and regulatory mechanism. For example, because the concept of constructive alignment is now embedded in the rhetoric of good teaching practice, it often must be accounted for within institutional program and module proposals. It is also one of the key concepts taught in teacher-training programs, which are the main path to HEA professional recognition and are frequently a requirement for lecturers to pass probation in England and Wales. In these examples, we can see how a good teaching practice, when attached to managerial discourses and tied into institutional quality assurance practices and professional standards, can then set the parameters of what should happen in a classroom and thus compel teachers and students into prescribed scripts for learning.

Third, the neoliberal project works to produce a particular kind of student subjectivity (namely one that is individualized, career-driven, competitive, etc.), which in our experience can mean students are

less receptive to noninstrumentalized and transformative modes of education (Lynch 2014; Naidoo and Williams 2014). In other words, students may resist critical approaches to teaching because they appear to conflict with predominant narratives about what students should be learning, why students should be pursing education, and what they must do to fulfill career aspirations. For example, when we encourage students to pursue topics or readings that are not directly on the assessed curriculum, they can be reluctant because doing so is not strategic in terms of meeting the formal requirements of a degree program. We fully understand why students might feel the need to comply with instrumentalist measures of institutionally defined success. With increased fees, learning for passion or pleasure is even more of a privilege that few can afford. This is exacerbated by the need to balance studying with paid employment and possibly caring and family responsibilities. Within the current neoliberal framework, the benefits of noninstrumentalist learning approaches are not immediately evident because they cannot be measured with the logics of audit culture or performance indicators. Hence students have very good reason to be sceptical when we ask them to take intellectual risks or invest in learning processes where the immediate benefits and outcomes are not clear. This means that we not only bump up against institutional pressures but also against students' own expectations.

These three key constraints (the changing relationship between student and teacher, institutionalized changes in teaching practices, and the impact of neoliberal policies on student subjectivities) work together to reshape students' learning desires and narrow the horizons of possibility of what higher education can be. These forces can reconfigure and channel students' desires for learning into narrow instrumentalist frameworks and normalize certain kinds of teaching practices, expectations and outcomes. When these frameworks become entrenched, other kinds of learning practices become almost unthinkable. Non-normative teaching practices are seen as distractions from "real" learning, superfluous add-ons to the curriculum or radical whims of idealistic teachers. In short, space for critical and transformative pedagogies becomes limited. If one of the key effects of these changes is the narrowing of educational desires, then the question becomes, how do we open space for other types of educational desires to emerge, surface and come into possibility? For this reason, we turn to queer theory, as it provides a framework for questioning normative desires and finding ways to foster opportunities for learning otherwise.


**Queer Theory as Pedagogic Practice**

Although queer theory is often associated with gender and sexuality studies, our interest here lies in its broader political project of questioning norms, opening desires and creating possibilities. For us queer theory is a method of dreaming, naming and being otherwise in the world. As José Esteban Muñoz writes,

> Queerness is a structuring and educated mode of desiring that allows us to see and feel beyond the quagmire of the present…. We must dream and enact new and better pleasures, other ways of being in the world, and ultimately new worlds. Queerness is a longing that propels us onward, beyond romances of the negative and toiling in the present. Queerness is that thing that lets us feel that this world is not enough, that indeed something is missing…. Queerness is essentially about the rejection of a here and now and an insistence on potentiality or concrete possibility for another world. (2009, 1)

It is this understanding of queerness that inspires us in the project of resisting the constraints of neoliberal classrooms and finding new paths for teaching and learning.

Our use of queer theory in this context differs somewhat from much of the existing queer educational scholarship.[3] Most of this literature focuses on queer issues in the classroom, but little has addressed what it

would mean to take a queer approach to pedagogy as a method. For example, there is an extensive literature on engaging queer students (Abes and Kasch 2007; Renn 2007), being a queer teacher (Wallace 2002), and teaching queer content in the curriculum (Winans 2006; Monson and Rhodes 2004). Yet the question of what queer educational practices or queer pedagogic methods might be, beyond a focus on queer identity and queer subjects, is largely neglected.[4] As Vicky Gunn and Chris McAllister note, "A potentially untapped interpretative capacity for queer theory as method, therefore, exists" (2013, 156). So while queer theory is crucial for exploring issues of gender and sexuality in the classroom, we argue that its value to critical pedagogy extends beyond this scope. Taking up Gunn and McAllister's invitation to engage queer theory as a pedagogical method, we explore the generative potential of using queer theory to open up new possibilities for learning.

