Queer Young Adults, Informal Learning, and the Possibilities for an Inclusive Positional Pedagogy

Kristopher Wells
University of Alberta, Canada

Abstract: In this essay I examine the formal and non-formal educational experiences of Queer young adults in Alberta schools, families, and communities. I discuss how I use found poetry as a pedagogical device to assist adult educators in constructing emancipatory learning communities, educational practices, and research methods that empower students to think and act within transformative possibilities for social change.

Introduction

I begin this essay by briefly locating my master's thesis research, which explores the formal (high school and post-secondary) and non-formal (family & community) educational experiences of four Queer (lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender) young adults (17-22 years old) in Alberta, Canada. Then I reflect on the multi-method research strategy that I employed, and I highlight two examples of found poetry that emerged from this relational inquiry process. Next I draw on my research to discuss how found poetry can be used as a pedagogical device to assist adult educators in developing an inclusive pedagogical practice.

Sex-and-Gender OUTlaws in Alberta Schools

Historically, Queer young adults have been marginalized in adult, community, and school educational environments (Epstein & Johnson, 1998; Quinlivan & Town, 1999; Schneider, 1997). My master's thesis investigates how many formal secondary and post-secondary educational environments in Alberta socially, culturally, politically, and pedagogically construct (and thus marginalize) Queer young adults as abnormal or deviant. This research also examines how Queer young adults create spaces and languages of resistance as they work within non-formal learning communities in an attempt to resist, deconstruct, and transform fugitive identity constructions (Hill, 1995).

In my research I employ a multi-method design that utilizes open-ended interviews, found poetry, and visual narrative (photographic) techniques. This multi-method approach provides a way to check research data for plausibility, authenticity, credibility, and relevance (Denzin & Lincoln, 1994/2000). Moreover, a multi-method approach also helps to make the research more holistic as different research methods provide different kinds of knowledge (Richardson, 1998; St. Pierre & Pillow, 2000).

Contemporary educational research increasingly demonstrates that heterosexism and homophobia, in conjunction with other forms of discrimination, function to reinforce and reproduce specific forms of power and privilege that define and regulate the status quo in schools (Epstein & Johnson, 1998; Friend, 1998; Schneider, 1997). In the Canadian educational system this regulatory discourse reinforces tolerated hatred of Queer students with concomitant expressions of discrimination (ATA & OBC, 2002; CTF & ETFO, 2003). In this milieu the
personal safety and emotional well-being of many Queer students is often threatened (Ryan & Futterman, 1998; Wells, 2001).

In Alberta this regulatory discourse constructs and marginalizes many Queer young adults as sex-and-gender outlaws (Tierney, 1997) who are often physically and emotionally abused and assaulted by a heteronormative educational experience that seeks to render them invisible and silent. Due to this institutionalized victimization many Queer young adults seek out safe and supportive non-formal learning communities (Grace & Wells, 2001). These non-formal learning communities often become spaces of hope and possibility. Many Queer young adults turn to them as they strive to be, become, and belong as valued and contributing members of their family, school, and community environments.

Being Queer, Knowing Queer, Acting Queer

What are the educational experiences of Queer young adults in their formal and non-formal learning communities? To explore this question I engaged four Queer young adults, variously positioned in terms of sex-and-gender differences, in a relational inquiry that centered on their lived and learned educational experiences in Alberta schools, families, and communities. I examined the subsequent interview transcripts for dominant themes and then, using the transcribed words of the research participants, I created a series of found poems that strive to evocatively re-present some of the thoughts, feelings, and experiences that mark the research participants’ social, cultural, and educational experiences. The following two found poems are representative.

**Invisible Alliances**
(Kevin, Age 17)

Schools have faltered
I feel invisible
Teachers need to be trained
People are more accepting of colour, ethnic, and religious backgrounds than they are of sexuality
Sexuality is the last form of acceptable discrimination

I tried to start a gay-straight alliance at my high school
An atmosphere where you could feel safe
A place where people could meet at lunch and say
“OK, I’m gay”
Strength in numbers

The teacher pulled out
She was afraid
Afraid of the impact that it would have on her career

At first I understood
Now, I’m not so understanding

She’s a counselor
That’s her job
She should have found someone else
When you’re kicked down once
    It’s hard to get back up
If she wasn’t going to do it
    Then no one would

There was a boy who went to my school
He would have been my age
He killed himself because he was gay
When that happens there is something wrong

A gay-straight alliance could make a difference
Even if the person doesn’t attend the meetings
The resources will be there if they want them or if they ever need them
    That youth never got the chance

The Scars Remind Me…
   (Jordana, Age 19)

The Ellen Show
My mom, dad, and I used to watch that show
    Then on that one day
During the episode when Ellen was coming out
    My parent’s refused to watch

I realized that they thought that she was gross for being gay
It was my first clue that my parents didn’t like homosexuals

I kept quiet for a long time after that
I thought that maybe I was bad or wrong

I journaled to myself
    I talked to myself
    I researched
I started feeling like I was alone

