

The Vermont Connection

Volume 38 *Retracing Our Paths: Reclaiming
Narratives in Higher Education*

Article 3

3-4-2017

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Recommended Citation

Garvey,, Jason C. Ph.D. (2017) "Pedagogical Pause: Uncovering the Queerness of My Classroom Emotions," *The Vermont Connection*: Vol. 38 , Article 3.

Available at: <https://scholarworks.uvm.edu/tvc/vol38/iss1/3>

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Pedagogical Pause: Uncovering the Queerness of my Classroom Emotions

Jason C. Garvey, Ph.D.

My pedagogy is inextricably tied to my emotions and queerness. Yet, I do not often share how my personal and professional experiences have shaped how I understand the relationship between classroom learning, identity, and emotions. This paper serves as a pedagogical pause describing vignettes from my educational journey to illuminate how queerness and emotion have become central to my classroom instruction.

University of Delaware

I understand my emotions through the convergence of my individual reality, my interactions with queer people, and my socialization with queer culture (Sutton & Wheatley, 2003). As an undergraduate student at the University of Delaware, I constantly lived a double life and did not reveal my secret sexual identity to anyone. I was a college athlete for the beginning of my undergraduate career, and later lived in a house with my friends and rowing teammates. During my senior year, I remember setting my alarm clock so I could wake up and sneak out of my house late at night without my roommates knowing. I would drive up to Philadelphia to go to clubs in the Gayborhood by myself so I could explore and experience a queer social scene. Every time I snuck out of the house, I had to climb out of my second-story window.

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Without fail, I would always catch my pants on the window air-conditioning unit and rip an L-shaped tear in my pants on the upper right side. These small L-shaped tears in my pants became a secret badge of my gay/queer identity of which only I knew the meaning.

So often I wanted to share this story with friends or mentors, but I never felt I had a space to do so at my university. Truth be told, there was a great deal that I wanted to share with loved ones but I never felt ready to disclose due to shame and fear of abandonment. The secrecy of hiding my identity and community was difficult for me to process emotionally as a 21-year-old undergraduate student. I think back to that time and realize the isolation I experienced greatly affected my happiness, wellness, and sociability. One primary reason I did not disclose my gay/queer identity to anyone during my undergraduate years was fear of being essentialized based on one singular aspect of myself.

I constantly experienced a tension of wanting others to see me as a whole person while also recognizing my unique queer identity and positionality. I endured the entirety of my undergraduate career without coming out to anyone until weeks before my graduation. In my true queer performance sensibilities, I came out to my closest friends in a fun and freeing fanfare after my a cappella group's spring concert, and it was a truly liberating and emotional experience.

The Ohio State University

Upon graduating from the University of Delaware, I moved to Columbus, Ohio to begin my graduate degree in School Psychology at The Ohio State University. Columbus was particularly appealing to me because of the visible and vibrant queer scene. I took the move as an opportunity to reaffirm my voice to come out as gay/queer to friends and family. Beginning fresh in a new city and institution provided me the unique chance to reinvent myself. I was still concerned that others would view me and my queerness in a limiting and marginalizing way (Browning, 1998), yet I was also eager to embrace a more celebratory set of emotions than I had experienced when I was not out. Being open about my sexuality at The Ohio State University also permitted me to bring a new focus to identity in the classroom through critical reflection and authentic dialogue (Brookfield, 1993).

One of my first salient memories related to my sexual identity and learning occurred during my graduate program's field experience. I had just come out to my practicum supervisor right before working in a local elementary school and he discouraged me from telling other professionals, noting that although he supported my "decision and lifestyle," it was not appropriate when working with children. What was particularly jarring about this situation was that my practicum supervisor was a gay man himself. Thinking back to this incident reminds me of Evans' (2002)

question, asking “If a teacher is always on guard for possible harm to the (queer) self, how might that affect teaching?” (p. 171). I knew that not embracing my full queer self during my practicum experience would compromise the effectiveness of my experience and services to the school in which I was working.

Later in my master’s program, I had just developed my research statement and was ready to apply for doctoral programs. Upon showing my advisor my statement, she indirectly called me perverted because of my research interest in sexuality, commenting that the focus was self-centered and inappropriate in an educational work environment. Further, she attested that such interests would limit future employment opportunities because primary or secondary schools would be less likely to employ an educator with a concentration in sexuality. To my supervisor and advisor, my emotional, personal, and academic investments in queerness were seen as an oppositional and dangerous forces requiring “homogenizing and neutralizing” (Burke, 2015, p. 390). To me, my queerness was the sustaining drive to my wellness and emotional expressivity.