Our use of queer theory is informed by two overlapping and interwoven approaches. The first is an ethos of questioning and contesting norms. Although queer is now commonly used as an umbrella term for a multiplicity of sex/gender identities (i.e., lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, two-spirited, etc.), the concept originally emerged from a critique of the normalizing function of identity itself. Rather than trying to normalize homosexuality in relation to heterosexuality (the aim of many LGBT recognition- and rights-seeking projects), queer seeks to question the norm itself and contest binary logics altogether (Butler 1993; Sedgwick 1990; Jagose 1996; Turner 2000; Halperin 2003). As David Halperin describes,

> Queer is by definition whatever is at odds with the normal, the legitimate, the dominant. *There is nothing in particular to which it necessarily refers*. It is an identity without an essence. "Queer," then, demarcates not a positivity but a positionality vis-à-vis the normative. (1995, 62; original emphasis)

In this invocation, queer is not so much a (sexual) identity as it is a practice or a method for questioning the logic of normalcy.

The second approach, which follows from the first, is an ethos of fostering generative and transformative desires. By questioning and critiquing normative desires, spaces for non-normative desires become possible. For example, historically queer theory has sought to problematize the normalizing and limiting functions of particular kinds of sexual desire (e.g., heterosexual, monogamous) and sexual practices (e.g., marriage), and also sought to interrogate the terms upon which normal desire is constituted. By playfully invoking non-normative kinds of desire, queer politics disrupt and question normative power relations (e.g., hierarchies between heterosexual and homosexual, the channelling of desire through scripts of monogamy, marriage and particular kinds of family formation), and in doing so create space for non-normative desires to emerge and proliferate. It is precisely the disruptive moment of "queering" that is politically generative, as it opens up space for new possibilities that exceed established norms. In this way, queer theory is not advocating for any particular kind of desire but rather for enabling non-normative desiring practices to reshape the conditions of possibility. Hence the queer project is an always ongoing and incomplete one. As Muñoz writes, "We may never touch queerness, but we can feel it as the warm illumination of a horizon imbued with potentiality" (2009, 1).

## Queer Desires in the Classroom

The queer approaches outlined above are fruitful because they enable us as teachers to question the pedagogical norms and desires around which our classrooms are conventionally constructed. By queering the terms of the classroom, by contesting the binary positions of teacher and student, and by revealing the dominant narratives that shape learning desires, we can change what is possible in the classroom. Desire is

particularly important in these contexts because it can be a catalyst for transforming practices. As Paul Erb argues, "desire aims at what is not yet real, but is within view. So desire acts as a mediator in the learning world" (2004, 114). In other words, in pedagogic spaces queered desires can be what propels us toward the horizon of potentiality that Muñoz describes.

Many scholars have drawn attention to the important role that desire has in educational contexts (Todd 1997; Kelly 1997). This scholarship challenges those who would deny the presence of desire in the classroom or treat it as a problem, and instead explores ways of channeling desire into positive and productive learning experiences. However, most of this literature largely neglects the specific role of non-normative (queer) desires in transformative education.[5] This literature has tended to focus on desire (or eros) as a process of self-actualization or subject formation (e.g., Monson and Rhodes 2004; Rowley 2007); desire as an expression of embodied learning (e.g., Rowley 2007; McWilliam 1996); and desire between teacher and student (e.g., Gallop 1997; Jones 1996; Johnson 2004; McNinch 2007). Building on this literature, we focus on the productive potential of fostering non-normative learning desires as a strategy for disrupting the neoliberal marketized classroom and cultivating possibilities for learning otherwise.

Fostering space for non-normative desires in educational environments does, however, pose significant challenges. Desire itself is not easy to define or recognize. It takes many forms and is continually shaped and reshaped by differing institutional, cultural and social contexts. Students may be reluctant to talk or even think about desire because it is often seen as a private and personal matter. This is further complicated by the widespread assumption that desire is inherently connected to sexuality, which makes it a potentially charged topic and one that students and teachers may want to avoid. As such, the task of identifying and contesting normative desires in order to make room for non-normative ones requires a sensitive and flexible approach. It should provide space for students to articulate their desires, recognize how desire is socially and institutionally shaped, and provide opportunities to explore and embrace other desires.

