Gendered and sexed geographies of/in a graduate classroom

Catherine J. Nash
Brock University. Department of Geography
St. Catharines, Canada
cnash@brocku.ca

Data de recepció: juliol de 2008
Data d'acceptació definitiva: setembre de 2009

Abstract

Over 20 years ago, feminist and radical geographers urged members of the discipline to critically engage with questions of gender and sexuality in our research, in academic life and in the classroom. Classrooms, as geographical spaces are gendered, classed and sexualized in particular ways within power relations. Drawing on contemporary feminist pedagogies in geography, I critically reflect on an unexpected situation that arose in a North American Graduate course on social justice issues. In written course evaluations, student comments reflected a particularly gendered and sexualised set of expectations that stemmed, in part, from the nature of the classroom setting and the course content. In this paper, I examine how my experiences in this course illustrate that attempts to «gender», «sex» and «queer» the geography classroom have met with successes and setbacks that reflect particular historical and contextual circumstances.

Key words: feminism, pedagogy, queer theory, LGBTQ (Lesbian Gay Bisexual Trans and Queer), feminist geography, sexuality.

Resum. *Geografies generitzades i sexuades de/en una classe de grau*

Fa vint anys que les geògrafes feministes i radicals vam alentar membres de la disciplina a introduir críticament qüestions de gènere i sexualitat en la recerca, la vida acadèmica i la classe. Les classes, com a espais geogràfics, estan determinades pel gènere, la classe social i el sexe en formes particulars dins les relacions de poder. A través de la pedagogia feminista contemporània en geografia, faig una reflexió crítica d'una situació inesperada que va sorgir en un curs sobre temes de justícia social en una universitat nord-americana. En els treballs de curs, els comentaris de l'alumnat reflectien unes expectatives generitzades i sexualitzades particulars que sorgien, en part, del tipus de classe i del contingut del curs. En aquest article, hi examino com les meves experiències en aquest curs il·lustren que els intents de generitzar, sexualitzar i «alternativitzar» la classe de geografia han topat amb èxits i contratemps que reflecteixen unes circumstàncies històriques i de context particulars.

Paraules clau: feminisme, pedagogia, teoria *queer* (sexualitats alternatives), LGBTQ (Lesbiana, Gai, Bisexual, Transsexual, *Queer*), geografia feminista, sexualitat.

Resumen. *Geografías generizadas y sexuadas de/en una clase de grado*

Hace veinte años que las geógrafas feministas y radicales alentamos a miembros de la disciplina a introducir críticamente cuestiones de género y sexualidad en la investigación, la

vida académica y la clase. Las clases, como espacios geográficos, están determinadas por el género, la clase social y el sexo en formas particulares dentro de las relaciones de poder. A través de la pedagogía feminista contemporánea en geografía, hago una reflexión crítica de una situación inesperada que surgió en un curso sobre temas de justicia social en una universidad de América del Norte. En los trabajos de curso, los comentarios del alumnado reflejaban unas expectativas generizadas y sexualizadas particulares que surgían, en parte, del tipo de clase y del contenido del curso. En este artículo, examino como mis experiencias en este curso ilustran que los intentos de generizar, sexualizar y «alternativizar» la clase de geografía han tenido éxitos y fracasos que reflejan unas circunstancias históricas y de contexto particulares.

Palabras clave: feminismo, pedagogía, teoría *queer* (sexualidades alternativas), LGBTQ (Lesbiana, Gay, Bisexual, Transexual, *Queer*), geografía feminista, sexualidad.

Résumé. *Géographies genrées et sexuées dans une classe de licence*

Cela fait vingt ans que les géographes féministes et radicales avons encouragé des membres de la discipline à introduire des questions de genre et de sexualité dans la recherche, la vie académique et la classe. Les classes, en tant qu'espaces géographiques, sont déterminées par le genre, la classe sociale et le sexe en formes particulières dans le cadre des relations de pouvoir. À travers la pédagogie féministe contemporaine en géographie, je fais une réflexion critique à propos d'une situation inespérée qui est apparue dans un cours sur des sujets de justice sociale dans une université de l'Amérique du Nord. Dans les travaux de cours, les commentaires des élèves reflétaient quelques expectatives genrées et sexuées particulières qui apparaissent, en partie, selon le type de classe et du contenu du cours. Dans cet article j'examine comment mes expériences dans ce cours illustrent que les tentatives de genrer, sexualiser et «alternativiser» la classe de géographie ont trouvé des succès et des contretemps qui reflètent quelques circonstances historiques et de contexte singulières.

