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## Tabooed Terrain: Reflections On Conducting Adult Education Research In Lesbian/Gay/Queer Arenas

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## **Tabooed Terrain: Reflections On Conducting Adult Education Research In Lesbian/Gay/Queer Arenas**

Kathleen Edwards, Andre Grace, Brenda Henson, Wanda Henson,  
Robert J. Hill, and Ed Taylor

### **Robert J. Hill**

The issues to be explored in this symposium are the multiple ways that same-sex orientation is negotiated and mediated in Adult Education research. The sociology of learning and other diverse bodies of literature (e.g. gay/queer theory) show that, in the main, same-sex orientation (matter related to Lesbians, Gay men, Transgendered, Bisexuals and Transsexuals) is treated as tabooed terrain in both the academy and society (Hill, 1995), often with grave results. In this symposium, panelist Andre Grace positions his early developmental denial of queer being and acting as a form of self-mutilation. Andre has taken up a self-directed project of autobiographical writing and theorizing as a means to subvert society's forbidden parameters. Since many educators and community members fall back on stereotypes, internalized homophobia and homophobia that flagrantly compromise the very principles for which they labor (Harbeck, 1997), Andre has learned to name and express his outlawed self.

The work of panelist Kathleen Edwards, using a theory of narrative analysis, shows the significance of sexual stories as scholarship and as sites to explore the trajectories of self and society. She articulates that adult educators are confronted with sexual orientation on a regular basis as both personal and public issues for ourselves and those we teach and learn from. As such, we have an obligation to guarantee that all who engage in learning enjoy the same measure of equality. Yet, studies show that, for the most part, Gay men and Lesbians (estimated at more than 1.2 million students in the 1987 college and university population) have been silenced and rendered invisible--or worse, face violent acts of hate in schools, including places of higher (tertiary) learning (Tierney, 1992; Hill, 1995).

Acceptance of prejudice contributes to the authority of privileged heterosexuality, validating discrimination against others (Grayson, 1987). Panelists Brenda and Wanda Henson expose the abandoning-response of peers and faculty in the academy as a result of their politics of presence as out Lesbians. The example of a closeted faculty member, outlined by Wanda Henson, speaks to the power of compulsory silence--and the personal costs that are paid by "suspected sexual outlaws." Adult educators in academe, as well as in the larger public sphere, should care about the maligning and neglect that individuals like the Hensons receive as learners. Yet, Wanda and Brenda's rich lives are a testimony to the triumph of becoming active social agents, intervening on their own behalf--a process of democratic freedom. Their journey has brought them to the place where they have become role models for others struggling to overcome the marginalization that creates inequities for both heterosexual and homosexual females and males alike.

The work of Sears (1992) shows that most educators, despite school policies or goals, labor unions or contracts, and professional ethics, are unwilling to address gay concerns and issues. This has not been the case for some of our panelists, including Ed Taylor who interrogates the appropriateness of members of dominant groups doing research "on" or "with" out-group members. Ed's presentation probes the value of reflection and on-going dialog as antidotes to objectionable exteriority and invasive interiority.

This symposium's panelists attest to the fact that researchers, regardless of sexual orientation, pay costs for conducting gay inquiries. Not only are many learning environments hostile and insensitive to presumed or actual gay students, they are brutal on gay faculty too (Grayson, 1987). Gay educators report that dual identity is an institutionalized necessity because of fear of reprisals, loss of jobs, friends, family and student rapport. Yet, as we learn in the symposium, performing gay research or "being gay" can garner esteem, increasing one's cultural capital within the sphere of equity specialists, and may allow the researcher inhabit a privileged location.

In this symposium, presenters explore a combination of competing and complimentary perspectives, including both the theoretical and the personal dimensions of conducting adult education research in Lesbian/Gay/Queer arenas. It is widely accepted that different social standpoints yield different views of the world, thus, the panelists have been selected from the ranks of: gay and straight researchers conducting sexual identity studies, female and male, theoreticians and reflective practitioners, and faculty and graduate students. Research conducted in the academy and within the grassroots folk education milieu are represented. As facilitator, it is my hope that those who participate in the symposium are as challenged and provoked by the panelists as I have been. They hold their various positions from case-based learning, personal experience, knowledge of the literature, empirical research, and critical analysis of everyday life-locations that give them clear authority on the subjects they present.

