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Toward a LGBT Studies Minor

Margaret Himley, Adrea Jaehnig, and Andrew London, with comments from Jonathan Massey

n March 9, 2004 Adrea Jaehnig initiated a conversation among members of the Senate Committee on LGBT Concerns, which focused on their ideas about LGBT pedagogy and designing and implementing a minor in LGBT Studies at Syracuse University. Over the past two years, the committee has been talking with others on campus, sponsoring nationally recognized LGBT speakers, hosting a faculty reading group, and planning for a fall 2004 conference on LGBT Studies with the goal of enlarging the number of course offerings that focus on or include LGBT scholarship. The committee has also been considering the promises and potential pitfalls of an organized minor in LGBT Studies. The conversation that follows reflects some of the thoughts and concerns of committee members.

AJ: Let's start our conversation about LGBT pedagogy and see where it goes from there.

MH: I have two different contexts for thinking about this. I used to teach LGBT Studies and the Rhetoric of AIDS as elective courses in the English Department, and I have raised LGBT issues and theories in our required writing courses. And I think in both contexts there are three landmines. One is that teachers worry that they don't know enough to do justice to the large and interdisciplinary field of LGBT Studies. To explain one thing, you have to explain many, many, many things, and you may end

up giving such a reductive version of it all that it is not actually helpful.

>>**Key**>>>>>> MH: Margaret Himley AJ: Adrea Jaehnig AL: Andrew London

AL: Yes, when I taught Sociology of Gays and Lesbians, I really struggled with how to organize the curriculum because the field had changed a lot. So you want to give some history, right? And allow them to read sort of in depth. But then if you are doing

that, it is hard to do it across lots of topics. So I really struggled with how to represent the field as it is changing even within a single discipline. And then you start to do that across disciplines...and it is really hard to capture the field, even though I agree that it is a well-established interdisciplinary field.

MH: And it is also a social movement, and much of what goes on is happening at the level of social movement. A lot of the transgender work is happening not because there is academic research going on, although there is some of that, but because there are people who are living their lives on the front lines and making very big demands on legal and health care systems.

AL: There is also the media and cultural aspect, so a lot of what

the students are bringing into class with them is this popular misknowledge or superficial knowledge, and you're trying to tie that to scholarship that has a history and a disciplinary location. Doing all of that is just really, really hard.

MH: Especially if you have to do it all in one course. The students come from different disciplines and have no shared vocabulary or knowledge base. And they also come with identity politics needs. In my courses, about half the students were LGBT, and it was exciting for them to have a class focused on queer life and work. And you don't want to displace that desire in some way or turn it cynical with critical theory, so you've got all of these competing needs going on.

AL: And then half your class is probably straight, so they don't have even so much of the taken for granted stuff from popular culture. A lot of my students had never even heard of Stonewall before. Just even this basic 101 stuff isn't available to a lot of the students but then you have a few students who know everything.

AJ: That's right. This makes me think about the project that we have done with the Newhouse School, where we had to give some background and information. Even that was very limited. Think just about trans issues, which has turned gender on its head. In order to really answer questions about trans people or the trans movement, you really need a whole class!

AL: Yes, this idea of just infusing it as a topical issue without any context or history, without any connection to ideas of gender and sexuality...I mean, it doesn't do it justice.

MH: Without an analytical approach to sexuality and gender, it is really hard to answer a question about what a trans person is. The answer requires a lot of theory and history and discourse.

AJ: Before the Trans Teach-In, people would ask me how many transgender people there are on campus. You know, you could think maybe a handful, but now my answer is, it depends on how you define transgender. What's the second landmine?

MH: The second one is much easier – that's the whole fear of political correctness suppressing real dialogue and inquiry. And the third problem is moralism, where taking up LGBT issues means, let's learn to be nice to them, which is just a sentimental form of othering. It doesn't move the center at all. It assumes that we should just make that liberal gesture of inclusion because those 'other people' are having such a hard time. When someone says something that is transphobic or homophobic in class and the teacher says something like, 'Well that's not very nice,' that seems like the wrong response to me. It lends itself to setting up the demand to be tolerant. It positions the dominant student as thinking, 'I need to be generous and this is just something that I can do, because I am mainstream'

AJ: Because you still have the power. Power doesn't shift at all.

MH: Right, and you're not touched by them or the questions they raise.

AJ: Which is like the Tunnel of Oppression.¹

MH: Which is like the Tunnel of Oppression problem. Here is this person's problem, and that person's problem, and oh ...I feel so badly for them, because I am such a nice person, and I



We need more people who are talking about (LGBT issues) and it needs to be faculty.

>SU undergraduate student



wish their life were easier. As if all gay people and trans people were just miserable all the time. They become objects of pity.

AJ: And who wants to be pitied?

MH: And then you have a politics that is not about desire and pleasure – the joys of collective work and imagination and utopic dreams, as in Robin D. G. Kelley's *Freedom Dreams: The Black Radical Imagination*.

AL: So is this conversation becoming an argument for having more classes that are taught by faculty who have that same sort of vision, orientation, and capacity as opposed to doing a broad infusion?

MH: Ah, this takes up back to the question of whether we want a minor in LGBT Studies. I don't know finally where I am going to land on that question. I suspect that I am going to land in favor of it. For example, I have loved how the LGBT Studies Faculty Reading Seminar has been set up around debates and tensions and pleasant disciplinary disagreement. I would love to see an introductory, cross disciplinary LGBT Studies course organized around history, identity, and social movements, and the unsettling of gender and sexuality. Debate draws people in.