There are, however, tensions in navigating this approach. On the one hand, if we simply ask students to name their desires, they may rehearse the institutional scripts of desire that they have been encouraged to embrace within neoliberal frameworks (i.e., student as consumer).[6] In this context, students are increasingly positioned as autonomous, self-enterprising individuals that consume knowledge and then use it as social capital to maximize self-interest. Students, for example, are encouraged to choose a degree that will increase their future job prospects or earning potential.[7] As a result, their desires are often channelled around achieving that particular goal, and other desires, such as learning for pursuing personal interests, are increasingly sidelined, devalued or viewed as idealistic or frivolous. Students may need a more explicit invitation to feel they have permission to explore, recognize or value other desires.

On the other hand, if as teachers we impose our assumptions about what our students' desires ought to be, or what authentic desire looks like, we risk replacing one set of limitations with another and fail to recognize that students' desires may be shaped by different material and affective conditions and relationships to learning than our own. Furthermore, we are in danger of reinforcing the banking model of education critiqued by Paulo Freire (2000), whereby students are treated as empty vessels to be filled by teachers' knowledge.[8] Some of the scholarship on engaging desire in the classroom is at risk of playing into this problem. For example, Peter Schwenger argues that "teaching … works much like seduction: we want our students to want something they didn't know they wanted" (2005, 31). In one sense this is true—we are offering something to students in the hope that they will take it up and explore it further. But in another sense, this perspective is problematic. Although we want to engage students' passions for the topics we teach, we need to be careful not to assume that we hold the key to igniting their learning passions or the

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truth of what they should want, as this restricts their ability to consent, engage and participate fully in the learning process. Rather than presuming to know what students should want, a queer approach would encourage them to question their normalized desires and allow other desires that exist below the surface to emerge and take form. This involves encouraging students to question the processes that give shape to their desires and allow space to discover new modes of desiring. In other words, there is a difference between trying to get students to see the world in the same way that we do and encouraging them to question and rethink how they themselves see the world.

At the heart of this dilemma is a tension between recognizing that desire is socially produced and scripted and being mindful that individuals nonetheless have agency to shape and choose their desires. We are not endorsing a liberal choice model that simply encourages students to choose whatever they "want" from a predetermined array of "choices"—as though such entirely free-willed choices are even possible. Rather, we seek an approach that ensures students are given opportunities to be self-reflective and critical about their desires and to engage consensually in that process. We want to go beyond inviting students to simply replace one set of desires with another. Instead we advocate an approach that facilitates a rethinking of desire itself.

A key part of this task requires contesting prevalent models that see desire as seeking to fill a lack. As Elizabeth Grosz (1994) argues, desire is commonly understood in Western philosophy and psychoanalysis as a void that needs to be filled. This model is limiting on a number of levels. From a queer feminist perspective, it renders women's desire generally and lesbian desire specifically as an impossibility; women's desire is figured as a response to, substitute for, or replication of male desire and is inconceivable on its own. Additionally, in this model desire has a conveniently symbiotic relationship with capitalist modes of consumption. As Grosz writes,

> this notion of desire as an absence, lack, or hole, an abyss seeking to be engulfed, stuffed to satisfaction, is not only uniquely useful in capitalist models of acquisition, propriety and ownership (seeing the object of desire on the model of the consumable commodity), but it also inherently sexualizes desire, coding it in terms of the prevailing characteristics attributed to the masculine/feminine opposition, presence and absence. (1994, 71)

Grosz's critique is particularly salient in the current educational context, where students are recruited and marketed to on a presumption that they lack particular kinds of social and economic capital; their aspirations are prefigured as a void that must be filled with a set of educational commodities (i.e., skills, knowledges, experiences). Within this framework, desire is reduced to a negative mode of absence and is limited in its capacity to be something more generative.

Moving away from the conception of desire as a void, Grosz challenges us to "think desire beyond the logic of lack and acquisition" (1994, 70) and encourages us to approach desire "as an intensity, innervation, positivity or force" (74). Drawing on Spinoza and Deleuze and Guattari, Grosz argues for "desire to be understood not just as feeling or affect but also doing and making"; in that sense, "[d]esire is the force of positive production, the energy that creates things, makes alliances and forges interactions between things" (75). It is "productive and innovative, experimental and provocative" (81). In this conception, desire becomes a catalyst for change, a tool for transformation, an opportunity for self-discovery (Jones 1996, 105–6; see also Zembylas 2007).