The symposium is a summons to adult educators to interrogate our present knowledge, beliefs, and practices, and to question the assumptions that ground our theories and routines of adult education research. We, as citizens and educators, need to ensure: equal learning opportunities, a safe learning environment, and supportive spaces for living and recreating for all. In 1983, Audre Lorde exhorted educators, saying, "if we truly want to eliminate oppression, then heterosexism and homophobia must be addressed" (Gordon, 1983). A decade and a half later, this symposium looks at how far we've come in building communities of difference and hope in the academy, offering material for both debate and adoption by adult educators.

### **Reflections on Queer Life Narratives as a Research Paradigm: Possibilities and Risks**

Andre Grace

From those first awkward and scary moments in my twenties when I started to come to terms with my own queer identity-difference, I also began coming to terms with the reality that heterosexism and homophobia would be perennial and pervasive cultural deterrents shaping my being and acting in this world. In those fear-ridden days, it appeared that I would have to move

stealthily, invisibly, and in silence through life so I might attain a degree of safety and security in our often uncivil society. However, as I came to terms with my own queerness, I realized that such a solution was no solution. For me, silence and invisibility amounted to forms of self-mutilation. They constituted a denial of queer being and acting that led to sickness and thoughts of a final solution. Indeed, they were tantamount to a suicide of sorts.

I still think about these things. I consider how my queer life history shapes my being and acting in the everyday. As catharsis, and as part of locating myself in the spectral community of queer Others, I write autobiographical about my lived and learned experiences. I use life narrative as a research medium and short story and poetry as forms of expression. Furthermore, I theorize what I write about so that I can understand my experiences better. For me, writing and theorizing have become ways of challenging a politics of silence and invisibility that left me afraid, angry and isolated. They are also ways to investigate a politics of exclusion that leaves queer persons without the full rights and privileges accorded to those ninety percent of citizens who travel along a road too straight and narrow for me. Writing and theorizing help me to understand how I might act in the intersection of hope and desire to challenge my locatedness as an uncitizen. They also help me to name and understand the risks involved. In effect, they are part of figuring out what Roby Kidd (1973) called "being, becoming, and belonging" (p. 5).

Usher, Bryant, and Johnston (1997), writing about adult education and the postmodern challenge, suggest that the purposes of research are to take the researcher (desiring to be a reflective practitioner) beyond the limits of present knowledge to gather new "facts" and explanations and, from a postmodern perspective, to question their grounding in conventional belief systems and contemporary research and practices. Lived out, these purposes would make mainstream space for autobiographical queer life-narrative research capable of informing an inclusionary contemporary practice. Of course, this research is filled with possibilities and fraught with risks for the queer adult educator fulfilling roles as both the researcher and the researched. Constituting exposition on the rough terrain bridging desire and risk, queer life-narrative research is "tabooed terrain." It challenges scripted research practices locked into acceptable and accepted ways of conducting research. Since queer identity-difference is textured by race, gender, class, age and other relations of power, queer life-narrative research further alters the research script when it is conducted in the intersection where queerness contributes to a person's multiple subjectivity. These intricacies shape queer life-narrative research as a contested mode of research used to inform queer theory (as a contested discourse) and queer pedagogy (as a contested form of practice).

While doing queer life-narrative research extends the parameters of present knowledge and challenges what we might believe and do as adult educators, engaging in this research is, indeed, a risk-taking process. We cannot ignore the effects of doing this research as exposition within our life spaces, especially in the present sociocultural milieu where a conservatism slurs our identity-difference using a rhetoric that supports heterosexist cultural traditions. hooks (1988) reminds us that the radically vocal Other is often viewed as a threat by those who already have voice. There are certainly many risks associated with research supporting a cultural politics that finds expression as inclusion education where we name and represent our queer multiple selves. For me, they include individual risks associated with dredging up memories and social risks associated with society's pathologizing of queerness. Thus it is crucial to remain wary. Queer

persons need to consider the ways in which our life and research knowledges may be dangerous as we continue to reveal our diverse life spaces. We need to remember that "the price of our visibility is the constant threat of violence, [subtle and overt forms of] anti-queer violence to which practically every segment of this society contributes" (Browning 1993, 1994, p. 27).

