Queer Composition in Academic Writing

Though queer theory has been widely influential in academia, composition research has fallen behind in adopting this way of thinking. Nevertheless, the practice of involving queer themes, ideas, and experiences into writing, or *queer composition,* already fits neatly into the goals of the classroom. For example, when considering Judith Butler's sense of gender as a process of social construction and *becoming,* Stacey Waite notes how teaching students to *become* writers and considering what each writer is *becoming* in a sentence is a subtle way to incorporate queer theory into writing instruction (113). Recent scholarship has investigated the ways educators can incorporate queer theory and queer writing into the classroom, and how they can make space for make spaces for students to queer composition. Few studies, however, have been written from the perspective of queer students themselves. Moreover, almost all scholarship on queer composition, excluding the work of Brook Corfman and Jonathan Alexander, uses terms like "queer" or "LGBT" liberally but little consideration of, as Corfman calls it, the "Silent T" of the latter acronym. In the present study, I aim to address both gaps by examining how queer students at my university have been "writing themselves into" their academic work, especially my trans and nonbinary peers. I argue these students should be given the space to queer composition, by including queer themes, ideas, and their experiences into their academic writing, because doing so benefits them as writers and thinkers and creates a tangible impact in the broader fight against transphobia and homophobia.

Queer composition also encourages non-queer writers to foreground queer people and their ideas and to challenge heteronormativity and cisnormativity, or the assumptions that everyone is, or ought to be, heterosexual and/or cisgender. This has been the focus of queer composition so far, such as the work of Jonathan Alexander and David Wallace. They argue in

their recent review of queer composition research that queer composition can lead to students and their teachers to "come to a new understanding of identity as well as a new understanding of what it means to take literate agency in a postmodern world" (W301). Student writer Jonathan Doucette similarly argues that "queerness… gives students a sense of agency and a way to write themselves into the American society" (6). Queer composition benefits both queer and non-queer student alike as they live culturally impacted lives and produce writing that affects the culture. However, that is not to say the benefit to queer people is not a worthy reason alone to incorporate it into pedagogies and encourage them to write about themselves and other queer people.

Queer Pedagogies

Much of the current queer composition research concerns queer pedagogies, or the inclusion of queer voices and ideas in the classroom by educators. In "'Straightboyz4Nsync': Queer Theory and the Composition of Heterosexuality," writing instructor Jonathan Alexander describes his students' responses to his creation of a fake internet blog about a self-identified straight boy who is a fan of the boy band NSYNC. That the website was fiction is unknown to the students, and they responded with mixed reviews. Some are seemingly threatened by the perceived breaking of sexual or gender norms, while others believe a boy liking a boy band is not, in fact, "a problem." Alexander finds that even negative responses are catalysts for discussions of norms and how it can be difficult for those who deviate from them to "come out of the closet" (383). This practice should help non-queer students not only imagine life from a queer perspective, but also see how their non-queer identities are still culturally constructed and not simply a default to be taken for granted. Ideally, Alexander's queer pedagogical move leads non-queer students to be more empathetic to their classmates. However, I question what benefit this has to queer students directly. These students might not stand much to gain from hearing

their classmates debate the validity of a fictitious person's straightness in the face of a NSYNC fanaticism. This experience could even be harmful if negative feedback isn't mediated well by the instructor. While a potentially beneficial queer pedagogical strategy nonetheless, Alexander's practice here is clearly one centered around his straight and cisgender students and I argue for a more queer-centric approach.

Another queer pedagogical strategy created by Alexander is incorporating trans theories into teaching. In "Transgender Rhetorics: (Re)Composing Narratives of the Gendered Body," he outlines an activity where students are made to write from the perspective of another gender, motivated by again by his correct belief that queer theory can benefit all students, particularly in "how our identities are shaped and communicated through a variety of intersecting social processes" (52). Alexander's stated goal is to "provoke" his students to understand gender as both a socially mediated construct and a "material and embodied reality" (47). But those who have navigated being trans or nonbinary in the culture often already see gender in this light. While using trans theories to educate cisgender students may reduce transphobia at its potential source, I argue that a more effective queer pedagogical strategy would also include promoting the voices of queer students where they are willing. Beyond that, truly queer-centric queer pedagogies should empower queer students to use language to combat trans- and homophobia.