But what does this mean in practice in the classroom? How do we actually find ways to question conventional educational desires? What strategies or methods have the potential to disrupt normalized modes of education and create space for unspoken and closeted desires to come out? What practices enable new kinds of educational relationships and identities to emerge? There are many possible answers to these

questions. Below we outline a practice—which is not meant to be prescriptive or limiting—that we have found helpful. It is a practice we would describe as queering conversation.

## Queering Conversation

We suggest that "queer conversation" is a potentially powerful way to open space for non-normative desires to emerge in the classroom. As other scholars, such as bell hooks (2010), have argued, conversation is fundamental to an engaged pedagogy that allows students and teachers to explore ideas in an open and fluid way. This is because conversation—unlike other methods of teaching—is more likely to break down the binary relationship between teacher and student. For example, conversation is often less scripted than a lecture or seminar discussion and offers a mode of engagement that allows students and teachers to give voice to more nascent thoughts and ideas as they emerge.[9] Through its mutuality and fluidity, conversation has the possibility of transforming classroom dynamics. As hooks argues, by "learning and talking together, we break the notion that our experience of gaining knowledge is private, individualistic, and competitive. By choosing and fostering dialogue, we engage mutually in a learning partnership" (2010, 43). For us, a queered conversational practice holds the transformative possibilities that hooks describes. It also provides opportunities to question normative learning scripts and open spaces for other kinds of practices and learning desires. It is not that conversation itself is inherently queer but rather that conversation is a mode of engagement that facilitates the queering of desire. A queer approach to conversation deliberately seeks to create space for non-normative desires—those that sit on the margins, hover at the edges, or lie just below the surface—to begin to be articulated and expressed. This does not require us to identify as queer or to be experts in queer theory. It simply asks that we be open to practices that foster space for different types of desires to flourish.

It may not be possible to definitively characterize queer conversation and doing so might be contrary to what we are trying to achieve. However, it may be helpful to identify some qualities of queer conversation. For us, queer conversation has three significant attributes. The first is a continual questioning and disruption of the conventional binary between teacher and student. Like many critical pedagogues, we are interested in practices that challenge norms of privilege and knowing that are often assigned to the roles of teacher and student.[10] But more than that, we argue that this disruption is a necessary condition for non-normative desires to emerge in the classroom. As long as the teacher is positioned as the expert and the student as consumer of the teacher's knowledge, there is little space for students to explore their own desires. By contrast, conversation can become a mode that allows the students to reposition themselves as full, active participants and self-reflective agents of their own desires. This practice of continually challenging the binary between teacher and student is necessary because these roles are institutionally reinforced and upheld, and unless we challenge them, queer desires will remain at the margins.

A second attribute of queer conversation is the disruption of norms around the boundaries of what can and cannot be said in the classroom—including what kinds of learning desires can be expressed. Queer conversation offers a means to give voice to things that might otherwise feel unnameable or unspeakable, and give space to subject positions that might otherwise seem untenable. As hooks suggests,

> To speak, to be able to name [is] a way to claim the subject position. Many students often feel that they have no voice, that they have nothing to say that is worthy of being heard. This is why conversation becomes such a vital intervention, for it not only makes room for every voice, it also presupposes that all voices can be heard. (2010, 45)

Here the articulation and naming of desire opens space for something more. This call for naming desire is not to be mistaken for a politics of recognition that seeks to affirm a subordinate voice. Rather, it makes visible the conditions that create this subordinate position in the first place and makes space for a range of possibilities to emerge. Queer conversation is about opening dialogues on topics that students may believe they are not meant to ask about and being willing to talk about subjects that we as teachers may not be entirely comfortable with or have completely thought through ourselves. Queer conversation makes room for thoughts, ideas and practices that normally do not have a place in classrooms; it opens space for the desires that hover at their edges.