These collective incidents led me to determine that the professional environment of primary and secondary education would not permit me to bring my whole queer self to my work. In many respects, my intuition warned me that had I remained in primary and secondary education, the painful emotions that I experienced as an undergraduate student might have resurfaced. When educators experience emotional dissonance between inner feelings and external expressions, they are more likely to experience dissatisfaction and burnout (Zhang & Zhu, 2008). I was certainly not ready to begin a career in a new profession where I already felt disengaged. A mentor of mine knew of my desire to leave primary and secondary education. She recognized my talents and passion for serving undergraduate students and encouraged me to consider a career working in higher education. This change in my professional trajectory led me to a doctoral program at the University of Maryland.

University of Maryland

I began my doctorate in College Student Personnel Administration at the University of Maryland in 2008. While attending school at Maryland, I lived in Northwest Washington, DC. My decision to live in downtown DC was driven largely by my desire to be a part of a queer community. Performing in musicals and belonging to gay men’s choruses were among my first avenues for belongingness within a community of queer men. I discovered new aspects of my queer self through emotional journeys that I experienced with my community in DC. Especially as a performer, my voice was the shared link that brought me into my queer community. Evans (2002) wrote, “As the boundaries of our selves are navigated, emotions are the compass” (p. 30). To this day, how

I understand my queerness and sense of self is through my emotions and voice. I credit this discovery of voice and queerness to my participation in gay men's choruses and for that I am eternally grateful.

Partway through my coursework, I had begun forming my scholarly and professional interests in queer student success. At the time, I was also teaching undergraduate courses in leadership and a seminar course for first-year undergraduate students. When teaching my first undergraduate courses myself, I initially did not disclose my sexual identity to students in the classroom. To be honest, I was not yet confident in my ability to hold both my queer identity and my conceptualization of what it meant to be an educator (Evans, 2002). Shortly after the completion of an undergraduate leadership course, a student from the class reconnected with me. Upon discovering that I was gay/queer, she expressed anger and sadness for me not disclosing my identity to her in class sooner. Throughout the course, she wanted to reference her sexual identity in relation to what she was learning, but did not find appropriate times or places during class to do so. Her experience led me to realize that the way I communicate my emotions and identity relates to students' learning and enjoyment in classroom engagements (Titworth, McKenna, Mazer, & Quinlan, 2013). Without disclosing my sexuality, there was no possible way for me to authentically express my emotions appropriately in class.

Later in my doctoral program, I taught a course on LGBTQ leadership. The course was a truly unique experience, with more than half of the students identifying as a person with a marginalized sexual or gender identity. We connected in every regard – professionally, politically, emotionally, and personally. The classroom experience was the most cohesive community I had ever experienced in an academic setting. Moore and Kuol (2007) noted that “Students often refer to emotions, emotional states, and emotionally satisfying experiences when providing descriptions of excellent teaching” (p. 87). Collectively, we all nurtured each other's emotional wellness, which in turn enhanced group and individual learning.

Feeling empowered by how well the class connected as a community, I wrote a small column for the school newspaper discussing the importance of LGBTQ faculty sharing their identities and experiences with students. The first comment on the column read, “Why does it matter where you stick your d**k? Just teach me the damn content.” As a new instructor, this moment was pivotal and quite jarring for my development. The hostile comment reminded me that emotional investment and expression in classroom engagements pose risks in university settings (Quinlan, 2016). As a class we had connected emotionally, but outsiders did not recognize the dynamic and elevating effect of having a cohesive classroom community experience. In fact, some approached our queer classroom community with hostility. According to Leathwood and Hey (2009), fear of emotion in the classroom generates misogynistic orientations. Such a fear reinforces

divisiveness, highlighting a contrast between what is rational and what is emotional. At that point in my doctoral program, I had already begun establishing myself as a queer scholar/practitioner and the experience of my sexuality being ridiculed was difficult emotionally.

In Fall 2010, I was in my third year as a doctoral student and was working as a Graduate Coordinator for LGBTQ Student Involvement and Advocacy. One night in October after teaching, I left for home via the metro around 9pm. Between my walk from the metro stop and my apartment, I was physically attacked by two unknown assailants. Although they did not manage to take any of my belongings, I did leave the encounter with a badly beaten and bruised face. During the attack I tried yelling for help, but one of the assailants punched my throat several times to silence me. After filing a police report, I went home and tried to resume any semblance of normalcy for the evening. I woke up the next day and went into work early. Upon seeing my bruised face, my supervisor asked what had happened and upon learning of my attack, encouraged me to go to the emergency room. I had not realized the severity of the damage to my throat until I met with my primary care provider. For several weeks, I was unable to speak above a whisper because of the bruising and swelling around my vocal chords. I later learned that my assault was just one among a number of attacks against queer men in DC during the summer and fall of 2010.

