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Authenticity in the Classroom: A Qualitative Study of Lesbian Health Educators

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Abstract: *This paper discusses the findings of a qualitative study which implemented a narrative inquiry approach to explore how lesbian health educators navigate authenticity in a heteronormative higher education setting.*

Authenticity is difficult to define and multifaceted by nature. Adjectives used to describe authenticity in the classroom include trustworthiness, honesty, genuineness, caring, and helpfulness (Brookfield, 2006; Kreber, Klampfleitner, McCune, Bayne, & Knottenbelt, 2007). The motivation to move towards authenticity provides a better understanding of self and an awareness of others. It enables a working relationship between student and teacher within a specific context of learning and includes critical reflection (Cranton & Carusetta, 2004). The working definition of authenticity used for this study is a process of “knowing and understanding the collective and carefully, critically determining how we are different from and the same as the collective” (Cranton & Carusetta, 2004, p. 4). The lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgendered, and queer (LGBTQ) populations are continually faced with difficult dilemmas in the classroom and on campus when working towards authenticity in light of their own sexual orientation which is different from the collective norm.

There continues to be an increase in the voices and the visibility of the LGBTQ populations which has brought sexual orientation to the forefront in academia. This increase in voices and greater visibility places more emphasis on the LGBTQ teacher. In light of the heteronormative environment in the world at large (Herek, 2009), institutions of academia continue to struggle to break the hegemonic forces of homonegativity and bias (Gulley, 2009). These hegemonic forces provide difficult situations for the LGBTQ educator, thus, authenticity through the eyes of LGBTQ educators has been described as an evocative notion or an elusive, complex, contested construct (Kreber, 2010). This study focused on lesbian health educators in particular due to the difficult topics discussed in the health education classroom (i.e., sexuality education). The lesbian health educator is balancing her own identity and positionality with the difficult topics of health education in the classroom. It is this balancing act that draws the question and connection between authenticity and the lesbian health educator.

Integral to the discussion of authenticity and identity is problematizing the idea of a core self and the socially constructed self. Moving towards authenticity or an authentic identity in the classroom has been suggested to be moving towards “one’s deepest spirit” or a “core self” (Tisdell, 2003). Identity formation encompasses the notion of individual self (core self) and includes the effect of the social on individual identity development. The search for authentic identity then is a lifelong continual process in which individuals do not arrive at authenticity (if so this would evoke an essentialist standpoint) suggesting that the idea of claiming absolute authenticity cannot be attained. Therefore, the understanding of core self via authenticity is a journey of “ongoing personal identity development” (Tisdell, 2000). Thus, the purpose of this paper is to discuss the results of a qualitative study that explored how lesbian health educators navigate authenticity in a heteronormative higher education classroom.

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical lens for this study is grounded in feminist pedagogy and considered to be a lesbian standpoint feminist pedagogy. Feminist pedagogy not only includes the curriculum, instruction, and evaluation of education but also involves how the societal hierarchies and the political dimensions of education affect teaching (Crabtree, Sapp, & Licona, 2009). Central themes of feminist pedagogy include personal experience, voice and/or silence, authority and power, shifting identities, and positionality (Crabtree, Sapp, Licona, 2009; Tisdell, 2005). Standpoint feminism suggests that women's experiences at the margins provide valid insights into the complex natures of the world (Collins, 1989; Hartsock, 1983). Standpoint theory also suggests that knowledge is socially situated, cultural, and temporal (Harding, 2004). The agents of standpoint are multiple, heterogeneous, and contradictory suggesting motion and movement in the margins. Hooks (2004) describes marginality as multifaceted and a site of possibility, "a space of resistance" (p. 156). This particular study is coming from one particular perspective or standpoint in regards to lesbian health educators; it is not considered to be the only perspective. The participants provided their own perspectives or standpoints from life in the margins and how they overcame or complied with heteronormativity in their environments.

Methodology

This was a qualitative study, which implemented narrative inquiry as the research methodology. Semi-structured, conversational interviews were conducted with nine self-identified lesbian who taught health education courses in a higher education setting ranging from professors teaching in programs to health generalists. For confidentiality purposes pseudonyms were used for each participant. Interviews were completed to glean insight into the participant's stories of working towards authenticity in the classroom. Critical Incidence Technique (Flannigan, 1954) was used to elicit those stories. The interviews were then transcribed and underwent individual and collective analysis in order to discern themes. A second analysis involved the use of microstoria analysis (Boje, 2001). Microstoria analysis questions the grand narratives of society in an effort to reclaim local ways of knowing. The grand narrative (heteronormativity in this case) is then interpreted with the participant's stories or microstoria of how the lesbian health educators might resist domination.