Collins (1991) argues that we can do without a modern practice of adult education that fails to question existing hegemonic arrangements. He believes that, as vocation, adult education works with the diversity of Others and makes space for alternative democratic discourses in its mainstream practice. However, achieving this vocation remains a struggle for the queer Other in adult education and other social spaces. As Browning (1993, 1994) points out, "Gay people are admitted only to the degree that they sequester their difference and conduct a sexless public life that offers no model, no quarter, no inspiration to others - child or adult - who would explore all that is queer about themselves" (p.18). By speaking to issues of queer citizenship and cultural democracy, queer life narratives provide a challenge to adult education as a mainstream cultural practice. That challenge is to invigorate contemporary practice by building communities of identity-difference committed to creating a society where queer persons experience freedom, justice and other rights and privileges of full citizenship.

### **Border Crossing In Sexual Identity Research: A Straight Male Perspective**

Ed Taylor

The appropriateness of members of dominant groups doing research "on" or "with" members of marginalized groups has become an issue in the research literature (Cotterill, 1992; Fine, 1995; Lather, 1991; Rhoads, 1994). In cross-border research of non-dominant groups, voices are brought to life and stories are told that often misrepresent the views of the research participant. Research findings are tailored, without much explanation of analysis, to support a particular argument; voices of those who prefer to be nonpolitical are made political; and stories of marginalized lives are often romanticized and over simplified (Lather, 1991). Khayatt (1992) speaks of this in her research with Lesbian teachers: "the experience is one of knowing ourselves as women through eyes that are not ours and through language that does not include us" (p. 87). Despite these concerns, others argue that it is important to conduct research across cultural borders. To leave research only to the "insider" is an essentialist trap to view cultural borders as concrete and static. "When we essentialize identity, we confess to an inability to understand difference and run the risk of constructing impermeable social barriers" (Rhoads, 1994, p. 3). Recognizing these various positions, it is the purpose of this discussion to explore related consequences of an actual "border crossing" research experience. In the Fall of 1995, I, a straight male, collaborated with a LesBi co-researcher to examine how "out" Lesbian and Gay faculty members deal with sexual orientation in the classroom and how they perceive their own sexual orientation affects the learning environment in adult higher education contexts (Tisdell & Taylor, 1995). From this experience four issues emerged that need recognition when conducting research across borders of sexual difference: (a) the fluid nature of sexual identity; (b) the "John Wayne Syndrome"; (c) the Insider/Outsider perspective; and (d) heterosexist assumptions.

When I first began identifying participants for this study, I became aware of the fluid nature of sexual identity. This was the result of resistance expressed by my co-researcher and some of the study participants to self-identify exclusively as gay or lesbian, arguing that they share traits of several orientations. It was as if sexual identity should be viewed along a continuum reflecting degrees of gay, lesbian, transsexual, bisexual, or heterosexual orientation. By asking participants to self-identify as gay or lesbian faculty, my colleague and I were promoting a static view of sexual orientation, overlooking its inherent fluidity. Furthermore, practicing research across borders by using general categorization is often arbitrary and simplistic, and overlooks the multiple standpoints participants represent.

Even though I was comfortable, theoretically, with the idea of a fluid concept of sexual orientation, in practice I was quite uneasy with it. I felt strongly that it was important for people to know that I was a straight heterosexual male. For example, my lesbian co-researcher and I regularly debated about the importance of outing ourselves when it came time to present this research. I often joked with my colleague that if she did not out herself, I would saunter into the presentation hall like "John Wayne" exhibiting as many stereotypical masculine male characteristics as possible, to ensure that my heterosexual identity would stay in tact. This raised several questions for me: Why was it important to preserve my sexual identity? Was I homophobic? It continued to become more apparent to me that one's sexual orientation was not a neutral concept--its impact could not be discounted when reflecting on one's research or teaching practice. Furthermore, this issue supports the long held axiom when conducting research, that of the importance of researchers becoming self-aware of their personal biases, prejudices and insecurities concerning their research.

As the research project progressed to the data analysis stage, my co-researcher and I found ourselves in conflict over the interpretation of the findings of the study. A good example was demonstrated in how differently we interpreted the data of what was seen as being "out" in the classroom, by the study's participants. My co-researcher identified clothing (e.g. T-shirt proclaiming a gay and lesbian rally), specific cultural symbols (pink triangle), and language (using the term "partner") as relatively explicit examples of being out in the classroom. While, from my perspective, these were implicit, subtle, and privileged insider messages of being gay or lesbian. Even though this disagreement on the surface could be perceived as indicative of what Griffin (1992) refers to as different strategies teachers use to manage outness, I saw it as much more complex. These disparate interpretations of the researchers were due to their positionality (insider/outsider perspectives) in relationship to the research participants. Furthermore, the difference was not a disadvantage; it actually was an advantage since it offered a richer description of the participants' experiences, and aided insights gained in cross-border research.

