



Imagining Queer School

Adam J. Greteman, Ph.D.

School of the Art Institute of Chicago

Welcome to the Inaugural Hunt-Simes Institute in Sexuality Studies - HISS - for short. I want to acknowledge, as others have, that we are gathered here on Gadigal Land and I pay my respects to elders past, present, and future. I also want to thank Lee Wallace, Vic Rawlings, and the SSSHARC staff for both the efforts and energy in organizing this institute and the vision to bring together an interdisciplinary, international, and intergenerational group of sexuality studies scholars around the theme “Queer School.” As a philosopher of education based in the United States, I am thrilled that this is the theme. This is not only because of my background in education, but because there is little doubt that when “queer” sits next to “school,” complicated and polarizing conversations are provoked. Many of us here may know and be familiar with these conversations as they seem to have a global reach. In the United States, which I fear is exporting virulent queer and transphobia, there is currently a rather concerted backlash against LGBTQ+ rights in schools as evidenced by the 250+ legislative bills under consideration across the country, as well as an increasing number of book bans focused on books engaging LGBTQ+ and race-conscious issues. These legislative and legal challenges, however, exist alongside a whole host of protections for LGBTQ+ students and teachers, as well as access to GSAs and an inclusive curriculum bills signed into law in seven US states. Brought together, these contradicting realities remind me of the importance of being attentive to local conditions so as to not allow what is happening “there” (for instance, in the US state of Florida) to dictate what is possible “here” (for instance, in the US state of Illinois, where I teach).

Please note I say dictate as I do think what happens “there” should inform how we think about our context “here.” Doing such work can aid us in developing ways to support others elsewhere who are grappling with different legislative, legal, and cultural landscapes. Since we are an international group of PhD students, post-docs, and professors at different stages of our careers, it will behoove us to be mindful of being “here” in Sydney and the frameworks we bring with us from “there,” our homes. I think this is especially important for those of us from the Global North, particularly the United States and Canada, to sit with and recognize the influence academic, political, and economic realities “there” reach outward in profound and often problematic ways. A queer education such as we are creating together over the next two weeks may be one that is especially sensitive to and mindful of contexts and communities, including the



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ways in which some contexts and communities may have undue influence that only becomes visible and felt when we find ourselves out of context.

Most of us here are out of context, some of us perhaps still jet lagged. As we all walked into “class” today, I imagine there were a range of feelings, including being reminded of the awkward nervousness that many of us feel on the first day of school when we may not know anyone. School, we might realize, at the outset is always a little queer; queer here, naming the strangeness of school since it is school that takes us away from the familiarity of our family and into a new world of others who by definition are different from us. And difference is something that defines our relationships as well as our responsibilities to others and to the self.

My time – here on the first day of the institute – is to think with you all about and through our relations and responsibilities; an opportunity that is not just about these two hours, but part of a broader educational endeavor we are now part of. I want to do so by thinking about teachers both to be transparent about how I see, think, and feel about myself in the role of “teacher” but also to explore with you all what and how you see, think, and feel about yourselves as individuals who may already be teachers in some regard or will be teachers (e.g., professors) in the near future. It remains the case, I’m constantly reminded, that PhD programs rarely teach us how to teach despite knowing that many of us will have to teach. Let’s then take teaching seriously together during our time in Queer School since we need “queer” teachers that can be part of shifting conversations and practices that help students thrive in the work of becoming subjects, queer or otherwise, as such work happens across elementary, secondary, and tertiary contexts.

For philosopher of education Gert Biesta, “the point of education is never that students learn but that they learn *something*, for *particular purposes* and that they learn it *from someone*” (p. 38). That someone is a “teacher” who has taken on the responsibility of making decisions and choices that direct students to learn about particular things. Working with pre-service teachers as well as graduate students working towards their PhDs, a common refrain I often hear is around the real, practical, difficulties this responsibility of teaching presents. Making decisions and being clear about one’s aims is challenging not only because we often were never privy to those very things as students or if we were, didn’t necessarily understand them entirely. But also because it is a large responsibility to make such decisions knowing that such decisions will, in unknown ways, impact students who encounter them. As students our responsibility is for our



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learning, but for teachers our responsibility turns outward toward students (plural). Our responsibilities towards others shifts and these responsibilities impact how we relate to those others. Yet, these relations are never abstract, but rather embodied as teachers and students bring into classrooms their body-minds and all those entail, including our identities-in-information, school histories, and life experiences.

All of us here have experiences as students and many of us have experiences as teachers in different capacities. Yet, often in our capacity as teachers we rarely have the opportunity to observe others teach. This means, as well, that we are rarely observed in our classrooms. If I am honest, I am nervous standing in front of you all. These nerves are somewhat regular since I am always nervous about starting a new class with new students. They are also somewhat irregular because this “class” is filled with colleagues whom I am just meeting that are observing me, just as I will observe them later. Observation is probably not the best word here, because I think what we will be experiencing is being “taught by.” I don’t see myself as observing others who will be teaching lessons over these next two weeks in some sense of assessment. Rather, I see myself as having the opportunity to be taught by colleagues whose work is in different disciplines and fields. Just as you might say you were “taught by” me, I hope to say I was taught by you as we explore what it means to put queer next to education. This may reveal a form of collaboration that is needed in becoming a queer teacher.