Findings

Findings suggest that the women in the study consider themselves moving towards authenticity (Weiler-Timmins, 2011). There are many similarities and differences within the participant's stories that may suggest very different journeys of authenticity in relation to being out on campus (outness) or staying in the closet (inness). All participants felt as if they were moving towards authenticity regardless of their outness or inness and the degree of visibility was determined by many factors.

The Health Educators' Overall Role

The specific role of the health educator on campus was a factor. The health generalist is hired to take on a broader campus role of teaching the student population basic health skills via presentations or trainings. The generalist is often identified as the "queer" identified person on campus. The generalist role seems to have the characteristics of being freer on campus to express their sexual orientation; they were very open and very out. In contrast, the professor role of teaching within a program had a more conservative approach to being out. These professors discussed varying degrees of being in and out of the closet depending on the situation, their own

personality, and the context of their campus. The context of the campus and classroom provided a sense of contrast of the differing degrees of visibility of sexual orientation on campus.

Assessing the Geographical and Campus Political Context

Most of the participants' descriptions of their context on campus were linked to the area in which the university is located and provide insight into how they navigate their sexual orientation in the classroom and the degree of visibility on campus. Participants describing their campuses as liberal felt freer to be out on campus while those located in Republican areas did not feel safe coming out. Peggy tells a story of a time when she taught homophobia in her class. Some students took issue with the subject, and wrote on her evaluation that she was "an ultra feminist and trying to push her feminist ways down their throats." She reinforces that it is "crystal clear" that visibility of sexual orientation is environmentally driven.

Classroom Outness Determined by Contextual Factors

Contextual factors determining outness included the experience of the educator, the type of students they were teaching, and whether coming out would enhance the learning experience. The life experience factor of the educator included the number of years of experience and whether one was tenured or not. Nancy stated, "We are conditioned in our heterosexist society to be... hidden, and on some levels we are supposed to be ashamed of who we are... as one develops more confidence, the more comfortable they become in their skin." The more confidence the more able to feel as if one is moving toward authenticity by their own words and actions in the classroom.

Navigating openly in the classroom also depends on whether one is on tenure track or has tenure. Tenure provides a sense of freedom while someone on the tenure track has definite reservations on being too outspoken. In addition, it was found that the educators had a closer relationship with the graduate students suggesting that their lives intertwined outside of the classroom due to research interests and community involvement. In terms of the undergraduate students, the relationships seem to be relegated to inside the classroom with participants typically keeping their personal lives away from the undergraduates and choosing not to come out.

Outness for most of the participants was described as an organic experience, meaning that if the participants did disclose their sexual orientation it was in the flow of the teaching moment and typically related to student learning. Some of the educators self-identify as a lesbian in sexuality classes in order to provide a new perspective for the students. Others embed stories about their lives to make points in class when it directly relates to the content. The way in which the educators organically come out, the self-identification as lesbian, and the storytelling to enable student learning empowers the educators to continue their own journey towards authenticity.

Moving Towards Authenticity in Context

The personal stories in this study give a glance at just how complex the concept of authenticity may be for the lesbian health educator. Authenticity was described as a way of life or a state of being in this study. The educators discussed authenticity as part of their belief systems; how you choose to live your life. Some educators described themselves as very bold while others described themselves as very private people. This suggests that different

personality types may affect how one may present information about themselves in a social context like the classroom. This is integral to what authenticity may mean in the personal realm.

The journey of authenticity was also discussed in layers. Some perceive one layer of identity to be sexual orientation but suggest it to be only one aspect of their identity. Dierdre suggests that she is “an educator first and lesbian is a qualifier that comes later.” Mary said her sexual orientation is “a part of me and it is not the most important part when I am teaching.” The layers of authenticity rest on particular aspects of the classroom and the university. The findings of this study make clear that the layers are dependent upon the interactions with the students, society, and the teacher’s sense of self. The concept of layers not only related to revealing ones different identities in the classroom but it was in reference to the level of relationship or rapport with particular classes. A theme of trust rose across the words of the participants. Janet suggests, we should trust and respect students enough to trust them with the information that one might be queer.

Discussion and Conclusions

These stories were then pitted up against the grand narrative of heteronormativity in society and in the health education field via microstoria. Findings suggest stories of discrimination throughout the study show the constant force of heterosexism and portray the resiliency of the participants and define their journey towards authenticity. This was shown through a discussion of the construction and deconstruction of knowledge and authenticity of lesbian health educators.