A third attribute of queer conversation is its capacity to make space for new potentialities and possibilities. If, as Muñoz writes, queer is about creating other ways of being in the world, and if, as Grosz writes, desire can be generative, then queer conversation is a practice that brings together the longing for something more with the generative capacity of desire in order to make new things possible. In the classroom, queer conversation can allow for the articulation of longing that, as Muñoz suggests, "propels us onward" to things that currently lie beyond the horizon of possibility. This is not something that can be pinned down, predetermined or controlled. In the same way that we cannot know in advance which way a conversation will go—and yet the most productive conversations are sometimes the most unpredictable ones—it is likewise impossible to know exactly where the generative capacity of queer conversation lies. Like so much queer practice, this attribute of queer conversation is nebulous, but that is also part of its strength. Queer conversation carries an ethos that holds space for new and unforeseen things to happen that sit outside normative expectations in the classroom.

**Strategies for Queering Conversation in Our Classrooms**

Although we may be unable to define queer conversation in precise terms, the attributes above give a sense of the ethos that shapes the practices we seek to engage in. In order to make this more concrete, we outline below two examples of strategies we use to support and generate queer desires in the classroom.

The first example is an attempt to explicitly open a conversation about learning desires in the classroom. It is common practice that during the first class teachers ask students to introduce themselves and identify why they are taking the course and what they hope to learn. In some ways this exercise is a prompt to talk about learning desires, but answers often remain confined to predictably surface narratives. In the past, when we have undertaken this exercise, we found that students largely responded with expressions of external pressures or validations such as, "It is part of my degree requirement," "It will help me get a better job," or some variation of these sentiments. Yet we know that there are other things that motivate and pique the interest of our students, because other desires invariably materialize in overt and covert ways during the year. In an attempt to deepen the type of conversation we were having with students, we experimented with techniques that would create a space for other kinds of desires to be named and discussed more openly. We also wanted to engage students in a conversation that would allow them to reflect on how their desires take the shapes that they do.

We decided to try a technique that we hoped would extend the conventional practice of naming why students have chosen to take a class. We first tried this in a Spanish language course that one of us taught. This particular course seemed an ideal place for this exercise because the group of students tended to be quite mixed and usually included undergraduates, postgraduates and some students who were taking the course as a continuing education class (i.e., not part of a degree).[11] Additionally, the language-learning

context, with its emphasis on conversation and smaller enrolments, lent itself well to getting students to speak and build confidence in sharing their ideas and selves with the other members of the group. The course ran for 29 weeks and met in three-hour blocks, which also provided enough time and space to build a conversation slowly.[12] At the beginning of the year, everyone introduced themselves as customary, but rather than asking students simply why they were taking the class, they were invited to also think about what other motivations and aspirations they might have beyond the more obvious and conventional ones. As teachers, we also thought it was important to share what brought us to the classroom beyond the standard assumption that it is an obligation of our jobs. By revealing our own desires for teaching—which were not tied up in the rhetoric of student achievement and success but based in the pleasures of discovery and learning—we hoped to provide an example and share in the process of revealing ourselves to one another. What emerged from the conversations that followed was a wide range of desires such as wanting to travel, wanting to read poetry in Spanish, wanting to communicate with a lover, or wanting to be part of a learning community. While many students had reasons for learning a language that clearly were linked to their career aspirations or degree requirements, this exercise allowed us to uncover and reveal to one another the other reasons that brought us to the class. Almost always these other desires exceeded the framework of constructive alignment and neoliberal objectives. We returned to these initial conversations throughout the year, so that we could support one another in developing and realizing those desires.

Recognizing that some students may not feel comfortable sharing their desires openly, we also experimented with ways of getting students to contemplate their desires in a less public format. Following on from the exercise above, students were asked to spend the week between the first and second class reflecting on their answers. We were mindful that for some students the original exercise might be asking them to consider things they had not thought about before or did not imagine belonged in the classroom, so they might need time to uncover their responses. In the second class, we spent time writing down our personal learning desires, including any that we felt unable to mention aloud the previous week. The reflections were collected, sealed in an envelope, and locked in a drawer. At the beginning of the second term, the papers were returned to everyone and we reflected on them, made changes, and put them back in the envelope. At the end of the year, the papers were returned again, and we discussed what the process of writing down our desires and actively circling back to them meant for our learning. The less public nature of the envelope allowed students to explore and give voice to things that were perhaps a little deeper inside of them, without needing to name those things explicitly to others. Students had different responses to this exercise. Some wrote a sentence or two, while others wrote a page or more. We were not sure what the reaction to this second step would be, but students on the whole were very positive. Because this final step occurred at the end of the year, when many students were feeling the aftereffects of essay deadlines and exams, these written notes helped reignite desires that felt dampened by the pressures and constraints of formal assessment requirements. Students were excited to get the notes back in part because it felt like receiving a letter from themselves, which rekindled some of the enthusiasm and possibility that was present at the beginning of the academic year. More broadly, the exercise generated conversation outside class, suggesting that its impact exceeded the formal boundaries of the classroom. Several students talked about how meaningful it was to articulate and collectively recognize desires that would normally remain unspoken, and how that in turn allowed them to think about learning differently.