One such perspective that foregrounds the queer student in this way is Corfman's, who in "On Not Knowing Students'; Genders, Nor Being Able to Predict When or How They Will Change" considers the inevitability of a classroom having a transgender student. While recently trans issues have become more visible to the public eye, trans, nonbinary, and gender-nonconforming students have always sat in writing classrooms and work needs to be done to accommodate them. Corfman argues that since the composition classroom is already so desirous

of self-discovery, a transition in a student's understanding of gender, or even their own gender, can be positive learning outcomes. They propose that supporting trans students is uncomplicated: simply use their pronouns, advocate for them, and help them navigate the university like one would any other student (278). While I think that queer students are likely already aware of the social mediation involved in gender and sexuality, Corfman notes that it may not be so obvious that this relationship is *linguistic* and that supporting queer people through resistance to trans- and homophobia is often a *rhetorical* move (271). I don't believe teaching non-queer students about the postmodern political self is nearly as beneficial to queer students as teaching queer students to use language to support themselves.

Queer Student Composition

In addition to pedagogies that bring outside queer voices in, queer students can incorporate their ideas and experiences into their academic writing. Student writer Jonathan Doucette discusses in "Composing Queers: The Subversive Potential of the Writing Center" his experience as a gay writing tutor. He tells of a student bringing in a very formally written political science paper on same-sex marriage, only for the tutor and student to learn together about her stake in the topic, her gay brother, and infuse this personal connection into the essay. Doucette writes that the paper "bridges the gap between her personal and political selves" (13). He argues for an interdisciplinary approach to queer composition that involves fusing the personal narrative with the academic essay, resulting in a more impacting final piece. This impact is not only for the reader but also the student dealing with the emotional labor and anxiety of writing in an academic voice, which Doucette notes is more pronounced in queer students when writing about queer themes. This benefit to queer students directly, not just the reader or their peers, is exactly the kind of educational practices I think educators should strive for.

In *Invisible Diversity: Gay and Lesbian Students Writing Our Way into the Academy,* Sarah Sloane describes the experiences of gay and lesbian students writing retold to her in interviews taking place in 1993. One of the students, Jeffery, is an undergraduate who navigates concealing his gay identity in the classroom as his professors give him topics such as the meaning of family and the AIDS crisis. For the family essay, he chooses to write about a pod of whales, calling this reworking of the assignment an expression of "creativity," and Sloane argues he was allowing himself to balance hiding his identity with resisting heteronormative ideals around the concept of family (33). Unfortunately, Jeffery recounts being made to tackle the topic of the AIDS crisis being so challenging and traumatic that it leads him to drop out of college entirely. In this situation, a closeted gay student finds space to queer composition while his identity stays secret, but when faced with the threat of revealing his identity, his ability to write at all is challenged. Sloane also writes about other interviews where gay and lesbian students report feeling alienated by their normative writing assignments even though they enjoy writing in their free time. Sloane advocates for the inclusion of discourses in the classroom that dissent from privileged positions, all the while being aware of the work this involves for the students themselves. She aptly writes, "'Personal experience' writing assignments in particular can require our gay and lesbian undergraduates to perform rhetorical tasks of double difficulty, tasks that require a balancing act between self-revelation and self-concealment" (38). A classroom that supports queer students from the beginning would have helped Jeffery and these students as writers who have unique and "creative" perspectives on prompts and personal stakes in issues involving their community.

