

Queer Literacy: Helping Students Navigate New Vocabularies

When reading, writing, and speaking about issues of sexual orientation and gender identity, many students can sometimes feel ill at ease expressing their ideas, not just because of the potential sensitivity of these issues but also—most often for straight and cisgender students—because of unfamiliarity with the relatively new vocabularies used in queer studies and public discourse around issues of sex, gender, and sexuality. In fact, many instructors are still developing their understanding of these vocabularies themselves. The process of further developing a working understanding of and comfort with these vocabularies is complicated by the fact that the vocabularies themselves are evolving so quickly. I'd like to suggest some strategies and resources for instructors to help students—and help themselves—gain fluency in the language of LGBTQ theory, identity, and lived experience.

Our present cultural moment provides at least two compelling reasons for instructors and students to learn about the theory and language of LGBTQ (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer/questioning) identity: for the sake of our LGBTQ students, who too frequently hear their lives and experiences mislabeled and their identities misnamed, and for the benefit of our straight and cisgender (that is, non-transgender) students, who increasingly will need to be able to write and speak fluently about sexual orientation and gender identity as these issues gain prominence in public discourse. The college English classroom is an ideal place to address new and evolving vocabularies and the theory behind them, dealing as it does with language and its implications, and there are several easy ways into the conversation available to English instructors.

One way to set the stage for this conversation is to provide students with at least one reading that addresses gender identity or sexual orientation as one of its themes. The reading needn't even focus on "queer issues" as its central theme; even a reading in which the writer's sexuality or gender identity is addressed only incidentally can provoke useful conversations about new vocabularies. If the anthology being used for any given course lacks pieces by queer authors, it's easy enough to find and photocopy or upload short pieces by well-regarded queer writers. Students in my classes have responded well to essays, short stories, and chapters by Dorothy Allison, David Sedaris, Jeanette Winterson, Jennifer Finney Boylan, Madison Moore, Richard Rodriguez, Kate Bornstein, and many others.

In addition to discussing and writing about readings by LGBTQ authors, devoting class time to analyzing the implications of word choice in queer vocabularies can also be helpful to all students. For example, instructors might ask why writers today generally use the phrase "sexual orientation" rather than "sexual preference," or they might ask students why their college's registration survey asks about students' "gender identity" and not just their "sex" (as it now does in Washington State). Uncovering the hidden assumptions in words like "preference," considering the importance of "identity" in general, and examining distinctions between "sex" and "gender" can all lead students to engage in highly productive critical thinking. The vocabulary of transgender and gender-variant identity can be particularly rewarding to examine in this context. For example, the evolving use of singular, gender-neutral personal and possessive pronouns can be

used to discuss the evolving nature of English itself and the structural functions of parts of sentences, as well as the impact word choice can have on an audience. Students may be interested to learn that in some transgender circles, "they" is increasingly commonly used deliberately as a singular, gender-neutral pronoun. (Discussing this development would flow very naturally out of a discussion of pronoun-antecedent agreement in written versus spoken sentences, as most students are already in the largely unconscious habit of using "they" as a singular, gender-neutral pronoun in speech and casual writing anyway.) On the same subject, students will undoubtedly be interested to learn about new coinages of singular, gender-neutral pronouns (e.g., "ze/zir/zem") in the context of how language evolves to meet the needs of its users. It may be useful to note that the politics of naming in the LGBTQ world has connections to other literacies and histories (e.g., African-American history, women's history). For members of any marginalized group, claiming the power to name oneself and one's experiences can be a practice of liberation.

As instructors wade into these waters, two pieces of advice may be helpful. One, it can be productive in these discussions to let students lead. Often, queer or queer-literate students in the classroom can provide up-to-the-minute information that even an experienced instructor might not know, and sharing that information can be empowering for students accustomed to not having their lives and histories be visible in the classroom. (At the same time, it's important to be careful of "spokesperson syndrome"—assuming that a given student either is an expert in the vocabulary of their own identity or wants to be seen as such. It should never be the responsibility of any one student to educate the rest of the students in the room about matters pertaining to that one student's own personal identity or orientation.) Two, never assume fixity: this is all in flux, and thinking in terms of "rightness" or "wrongness" is counter-productive when new terms, like all language, can be more usefully examined for their histories, their implications, and their effects on an audience.

— Dr. Susan Lonac
Whatcom Community College

RECOMMENDED RESOURCES ON QUEER VOCABULARIES —

TransStudent Equality Resources: <http://transstudent.tumblr.com/>

The "Genderbread Person" from "It's Pronounced 'Metrosexual'": <http://itspronouncedmetrosexual.com/2012/03/the-gender-bread-person-v2-0/>

Ohio University's Trans 101 vocabulary primer: <file:///C:/Users/slonac/Documents/WCC/Conferences/TYCA%202014/Trans%20101%20%20Primer%20and%20Vocabulary.htm>

Rutgers' Center for Social Justice Education and LGBT Communities' "Queering Our Vocabulary": http://www.google.com/url?sa=t&rc=t&jq=&esrc=s&source=web&cd=1&ved=0CCMQFjAA&url=ht tp%3A%2F%2Fsocialjustice.rutgers.edu%2Ffiles%2Fdocument s%2FQueering_Our_Vocabulary.pdf&ei=xy04VJfqOc_OigKRqo DwAw&usq=AFQjCNFMiKWJ2N6GNF4ptK_4oLCaGsJ1Hw&b vm=bv.77161500,d.cGE

Spokane Falls Community College's LGBTQIA Virtual Resource Center: <http://www.spokanefalls.edu/College/LGBT/Home.aspx>