Construction and Deconstruction of Knowledge

Knowledge is always socially situated (Harding, 2004, p. 7). The construction of knowledge in society is based on societal norms. Hegemony is the “permeation of a set of values into every sphere of social life” (Hill, 1995, p. 146). The underlying issues of the social are embedded in hegemony where marginalized groups are placed in the white, supremacist, capitalist, patriarchal society (hooks, 1994). It is the deconstructing of these degrading social truths and the reclaiming of an inclusive social outlook that may increase acceptance and equality for the LGBTQ individual. The grand narrative or dominate culture is heteronormativity. Heteronormativity is understood to be the hegemonic social rules that embed heterosexuality into the minds of society, placing it as the norm. The stories of discrimination and of staying in the closet show the constant force of heterosexism in the lives of the participants.

Authenticity and Lesbian Health Educators

Overall, the participants described their journey towards authenticity as a balancing act of self, others, and society at large. This balancing act is riddled with tensions due to the surrounding heteronormative society; however the participants used positive terms to describe authenticity including integrity, ethics, trust, respect, and compassion. While the participants used such words they also paid great attention to creating space in the classroom that enabled themselves and their students to move towards authenticity. This was accomplished by a high level of awareness of context, the continuous balancing of their own sexual orientation with the dynamics and needs of the class, the careful and reflective way in which they infuse their own sexual orientation into the classroom at appropriate times in the flow of conversation, and by making the notion of sexual orientation matter in their classrooms. The understanding of self as it connects with society and others then becomes a balancing act.

This balancing act includes the negotiation of self with student and context. If teachers are to contribute to the “development and growth of the group by sharing our knowledge, resources, expertise, and our person... we challenge, support guide, and come into conflict with the collective spirit and collective truth of the group” (Cranton, 2001, p. 84). Leveraging sense of self within the classroom in light of heteronormativity and the priorities of teaching becomes an art. Amy talks about this balance in detail, asking more questions than providing answers. She says, “What are the students going to think of me? Are they going to look at me differently? Is this going to draw me closer to them? Are you going to treat me differently? And if you are, are you going to treat me in a better way, in a more compassionate way, or are you going to treat me with more prejudice and discrimination? You know, the whole balancing act.”

Authenticity in context for this study is described best by flanking Janet’s description of authentic teaching in context with Peggy’s description of authentic teaching. Janet is employed at a very ethnically diverse institution and finds it easy to come out within a classroom situation. Peggy on the other hand says she pays the “mountain tax” to live in the mountain west area and considers the area to be super Republican. The “mountain tax” is described by Peggy to be the “things you [lesbian] have to give up in order to live in the mountains and have the recreational activities.” Yet she believes authenticity is “being able to be yourself, being able to reflect on who you are and what your beliefs are.” She says that in the classroom “the type of material that I teach, it doesn’t necessarily require me to be authentic about my sexuality... I don’t feel like it ever is really relevant to the material that I am teaching... I really try to live what I teach in terms of being fit, trying different strategies for strength and conditioning.” What becomes uncomfortable for Peggy is when she teaches health administration courses which deal with topics such as discrimination. This notion of context parallels the tensions of what Kreber (2010) was alluding to in her first person account of authenticity. Kreber begins to flesh out the notion of how context and society are at odds with authenticity in terms of sexual orientation describing the experience as a struggle. She describes becoming authentic by drawing on the notions of complacency, compliance, and contestation. Journeying towards authenticity is then a struggle including challenging oneself, challenging others, and publicly challenging the social norms. Authenticity then is “fought over by pushing oneself to contest the dominant agendas” (p. 194). Cranton, (2006) proposes the journey of authenticity as more of an individual concept in choosing what matters to self and understanding how this then stands apart from the collective.

The findings from this study show the participants fell along the spectrum of understanding self and how this understanding pushes up against society through complacency, compliance and contestation. The participants continue to uphold their own ideal of authenticity by the way they handled themselves in the classroom. The educators grappled with the multiple identities and they were keenly aware of the context in which they teach. They were in search of a between or a middle point with students, with society, and with themselves. Meaning that lesbian teachers may not put their lesbian identities in the middle of conversation but continually provide ways in which they can discuss the topic of LGBTQ individuals in the classrooms. In all senses, the participants were being true to self, understanding their environment, and journeying towards their own authenticity.

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