AL: I feel like this is a moment historically and institutionally to define for ourselves a LGBT minor. I also want to build relationships with other programs on campus like Women's Studies, but I don't want to be subsumed with anything else as a structure.

AJ: I like the idea too of the minor including projects and activist work. I think there is way too much separation between what happens in the classroom and what is happening locally. Students don't experience that separation. They are actively thinking about what's happening in Pride Union or the student center or hearing

about another black face incident or gay bashing and wondering how that all connects to the curriculum and what is happening or not happening in the classroom. A lot of students want to talk about these issues in classes and not in politically correct ways. This generation of students is bringing a whole other level of understanding of sexuality and gender. I think that they could be teaching us things and probably will, if we are open to that and are creating space for that to happen. All of this stuff is shifting in radical ways, and it's hard to believe we're not studying this and there isn't space in the curriculum to do that.

AL: I think that creating space is my major argument for having a minor. It creates a specific location. I am still for infusing, but infusing means giving up a lot of control. I think balancing infusion with a location where students are getting more theoretical grounding allows them to challenge and change those other environments that aren't working for them. There has to be a place too for LGBT scholars.

MH: I am very optimistic that these courses would be exciting for people, that there would be energy generated around them, that there would be pressure on enrollment, and that other people would want to be come a part of it. The minor could be a center of cutting edge work in a lot of disciplines.

AL: My experience of doing interdisciplinary teaching, however, has been that interdisciplinary classes look great on paper but they are harder to do in practice. I can imagine some people having a really hard time teaching in an interdisciplinary context.

MH: There is the fear of creating a structure that becomes untenable because it's geared for particular people. Institutionalizing the minor also might mean that one year you are arguing for the changes in the sex and gender system and the next you are arguing about

how you are going to get a Xerox machine.

AJ: It loses its transformational power.

AL: When you look at institutionalization, there is always that trade off.

MH: But the Senate Committee cannot keep doing this. It will not maintain the high level of work. It is having trouble maintaining even now. We want some faculty lines, and we need some resources dedicated to this kind of work if the university is serious about it.

AJ: And we want it seen not as this minoritizing approach to a particular group of people, but as issues that cut across every aspect of our lives – all of our lives, not just the LGBT students.

MH: So do we want to call the minor Sexuality Studies?

AL: As opposed to naming it LGBT? We would likely gain a bigger audience, and politically it would be more palatable.

MH: Do we lose the LGBT students then?

AL: We might. But if we name it Sexuality Studies and then have specific LGBT courses, I think that would be fine.

AJ: You may lose some people, and you may gain others. There are so many ways that calling the center the LGBT Resource Center limits who feels like this is a place where they can come. But at the same time, it has also created space that didn't exist before, and not just here but in so many different places on campuses. There has been a proliferation of new groups – the gay fraternity, the faculty LGBT reading group, the LGBT people of color group called Fusion. Those are three things that pretty much happened this semester.

There is also great value in disruption. The context in which we are operating is so heavily regulated by heteronormativity that calling this minor Sexuality Studies could so easily make LGBT invisible. While I agree that one of our principles is inclusiveness, I also believe that one of our goals is disruption and transformation of normal. I would rather go with Queer Studies than Sexuality Studies, which is both inclusive and disruptive.

Comments (Jonathan Massey):

After reading this transcript, my sense is that "having our own place" – institutional as well as curricular – is crucial. I think some kind of program, even if without a minor, is very important. In addition to the issues of control, serving student needs, and getting a revenue stream, I would raise another: expertise. The problem with infusion, as is noted above, is the difficulty of ensuring the quality of the teaching across a wide spectrum of faculty members. It seems to me that a core of faculty who already have the needed expertise, or who are willing to develop it as part of participating in a program, is crucial for establishing scholarly rigor in this field. That could be complemented by an "infusion" initiative wherein we ask key members in many disciplines to develop a secondary expertise in LGBT issues within their field. We would ask them to integrate this new expertise into their teaching. These faculty members would then become models and "diffusers" of LGBT knowledge, and the integration of that knowledge, within their respective departments and schools.

>>ENDNOTES

1 > The concept for the "Tunnel of Oppression" as a pedagogical tool to engage students in understanding diversity and oppression began at Western Illinois State University in 1994. The program, recognized by the National Association of College and University Residence Halls in 1995 as "Program of the Year," has spread across the country to numerous college campuses including Syracuse University. It has been seen as a powerful and popular educational experience for college students. Students who participate in the program walk through "the tunnel" in groups of 6-8 people and view scenes depicting racism, sexism, homophobia, ableism, and religious oppression acted out by other students or via clips of a videotape. The 15 minute walk through the tunnel is followed by a facilitated discussion led by a staff member (often from Student Affairs/Residence Life). Organizers have seen this program as a method of engaging and educating students of non-minority groups about the experiences of members of oppressed groups. The program, however, has been called into question on campuses across the country; critics cite concerns about the shocking, emotional, and extreme nature of the scenes, such as depictions of a hate crime or a KKK gathering. Other concerns include the oversimplification of the complex and systemic issues related to oppression, as well as the de-contextualization of the issues depicted in the scenes. Critics argue that the experience is ineffective allowing the viewer to remain distant and unable to make personal connections to the issues of oppression while depicting members of oppressed groups as powerless victims. The program has been conducted at Syracuse University since 2001.