I think the notion of being “taught by” is a rather queer move that refuses the binary option within educational conversations between “teacher-centered” (rooted in control) and “student-centered” (rooted in learning) teaching. Either choice actually makes objects of others – students become the objects of teacher’s control; teachers become the objects of student’s interests. I don’t think either is very compelling in actual practice since in scenes of education teachers and students are complex subjects working to make meaning of not only their own selves but also the world in which that self is situated. And within that exist different responsibilities and relations which I imagine we can all narrate in diverse and different ways. Teachers, in this equation, exist within schools and are tasked with this thing called teaching. Teaching is a key component to education, but not a component that exists on its own. Teachers and their practice of teaching exists alongside students and their practice of not only learning content but also becoming subjects in relation to their teachers. We have all been taught by teachers. And I hope in the coming two weeks we will take seriously this opportunity to be taught by others in this unique institute and how being taught by not only gives us ways into understanding new ideas, concepts, or practices but also changes us in the process.



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Since this is a unique institute, I want us to think about our purposes as we begin it. What are the purposes of our work here – during World Pride, no less – as we both think about and engage in the theme “Queer School” together? “The question of purposes is” according to Biesta (2012),

the most central and most fundamental educational question since it is only when we have a sense of what it is we want to achieve through our educational efforts . . . that it becomes possible to make meaningful decisions about the ‘what’ and the ‘how’ of our educational efforts, that is, decisions about contents and processes (p. 38)

In our work together today and for the next two weeks, I want us to think seriously about our purposes in engaging, creating, and critiquing “queer school.” I don’t think there is one purpose, nor will we all necessarily share a purpose. My sense is we may not be able to fully name our purposes immediately, some of them may reveal themselves in time, but we should begin thinking about our purposes for being together so we have a framework to ground ourselves in. What are our relations and responsibilities as members of this queer classroom? Why did we travel near and far to Sydney to be part of this “queer classroom?”

Combined, my hope is that we are able to think broadly about “teaching” alongside its specificity when it comes to LGBTQ+ experiences, thinking specifically about roles that intergenerational dialogue plays in such work. Education is generally always already intergenerational – “teachers” are older than “students” – but rarely is it the case that education is a space of intergenerational queer meetings. We have here an opportunity to engage in intergenerational (and international) dialogue centering queers and queerness and imagining new relations and responsibilities that may, in time, allow us to not only survive into threat but also thrive together.

It is significant that all of us here are engaged in sexuality studies. Some of us are from education, others sociology, some geography and others science and game design. What connects us, I sense, is a certain “queerness.” Australian scholar Daniel Marshall turned to the queer archive of Australian education and illustrated ways homosexuality has often been erased from educational thought and practice. This historical erasure impacts not only our inability to see legacies of queer existence “there” in our past, but how those legacies can help inform our “now” in our present. Yet, this is not just about seeing and thinking, but also about the affective consequences of such erasure. More simply, erasure causes bad feelings, but archives can help us feel differently, including helping us not feel like we are the only ones. However, that requires those archives to



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be activated, for instance, through education. One way archives can be activated is, for me, through intergenerational dialogue which allows us to encounter ourselves and others as “living archives” where questions can be raised, insights made, connections realized and more. How do we (want to) relate to one another and what are our responsibilities to ourselves and one another as we contemplate, historicize, speculate and more about queer schools drawing on our interdisciplinary backgrounds? How does such an opportunity allow us to explore queer education both “there” in our futures as scholars but also “now” for the next two weeks?

This might include, engaging some of the questions Marshall lodged that threads generations of “homosexual” educators experiences, affects, and more. These questions included:

Do homosexual educators today feel more watched than their heterosexual counterparts? Do they feel like they have to regulate the ‘volume’ of their sexuality across the vectors of life (e.g., public displays of affection, deportment, research topics, teaching decisions, dress, etc.)? ... Do homosexual teachers feel more precarious in their positions in comparison to their heterosexual counterparts and thereby feel pressure to achieve more or perform more compliantly so as to guarantee their inclusion or admissibility at work? (p. 355)

As individuals who may identify in a range of ways that historically bump up against school (and social) norms, how might we respond to these questions? How might revising homosexual to read transgender or nonbinary or indigiqueer further nuance the importance of such questions? How might such responses help us be responsive to not only our own needs but the needs of students “coming into presence” in changed contexts themselves? What does such attention to our relations and responsibilities do for our queer education here and now, as individuals who come into this conversation from different contexts and conditions? What are practices that we want to name and cultivate that can help – in our contexts and conditions – create queer schools?

Key Concepts

Responsibility	Relations	Frustrating middle ground	World-destruction	Self-
destruction	Teaching	Education	Learning	Queer

LGBTQ+