I’ve been slashing myself since grade eight
    Slashing became an escape for me
Whenever I got depressed or when something went wrong
    I slashed more
These aren’t fancy scars or tattoos
    These are horrific scars
You can tell it’s from madness

It’s nothing to be ashamed of
The scars remind me of all the hard days that I had to go through just to come out
Every single scar has a meaning
They remind me of different events

The very recent scars will probably be the last ones ever
I really blacked out after those ones
   I had to get stitches
I walked from my home to the lesbian bar
   So many people helped me there
   I realized that I wasn’t alone
   I don’t need to do things like this
       It’s behind me now

I feel like there is support and hope
There are people who will listen to me
   I have support now
I just have to learn to use it in a positive way
   Until eventually I become a support for myself

As an educator of young adults and as a researcher I use found poetry as “a practical and powerful method for analyzing social worlds” (Richardson, 1998, p. 357). As Richardson suggests found poetry can “nudge” us into an awareness that the text we are reading has been constructed, “but all texts are constructed – prose ones, too; therefore, poetry helps problematize reliability, validity, and truth” (1998, p. 356). Richardson (1998) further suggests that by “writing up interviews as poems [we] honor the speaker’s pauses, repetitions, alliterations, narrative strategies, rhythms, and so on. Poetry may actually better represent the speaker than the practice of quoting snippets in prose” (p. 356).

The found poetry produced in this research investigation attempts to create a counter hegemonic discourse that strives to rub up against the grand narratives of education, culture, and schooling that celebrate and maintain the heteronormative status quo. The research participants’ narratives seek to struggle to “reclaim and rewrite untold histories, to subvert what counts as knowledge and truth, and to challenge those who claim to have the authority to speak for them” (St. Pierre & Pillow, 2000, p. 5).

Kevin and Jordana’s narratives illustrate how I use found poetry as a conceptual research tool to examine and re-present the ways in which Queer young adults navigate and make use and sense of the available discourses that surround them to construct representations of their everyday realities and resistances. Found poetry can also serve as an effective pedagogical strategy that uses evocative writing that “touches us where we live, in our bodies… [as] we find ourselves attending to feelings, ambiguities, temporal sequences, [and] blurred experiences … [as] we struggle to find a textual place for ourselves and our doubts and uncertainties” (Richardson, 1998, p. 355). This reflective process can be described as a “blurring [of the] boundaries” between the researcher-researched hyphen that can help “to heal [the] wounds of scientific categorization and technological dehumanization. With its aesthetic sensibilities, experimental writing [such as found poetry] can introduce spirit, imagination, and hope” into the research, teaching, and learning process (Glesne, 1997, p. 210).

Kevin and Jordana’s found poems also serve to highlight how adult education does not only take place in formalized educational environments. Important sociocultural learning also
occurs in front of the television, at the dinner table, in community bars, and in youth groups. When formal educational environments turn their backs on the educational needs and experiences of Queer young adults, only some of these youth “are fortunate enough to find the strength and fortitude to continue educating themselves and each other in spaces they craft and tenaciously hold onto, often against great odds” (Weis & Fine, 2001, p. 498). These contested spaces are often found in gay/straight student alliances or in Queer community youth groups that “serve to sculpt real and imaginary corners for peace, solace, communion, social critique, personal and collective work. These are spaces of deep, sustained community-based educative work” (Weis & Fine, 2001, p. 498). In these fugitive spaces (Hill, 1995), Queer young adults confront, deconstruct, resist, and redefine identity limiting stereotypes and discourses that often provide “harsh humiliating public representations of their race, ethnicity, gender, class, and sexuality” (Weis & Fine, 2001, p. 498). Many Queer young adults turn to these non-formal learning communities as sources of important knowledge, education, and support for their emerging identities. These non-formal learning communities work to empower Queer young adults by accounting for the educational absences and constructed silences that exist in many formal adult educational environments. In these supportive and affirming non-formal learning communities, Queer young adults can safely explore their sex-and-gender differences. They can begin to re-imagine social possibilities, and in turn work towards developing a language of critique, hope, and possibility (McLaren, 1997).

Concluding Perspective: Building an Inclusive Pedagogy for Social Justice

In critical adult education we investigate the connections between learners, teachers, cultural identities, situational contexts, and educational practice (Grace, 2001). This is because an educator’s positionality is inherently connected to classroom dynamics that influence the teaching-learning interaction. Teachers should consider the ramifications of their pedagogical approaches. They cannot afford to disconnect their words from actions, which means that they need to be constantly engaging knowing, speaking, listening, and doing as elements of teaching and learning. In this engagement they should take up the challenge to construct emancipatory and inclusive learning communities, educational practices, and research methods. To counter the exclusion evident in narratives like those of Kevin and Jordana educators of young adults should heed Freire’s (1998) call to become cultural workers. This means developing inclusive pedagogical and community approaches that strive to include multiple voices and perspectives in the curriculum, classroom, and community.