By explicitly asking students to talk about their learning desires in an open-ended conversation, the exercise gave us all permission to think about and articulate desires in ways that exceed the motivational scripts that are conventional in neoliberal classrooms. In other words, there was space to express, uncover

and pursue non-normative or "queer" desires in the classroom. By revisiting those desires throughout the year, the exercise also enabled us to reflect on how our desires might have changed or how new desires might have emerged, thus providing a means to understand desire as something that is fluid and changing and as something more than a lack to be filled. Indeed, rather than articulating a lack (of skills, social capital, etc.), these queer desires spoke to an energy that expressed itself in other ways—such as an opportunity for self-discovery, a catalyst for change, a reconnection with other parts of our selves. In this process, we could see how these desires were potentially generative in the ways that Grosz describes. Desire in this sense was a productive force that could change how students approach learning and shift what they expect from their studies. These desires held the promise of dreaming and being otherwise in the world, of opening the horizons of possibility that Muñoz describes.

This first set of exercises laid the groundwork for our second example, where we asked students to take a more active and participatory role in shaping the learning process. In this example, we invited students to design and run five teaching sessions at the end of the year. The parameters of the task were entirely open for discussion. When students first received the course outline, the last five sessions were listed with dates only and a note saying that the content would be discussed and determined by the group. When it came time to plan these sessions, students were explicitly told that they could cover any topic related to the Spanish-speaking world. We had several planning conversations throughout the year, so students could think about the content, form and structure of those five classes. As a group we negotiated what topics would be covered, what content would be included, and what learning activities would be undertaken. Students chose all sorts of topics, including culinary passions (the history of *jamón ibérico*, or Iberian cured ham); family histories (Argentinian dialects and stories of migration); cultural practices (salsa and flamenco); and political debates (the US-sponsored "war on drugs" in Latin America). In terms of format, some students chose to run the session entirely themselves; others facilitated part of a session but asked for practical grammar exercises to complement that topic.

It is worth noting that some students opted not to participate in this exercise, either because they chose not to facilitate a session or because they did not attend those sessions at all. However, the students who did participate showed as much, if not more, enthusiasm for these classes than for the formally assessed ones. When explicitly asked why they continued to attend, unlike some of their counterparts, participating students made it clear that they wanted to take up every opportunity they had for learning because they were excited to continue the conversations we had engaged in throughout the year. These sessions also strengthened a sense of community, as students wanted to actively support each other in pursuing their interests and passions. Many students chose topics that linked, either explicitly or indirectly, to the learning desires they had expressed at the beginning of the year. Because we created opportunities to elaborate and tease out these desires more fully throughout the year, the collectively directed sessions then provided an opportunity to manifest those desires in a concrete way.

While the first example provided opportunities to question (normative) learning desires and open space to articulate (non-normative) learning desires, the second example enabled us to explore, develop and pursue those desires. By asking students to take on the role of designing and facilitating the curriculum, the second example elaborated those queer desires and also disrupted the binary between teacher and student. Rather than consuming "educational goods" provided by the teacher, students were generating their own learning practices and building a more collective classroom. This second exercise pushed the parameters of the first because it followed up on and gave form to the desires that were initially expressed. By not limiting

these sessions to the course's formal learning objectives and outcomes, there was space for students to return to any unmet hopes and desires that fell outside the formally assessed curriculum.