Methods

Sloane's methods are a useful model for this study. Sloane interviewed individuals

searching for how they balanced "authenticity against safety, self-revelation against distortion or silence" (32) in their choices to queer composition or not. In my study, however, I was more concerned with how the choice to queer (or not queer) composition affected the student. That is, I wanted to know how incorporating queer theory, themes, or experiences into academic writing made students feel. In a survey, I first gave six queer students examples of queer composition from Sloane's study, and then asked if they ever made similar choices in their college career. By priming them with examples of queer composition, especially Jeffery's "creative" measures, I hoped to help them see the broad definition of "queering" in this context. The student participants were made up of friends and classmates of myself, and most were trans or nonbinary. This contrasts with Sloane's study, which did not mention the potential trans or nonbinary identities of any participants, which is not to say Sloane didn't likely interview someone with those identities but may have overlooked a gendered perspective. When speaking on the balance of concealment and revelation in the writing process, the fact is that many trans and gender-nonconforming individuals *can't* conceal their identity or must take greater efforts to "pass." In this situation, the writing classroom as a physical space where the writer can be seen complicates the desire to have these voices heard. This is why creating welcoming spaces for the queer writers is so important.

Initially concerned with only getting minimal responses, I made the survey only two short-answer questions to ensure respondents weren't fatigued, followed by a demographic question asking if they were trans or nonbinary. The first asked "Have you had any experience incorporating queer people, themes, or experiences into academic writing or projects?" and the second, "Have you ever wanted to incorporate these things but chose not to?" Answers to these questions varied between about 100-300 words, apart from an answer "N/A" to the second

question.

Results

Participants revealed a wide range of practices involving queering, or not queering, composition in their academic work. Several individuals discussed "knowing their audience" as a concern and even a reason not to incorporate queer people, themes, and experiences into their work. These queer students are concerned about how their readers, professors, and classmates may respond. I believe this shows that some classroom spaces on this campus are creating an inadequately accommodating space for non-normative voices. In fact, a student reported that they believed they were receiving lower grades on assignments that involved queer theory in classes that weren't queer theory or gender studies specific. This is an area where queer pedagogies like those mentioned by Alexander, Waite, and Corfman can create a more welcome environment.

Still others responded that they did incorporate queer people, ideas, and experiences into their work. One student writer related that they write about their own sexuality and gender identities in both creative nonfiction and academic paper assignments. They said,

> I practically always write with the end goal of better understanding myself, because in a world where non-cis, non-hetero identity is purposely suppressed and left out of education, I believe queer people have to take it into their hands to understand and embrace the differences those hateful others wish to oppress.

This powerfully portrays the experience of queer composition as not only an expression of oneself to others but also a way for them to further their understanding of themselves, which is already a major focus of writing courses. More poignantly, they bring up writing as resistance to queer identities being suppressed and excluded from the classroom, a reality of the present day.

This focus on the queer person strengthening themselves through queer composition is in the spirit of Corfman, Waite, and me, who demand our attention to how queer composition works for queer students, rather than spending time defending that it helps all students alike.

Queer composition as a form of resistance to anti-queer rhetoric continued to be a theme in further responses. The students I surveyed are concerned about recent anti-queer legislation that has affected the education system specifically. This is more reason now to encourage queer composition, while we still can, and to teach students to use their voices in ways that resist endangering and complicating the lives of marginalized groups. My respondents showed overwhelmingly that they are eager to take part in the broader movement against trans- and homophobia.

Some students showed their awareness of how queer identity is constructed linguistically, one saying, "Queerness is language-rich; the culture has long been defined by the manipulation of sounds and words and references." This quote displays hallmarks of queer theory, that it is defined by manipulation of language. It is marked by what someone does, something performative, while also being essential, what someone *is*. This awareness gets at what educators like Alexander were doing to teach his students queer themes, but the focus on language allows an opening to provide students, queer students, with the proper rhetorical and language devices necessary to combat trans- and homophobia, which as my survey shows, is something they want to take on.

Conclusion

Queer composition, or the inclusion of queer people, themes, and experiences into literacy spaces, benefits students of all kinds, but most directly those that are queer. The writing classroom, often lauded as a place for self-discovery and taking agency, is an apt place for the

kind of “writing oneself into” academic work that I found in this study. The practice can be used not only to foreground queer people and their ideas, but also to resist anti-queer sentiment, especially in relation to recent educational legislation. Ultimately, I found that queer students in this university are queering their compositions and are finding that it expands their understanding of themselves and makes them feel a part of the broader movement against trans- and homophobia. Supporting queer students by not only using their pronouns and mentoring but also giving them space to queer composition is a way educators can create the space for self-discovery and advocacy that they have long desired.

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