I also felt initially that this implicit behavior by the teachers in this study demonstrated a lack of authenticity and genuineness, indicative of sitting on the fence and passively and indirectly dealing with issues of their identity in the classroom. This heterosexist assumption of mine sets the backdrop for the final issue: that of acting as knowing of what was best for gay and lesbian faculty. For example, I found myself along with other heterosexual educators, often in trivializing ways, giving advice to my co-researcher about what was in her best interest, particularly in response to knowing when and where to out herself, as if there was little risk or

few consequences. This insight was probably the most profound, such that it clearly demonstrates how ignorance is often allied with privilege and power.

Becoming aware of these issues through reflection and on-going dialogue with my co-researcher, I found myself less likely to do what Trinh (1991) refers to as the dominant culture moving "from obnoxious exteriority to obtrusive interiority--namely the pretense to see into or to own the others mind, whose knowledge these others cannot, supposedly, have themselves and the need to define, hence confine, providing them thereby with a standard of self-evaluation on which they necessarily depend" (p. 66). Due to this experience I recognize the tremendous potential of cross-border research, particularly if it is carried out in a manner that is reflective and collaborative with a co-researcher and participants from the non-dominant group. Cross-border research can offer another informed perspective for expressing the voices of those that are often silenced and marginalized.

### **Scholars' Sexual Stories**

Kathleen A. Edwards

Sexual orientation has been primarily a silent story in the academy until very recently. But the Gay rights movement of the past two decades, and the advent of "queer theory" as an interdisciplinary stream of research in the post-structuralist time, have brought the subject of sexuality into the classroom. Adult educators are confronted with sexual orientation as both a personal and a public issue for ourselves and those we teach and learn from on a regular basis. More and more students and faculty are "coming out in the classroom" (Harbeck, 1992) forcing us all to critically reflect on questions of our own private sexual identity, the possibility of prejudice, and the implications of heterosexism as a social and political issue. In addition, the "queer" arena is proving to be a rich source of cutting edge scholarship or "academic outlaws" (Tierney, 1997), working on a wide variety of subjects of importance to adult educators.

This segment of the symposium will focus on one adult educator's personal story as a sexual scholar in the academy. It will utilize Polkinghorne's (1995) theory of a narrative analysis to frame both the private and public implications of sexual stories as scholarship. At issue are personal and policy questions about providing safe space for queer scholarship and scholars, the political implications of sexual difference, and the significance of sexuality as a site to study the intersection of self and society (Brooks & Edwards, 1997).

### **Hidden From View: Reflections Of Lesbian Practitioners On Abandonment and Inclusion**

Brenda Henson and Wanda Henson

The lived experience of being an out Lesbian working in Adult Education in a socially and culturally conservative setting will be explored in terms of its academic, professional and personal effects on all who share in this experience. For some, this experience can be devastating. The isolation created from having no information leading us to the academic and



historical discovery of creative programs led by Lesbians, Gay men, Bisexuals, and Transgendered individuals keeps one's peers hidden from view, thus creating a sense of not belonging. The lack of academic support when under attack for one's sexual orientation, whether faculty or student, creates a sense of abandonment by those in one's academic family equal to that often experienced in birth family relationships.

We were both doctoral students at the University of Southern Mississippi; both of us were awarded Masters Degrees in Education in 1992. We took our classes together and our professors knew us as a very proud Lesbian couple. These same professors also knew of our dreams to one day open a Feminist Adult Education and Retreat Center to continue the charitable and educational work of the non-profit organization we co-founded in 1989, Sister Spirit Incorporated. In 1993 our organization purchased 120 acres in Ovett, Mississippi, just 20 miles from the University Campus. Delighted, we shared the news of our dreams coming true with professors and classmates. Then, a letter stolen from our mailbox, intended for Camp Sister Spirit volunteers, revealed to the community (through a newsletter announcement!) that we were Lesbians. The attacks began.