## Limits and Challenges of Queering Conversation

In presenting these examples we are aware that the practice of engaging in queer conversation creates both potential and challenges. In our experience, these strategies have given us opportunities to explore things that normally do not have an explicit place in our classrooms. At the same time, they generate tensions. For example, talking about desire can incite feelings of risk and danger for students. As Anne Stebbins argues,

> A pedagogy that creates spaces for young people to practice articulating their desires, hopes and dreams takes risks. It offers space for students to discuss their feelings of dissatisfaction and disappointment with the world. This can spark highly emotional experiences since doing so necessitates that learners confront difficult knowledge that exposes the investments of their subject positions. (2010, 165)

These risks can render both students and teachers vulnerable, which means we need to be mindful of the spaces that we open and close. Aimee Carrillo Rowe, drawing on Mary Rose O'Reilley's work, argues that we need to pay attention to "the importance of vulnerability, of surrendering control and power as educators, in order to deeply listen to what is going on within our classes, instead of urgently filling up every space with our outward projections" (2012, 1036). Indeed, in the attempt to protect our students and ourselves from feeling exposed or overly vulnerable we may be tempted to exert undue control over what happens in conversations.

At the same time, conversation cannot be a free for all. It needs some boundaries. For example, we have intervened in the curriculum-design process when students have suggested topics or exercises that were not sufficiently thought through and had the potential to negatively impact other students. In one case, a student suggested an exercise that would have been inaccessible to several disabled students in the class, so we asked the class to consider how they could make the exercise accessible or to choose a more inclusive alternative. In another case, a student proposed screening a film that contained numerous scenes of graphic sexual violence. When another student voiced concerns about the film's content, a conversation developed about whether the class had the capacity to deal with these issues and the affective reactions the film might generate. Not wanting to censor content but being mindful of the sensitivities of discussing sexual violence, particularly in a language course where the groundwork for dealing with such issues had not been undertaken, the class chose not to pursue that film suggestion. While the students reached that conclusion collectively, we might have intervened as teachers if the situation had been different. If, for example, the conversation did not appear to be consensual or a vocal group of students were imposing their views on other students in ways that reinforced dominant power relations, we might have stepped in more actively. In similar situations, our strategy of intervening has been to try to draw people's attention to what is happening in the conversation. Rather than simply shutting down that conversation, we have posed questions that move away from the content, which can become polarized, and instead consider the structure and power dynamics at play in the conversation itself. So there is always a tension between allowing the conversation and class to go where students take it and retaining some necessary boundaries.

There is also a further challenge if students resist conversation altogether and refuse to participate or feel unable to do so. Some students may be uninterested in participating or may wilfully resist for understandable reasons, and we do not want to coerce them into participating. Yet, for other students, their resistance may come from feelings of vulnerability and hesitation around the risks we are asking them

to take. The challenge for the teacher is to know when to simply accept a student's resistance and when to more actively address the reasons behind that resistance. Underlying this dilemma is the problem of power. As we know, classroom power dynamics and broader social structures shape what kinds of conversation are possible, who can participate and in what ways. As such, one danger in pursuing queer conversation as a critical pedagogic technique is that, much like the often-lauded strategy of "dialogue," it can be premised on the erroneous assumption that all participants come to the conversation equally (Razack 1998; Ellsworth 1989). If conversation happens in ways that reinforce problematic power relations in the classroom, it can further sideline students that are already marginalized. Likewise, not all teachers are positioned equally, and so the process of disrupting the teacher/student binary can have different consequences for teachers whose authority is already questioned by virtue of their experience, social location or identity. For this reason, we must undertake these practices with an ongoing attentiveness to the relations of power that shape the conditions of learning in our classrooms.

Additionally, it is sometimes hard to know how to navigate situations where students question or dispute our methods, and how such challenges fit within a queer conversational approach. Whenever we engage in critical practices that fall outside conventional approaches or expected norms, and when we trouble the binary between teacher and student, we increase the likelihood that students will critique our methods and ideas. These challenges can be positive, particularly if they enable us to reflect on some of our own taken-for-granted assumptions. At the same time, there may be instances where it is appropriate for us to maintain our approach even if it is unpopular. For example, a white male student once complained that the content of a criminal justice course was too focussed on race, gender and sexuality. He viewed these issues as "supplementary" and requested that we "stick to the basics." His comments arose from a context where students had been explicitly invited to comment on the content and form of the course, and where they were encouraged to openly express their views. However, the outcome of the conversation was not to simply comply with his request (i.e., remove the content from the course) but instead to foreground discussions about why that content was core to the curriculum. In this sense, the conversation did generate a change in teaching practice, but not necessarily the one the student asked for. In the process of inviting students to participate in a conversation about curriculum design, a tension emerged between enabling them to shape course content and not reinforcing the neoliberal ethos that students are consumers who can simply make "demands" of teachers because they are paying customers. The difficulty in these situations is to distinguish between when we have good reason to "push back" and when we are being unnecessarily rigid, defensive or unreflexive in our practices.