I think about this incident often. I questioned why I was targeted by the assailants and whether my attack was connected to the large number of attacks happening in the city to other queer men. I wondered, was it my gay/queer identity that prompted the assailants to attack me and punch my throat, thereby losing my voice? Being assaulted led to an emotional shift for me. Particularly after this incident, I understood that my voice and queerness were intimately connected. My voice is a vessel through which I enact my emotions in a performative way, both symbolically and literally. The queerness of my voice interweaves with my values and emotions so intimately that it is difficult for me to consider my queer identity without internalizing my emotions and core beliefs. The attack created a new relationship for me with my identity, emotions, and voice. I have never been able to sing at full capacity since the attack. I am not entirely sure if it is an emotional block, a physical limitation, or a combination of both.

The Professoriate

I was called to academia because of a commitment to serve students, and I have had the most successful relationships with students when I invest personal and emotional meaning into my work. Emotions are central to teaching because education is relational, and emotions are the cornerstone of relationships (Quinlan, 2016). These values guide how I teach and foster relationships with

students in the classroom. I believe strongly that “emotional awareness and the expression of emotions necessarily have a place in the classroom” (hooks, 2010, p. 81). My teaching and scholarly interests in counseling, helping skills, and identity are indicative of my emotion-driven pedagogy. Postareff and Lindblom-Ylänne (2011) noted that college faculty who have learning-focused pedagogy are the most emotionally charged with teaching, which again reinforces the reciprocity of relationships and emotions in education.

Since graduating with my doctorate in 2013, I have taught in the Higher Education program at The University of Alabama and in the Higher Education and Student Affairs Administration program at The University of Vermont. Most students who have shared a classroom experience with me know that I love the performativity of being a classroom instructor. The theatrics of facilitations and linking key concepts with ballads bring me personal fulfillment and joy. My performance-based pedagogy is rooted in a deep connection with my emotions and gay/queer identity. Logically, my performance experiences with gay men’s choruses as well as continued and sustained love for music contribute to both my emotional classroom performance as well as the connection between my queerness and pedagogy. At each institution I have served, the salience of my gay/queer identity has taken on unique meaning with relation to my pedagogy and instruction. However, I have noticed similar themes from student feedback with both covert and overt references to my sexuality.

Most students have received my emotion-drive pedagogy with positive regard. Similar to what Pietrzak, Duncan, and Koruska (2008) wrote, students in my classes have provided feedback that they value my compassionate, enthusiastic, and empathetic approach to teaching because it demonstrates a deep commitment to learning. My energy and genuine concern for students both within and outside of class are projected through my deep emotional connection with the class community and content (Sprinkle, 2009). In other words, what is important for students is for me to form relationships and care about their learning (Illeris, 2002). Through my candor, humility, and presence I try to co-construct an environment in which issues of power and voice are included in the process of making decisions to students’ learning.

However, not all students have welcomed my emotional expressiveness in the classroom. In one formal teaching evaluation for my course, a student wrote, “All we learned was how to help a gay man come out of the closet – he related every theory to that. If anyone said anything he didn’t like, he would pretend to cry.” Another student wrote that “He cried in class, which is unprofessional on so many levels.” Such feedback reinforces the fear and hesitation that instructors may have about emotional expressions in the classroom because they may be seen as out of control, primitive, or childish (Sutton & Wheatley, 2003). For these students,

emotions in the classroom are seen as a negative contribution to the learning environment, even though teaching is characteristically charged with a series of emotions (Postareff & Lindblom-Ylänne, 2011). In course evaluations, students have also described my teaching as having “too much energy,” being “over-energetic,” and that my “energy is overwhelming.” Students have also described my classroom engagement as too theatrical and performance-driven. Such feedback may have a negative impact on classroom engagement and lead faculty and students to arbitrarily dictate a set of “emotional rules” that govern who may express emotions, to what extent emotions are permitted in the classroom, and how emotions are regulated in academic spaces (Zhang & Zhu, 2008).

Closing

Ahmed (2004) discussed how new forms of patriarchy within neoliberal higher education ensure that characteristics of difference, such as ‘being emotional’ or ‘caring’, are controlled and stifled. Although emotion and difference are critical resources for pedagogical spaces and students’ learning (Burke, 2015), such classroom engagements may not align with students’ comforts or preferred learning environments. I greatly appreciate feedback, and seek opportunities to reflect and grow from students’ comments. Schoeberlein (2009) advocates for humility and presence among instructors to foster student learning. Such feedback provides me with an opportunity to reflect and modify my classroom management and emotions.

At the same time, I cannot help but imagine that my gay/queer identity plays into students’ descriptions of my classroom engagement as too energetic, emotional, and theatrical. My identity and emotions, whether revealed or not, shape classroom discourse. Regarding classroom learning, I strive to continue working towards developing a friendly terrain for students to explore themselves and their emotions within the curriculum while also providing opportunities for personal fulfillment within my queer emotional self.

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