We were eight courses away from our dissertation. In the ensuing year, over 100 hate crimes were committed against us and people sought ways to "drive us from our land" at town meetings. Politicians used us as fodder for their re-election campaigns; national talk shows (Oprah, Jerry Springer, 20/20 and Larry King Live) attempted to enlighten; and the local press distorted the reasons that we bought our land--we lived in fear for our lives! Going to campus was horrible: we experienced hate-filled mean stares from people we didn't know, and giggles in the classroom when our names were called during attendance. In statistics class, the guy in front of us took to wearing "Jesus- message" T-shirts. Silence, not support, was what we received from our instructors. One day on our way to class a woman with two small children approached us in the hallway to warn us: two men who worked with her husband at a local power company were plotting to murder us. She was crying and begged us to "get off that land." Brenda was first to take a leave-of-absence from classes. Although Wanda tried to remain in class until the end of the semester, soon her higher order thinking skills became impaired and she withdrew. Survival and "how to protect ourselves" became our focus. We wanted to "make it to the other side of all the violence" and so we planned carefully all that we did. Committed to self-defense, we followed the role model of Black farmers of the 1950's and 1960's--we took four hour shifts staying up and guarding our property and our lives, 24 hours a day. Not fighting back would have made it easy for one of our "neighbors" to kill us. We erected a mile of recycled tin fence, at a cost of \$35,000, an electric security gate, and maintained 20-30 volunteers a day.

What did our Adult Education professors or classmates do or say publicly at that time? Nothing! We felt abandoned. No one from the department spoke or wrote letters on our behalf. When two Political Science professors prepared a presentation-paper about what was happening, they chose to use the distorted information from the local newspaper rather than our own words, even though one was a personal friend. An English instructor whom we had never met wrote a letter to the Editor defending our rights as US citizens. Although a story about the violence appeared in our student press, it never mentioned that we were both students on that campus!

We both were active Adult Educators and social transformationists long before coming into the AE program at the University of Southern Mississippi. We hoped that within the program we would meet other like-minded individuals who knew the incredible mix between social justice and Adult Education that has/does occur, creating monumental moments in history. When we received a call from Frank Adams, formerly of the Highlander Education and Research Center, to join a Folk Cooperative School--Marowbone La Mazorca--we did. At their first meeting, the first order of business was to draft and send a letter to Janet Reno and President Clinton demanding that their Adult Education colleagues be protected. As the newly formed organization "Mississippi for Family Values" held town meetings and raffled guns to raise money for a nuisance law suit against us, it was Frank Adams, Kathleen Rockhill, Lee Karlovich and finally Robert Hill and Phyllis Cunningham that made us know we were an important part of the struggle for human rights and justice. Although we have heard from many colleagues since the early days in 1994, there is still a sense of loss in the absence of personal phone calls from the folks we had worked so closely with for so many years.

In 1996 we were invited by the AERC Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transsexual and Friends Caucus to attend the meeting in Tampa, Florida. We became so inspired by fellow educators who knew our plight and held sympathy and understanding for and admired what we were doing that we went home and read the *Conference Proceedings* every night. The process inspired us; by the next semester we were back in school. Why? Because we were suddenly blessed to be part of such a culturally rich and diverse community of progressive educators. We had come home. Yet, last year at AERC we experienced heterocentric erasure and homophobia. We thought that AERC was a safe space: we were wrong. Our commitment to end homophobia, racism, classism, agism, and anti-semitism in AE is resolute. Only when Adult Education is about democracy will oppression end.

Out of Wanda's 66 professors only two have come out: one came out in the classroom after Wanda came out because she didn't want a student to walk alone. Recently, Wanda's nursing professor, Dr. Pat Gonser, came out, saying, "I've been closeted for four years. Very isolated. I never feared my students knowing, it is just something I did not think to bring up in class...if all the Lesbian faculty would come out, our students would also be much more comfortable with themselves." We agree. Lesbian and Gay students need Lesbian and Gay cultural role models. And, we need our professors to be out.

The reason we chose to be a part of this panel was because we know our story is important--we choose to live our lives never being silent in the face of social injustice. We are now doctoral candidates. What are our chances to become professors in Adult Education? Look around you. Most Lesbian and Gay professors are closeted. Why? Because it is not safe in the academy to be out. Who will make a safe space for Gay and Lesbian professors?

What is the welcoming stance of this academy? We are out because we refuse to live a dishonest life. We are in love and we choose to share our lives with those around us. For us, social justice will come when non-Lesbian and Gay people choose to create safe spaces for us to live and work. Until then, we will make our own. We are blessed to have the road that we are making! Thank you for being here and for hearing Lesbian and Gay voices in Adult Education!

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