Finally, we are aware that our examples come out of very specific disciplinary practices and may not work or be relevant in other contexts. We also recognize that there are limits and potential disappointments in undertaking these exercises. Our practices are always messier than the visions we have for them, but this is part of the point of queering our pedagogy.


**Concluding Thoughts**

For us a queer pedagogy is one that is continually willing to take risks, to venture into the unknown and to make space for non-normative desires in the classroom. It is one that openly invokes the pleasures of learning even when this involves risks and dangers. As Jacqui Alexander writes,

> Pleasure invites and incites danger. And with danger comes risk; the risk, in this instance, of enacting the
> *truth* that crossings are never undertaken all at once and never undertaken once and for all. [It is about

coming to an] invited meetingplace of endless possibility with the desire to reengage that delicate point where danger and risk (and ultimately vulnerability) spark each other, recognizing that those pedagogies are necessarily incomplete, contingent, and therefore, awaiting precisely these interventions to elaborate a new unknown. (2007, 155; original emphasis)

A queer pedagogy is necessarily incomplete and requires constant reimagining. This means taking risks in order to venture into, and hold space for, the unknown.

More broadly, if we think about "our classrooms as landscapes of desire" (Rowe 2012, 1053), then a queer pedagogic practice is one which challenges existing landscapes and opens possibilities for new ones. Queer conversation is one method for doing this, but there are certainly many others. Our examples are neither meant to be prescriptive nor are they offered as a panacea for the problems of neoliberalism in higher education. Rather, they involve the more modest task of rethinking familiar techniques and reimagining how we use them in our classrooms. For us these strategies are about making small changes in order to open spaces for bigger ones; they are about doing transformative politics at the microrelational level in order to question and rethink power at the structural or systemic level. If we return to the moments of pleasure that we described in the introduction, these experiences are often fleeting yet impactful; they resonate beyond their immediate moment. Despite their ephemeral quality, they can shift a course, alter a student's engagement, and bring about the generative spark that ignites the potentialities students bring to the classroom. This is at the heart of the kind of queer pedagogy we are exploring.

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## Notes

1. We recognize that the impact of neoliberalism on education varies across regions and contexts. Our observations are based on our experiences of teaching in a research-intensive institution in England.

2. The HEA was established in 2003 and is the body responsible for the UK Professional Standards Framework for higher education.

3. Here we use the term "queer educational scholarship" broadly, but we recognize that some of the scholarship on sexuality and education may not be categorized as queer. Scholars may more readily identify with gay or lesbian studies or other variations.

4. Notable exceptions include Luhmann 1998, Kumashiro 2002, and Gunn and McAllister 2013. These contributions pose important questions about queer pedagogical methods, but do not explore in detail what enacting these methods would entail.

5. Notable exceptions include Audre Lorde (1984) and bell hooks (1994, 2010), whose work opens space for discussing the transformative potential of desire in the classroom in ways we might describe as queer. Our work builds on these important foundations.

6. Teachers' desires are likewise subject to neoliberal cooptation, albeit in different ways. Our passion for teaching and commitment to students, for example, are often mobilized to get university staff to work ever-longer hours in increasingly high-pressure situations, while pay and conditions decline.

7. For example, in England, universities are now required to produce and make public "Key Information Sets" which include statistics on graduates' employment status and salary levels following completion of specific programs.

8. See Todd 1997 for a critique of the way that conventional understandings of educational desire can fall into the "banking" model of education.

9. Within our repertoire of teaching practices there are many techniques that generate conversation-like discussions but do not reflect the type of conversation we are referring to here. For example, we may use question-and-answer formats in seminars to generate discussion, but these often become directed and managed dialogues rather than open conversations.

10. See, for example, Luhmann 1998, Loutzenheiser 1998, and hooks 2001.

11. Our institution has historically focused on part-time evening education for mature learners, including students in full-time employment and those often described as "lifelong learners."

12. In the context of our institution, this is considered a significant amount of classroom time. In most non-language courses, a group would have 15 to 20 hours of class time per term.

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