Chapter 56

"Are you Married?"
Exploring the Boundaries of Sexual Taboos in the ESL Classroom

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ABSTRACT

Within the adult English as a Second Language (ESL) classroom, heterosexuality is presumed perhaps more so than in other formal education settings. Curricula and everyday classroom exchanges reinforce its normative status with teachers wary of offending "cultural sensibilities" and putting themselves in the spotlight. In this chapter however, the author argues that taboo topics can attract student interest. Further, the positioning of ESL students as able to discuss and work through "sensitive" issues, within a classroom community that values positive, respectful interactions, may lead to more productive engagement around sexual diversity issues.

INTRODUCTION

Student: Are you married?
Greg: No I'm not, but I do have a partner.
Student: What's her name?
Greg: [thinking]...

Are you married? Although this question is often asked, the package of acceptable, intelligible answers within the adult English as a Second Language (ESL) classroom is limited.

With heterosexuality presumed, the notion that there might be gay, lesbian, or bisexual students and teachers is, most of the time, unthinkable. Moreover, monosexuality rather than multisexuality is the expectation, and it is rarely challenged (Nelson, 2006, 2009). Queer teachers and students regularly side-step questions or topics that might mean "giving themselves away" (Curran, 2002; Evans, 2002; Rofes, 2005). This chapter explores moments where I strategically intervene to disrupt - at least temporarily - the heteronormativity of the English as a Second Language classroom (also see Curran, 2006).

This chapter's style can best be described as a reflexive practitioner account. As critical incidents took place (in my class), reflective notes and insights were written, then discussed and debated with critical friends. Throughout these conversations, I engaged with poststructural and queer informed educational texts (Britzman, 1995, 1998; Evans, 2002; Kumashiro, 2009; Nelson, 2009; Rasmussen, Rofes, & Talburt, 2004) as I sought to construct an analysis that resonated with contemporary understandings of queer issues. That being said, this chapter is subjective, necessarily influenced by my life-history, the various and shifting components of my identities, and my interest in queer theory and gay rights (Jarman, 1993; Jennings, 1994; Jagose, 1996; Rofes, 1998; Warner, 1999; Willett, 2000). It is but one perspective on what took place in my classroom. As a white, Anglo-Celtic, able-bodied gay man, I can't speak for all queers. What I notice and respond to - and how I analyse the data must therefore be viewed as partial (see Ellwood, 2006).

Teaching queerly in adult ESL classes within heteronormative university landscapes is challenging. Gaining funding for queer research projects can be difficult let alone finding willing research participants from Non-English Speaking Backgrounds (Nelson, 2009). Students may be supportive of queer issues on a one-to-one basis, as I have regularly found, yet they may be reluctant to participate in a formal queer research project due to the tensions that could arise with their peers in the classroom and wider community. Thus, I sought to take action "in the now," responding to the issues that were arising in my class, bringing to the surface thoughts, ideas and values that would likely remain unquestioned, or unexamined in other mainstream ESL classrooms. In so doing, I was aware of the need to act ethically, in care of my students, particularly in respect to their confidentiality. I have therefore kept details of my class, the time period, and the students themselves at a general level. I have also withheld information that may render a student's identity obvious.

This chapter is written with the goal of engaging classroom teachers. As someone who straddles the practitioner/academic boundary in the Further Education sector, I want to draw in those teachers who position academic writing as inaccessible, and not connected to the "real" world of their classrooms. Eric Rofes, a queer education-focused writer, was a key influence in this regard. His first person accounts (Rofes, 2005) of teacher identity, being "out" (open about his sexuality), and the politics of queerness in the classroom are direct, partial and messy, without clear-cut answers. Informed by theory, in an understated manner, they resonated powerfully for me both as a teacher, and a gay man schooled in queer activist, first person, confrontational challenging of norm texts (Rofes, 1999; Savage, 2006; Soldatow & Tsiolkas, 1996). In the manner of Rofes then, I seek to foreground the classroom incidents in this chapter, whilst weaving in theory in an unobtrusive manner. I also centre myself, within the text, so as to provide a point of identification and engagement for teachers.

To be or not to be "out" in the classroom. It's a question that's often raised and pondered in education-focused texts (Curran, 2002; Jennings, 1994; Rofes, 1999, 2005). Does being out constitute an overstepping of professional boundaries; a pushing of a personal bandwagon or agenda? These questions are somewhat problematic in the traditionally heteronormative environs of ESL classrooms. Why for example, do some teachers seek to keep their sexuality private whilst most teachers make no such attempt to do so? It is not uncommon for teachers to talk about their partners and their family in the classroom setting without feeling the need to justify such practices. School curricula, resources and structures also regularly reinforce heterosexuality and heterosexual relationships as the norm (Bickmore, 1999; Dalley & Campbell, 2006; Letts, 1999; Rasmussen, 2004; see also Young, 1990).

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