Mots clé: féminisme, pédagogie, théorie queer (sexualités alternatives), LGBTQ (Lesbiennes-Gays-Bi-Trans-Queer), géographie féministe, sexualité.

Summary

Introduction

Over 20 years ago, feminist and radical geographers urged members of the discipline to critically engage with questions of gender and sexuality in our research, in academic life and in the classroom (e.g. Weightman, 1980, 1981; Castells, 1983). As Peter Jackson remarked, gender and sexuality «are regarded as peripheral, private, and personal issues, not suitable for academic debate or public discussion» —thereby ensuring that hegemonic and hierarchical power relations (and their spatial correlates) remained unexamined (1989:

104). At the time, feminist geographers had already taken up part of that call; critiquing both the discipline itself and its research agendas for masculinist biases and sexist assumptions (Monk and Hanson, 1982; Monk, 1985; McDowell, 1992). More contemporary feminist discussions include critiques of the processes of production of geographical knowledge and the privileged positioning of masculinist ways of knowing in research and in teaching. Critical feminist pedagogy, in turn, examines among other things unequal power relations in the geography classroom; the gendered nature of academe and the production of gendered «truths» and «knowledges» in those context (McDowell, 1997; Nairn, 1999; Nast, 1999; Oberhauser, 2002).

By the late 1980s, scholars working on the geographies of sexualities called for the «sexing» or «queering» of geography to consider how sexuality, particularly heterosexuality, contributes to hierarchical social relations in the classroom and beyond. Drawing on a broad scholarship, feminist and queer scholars argue that normative assumptions about sexuality (often intertwined with gender and other markers of the self) can potentially marginalize nonconforming faculty and students in ways that unduly limit experiences in places such as academia (Bell, 1997; Binnie, 1997; Skelton, 1997; Valentine, 1997; England, 1999). This scholarship highlights how «the politics of the classroom all too often reinforce norms rather than bringing them into discussion…» (Rhoads, 1994: 107). Some argue that the spaces of the academy may be the most closeted spaces of all for both students and teachers alike given the assumption that education in general is about inculcating hegemonic, normative values and beliefs. Raising questions about gender and sexuality can be a perilous experience with unpleasant personal and professional ramifications (Bell and Valentine, 1995; Skelton, 1997; Nast, 1999; England, 1999; Browne, 2005).

In this article, I take up the question of how far we have come in our efforts to «gender», «sex» and «queer» the graduate classroom, using my experiences teaching a graduate class on social justice at a North American University. I argue that while we may have challenged the gendered and sexualized nature of the classroom, the way in which we do this and the degree of «success» or «failure» (difficult as it is to quantify) is historically and contextually specific. This paper builds on current geographical literature on pedagogy to argue that the contemporary North American graduate classroom, while arguably more amenable to the introduction of «gender» and «sexuality» issues, contains unexpected resistances and contestations (Valentine, 1997; Elder, 1999; England, 1999; Knopp, 1999; Webber, 2005, 2006). These resistances and contestations are particular not only to the spatial location of that classroom (locally, nationally and internationally) but are framed contextually and historically within the academic and intellectual environment. My main purpose in arguing for a more deliberately historical, geographical and contextual pedagogy is to suggest that the sexualized, gendered and queer nature of the classroom is clearly an ongoing and constantly shifting process of production. While it is impossible to anticipate all difficulties as they may arise, including the inher-

ently personal ones, I suggest ways in which we could be attentive to how new knowledges and positionalities alter the ways in which the classroom is gendered and sexualized.

Through an engagement with feminist pedagogical literature, I explore three main themes related to the historical and contextual specificity of our pedagogical experiences in gendering and sexing the classroom. First, I discuss how a class composed of all women, most of whom demonstrated some knowledge of feminist theories and practices, created a gendered space with a particularly constructed set of expectations and presumptions about how the course should be administered and how student work should be evaluated. Second, within this gendered classroom, students engaged with notions of «privilege» associated with the social hierarchies of gender, race and class, but seemed largely unaware of and/ or unreceptive to discussions about the role sexuality and, in particular, heterosexuality played in ordering social relations. Third, while may North American university administrators have embraced «diversity», «tolerance» and «multiculturalism» on their campuses as school policy, it is important to consider how strongly these institutions support frontline faculty and staff responsible for the implementation and administration of these policies. The concluding section considers the implications of these discussions for further engagement with gender and sexuality in the geography classroom.

The graduate seminar under consideration here is the required «theory» course in a graduate program housed in the faculty Social Sciences and is relatively new. It is a 2-year program with both a thesis and a major paper option and the total enrolment to date stands at 67 with 8 men and 59 women. The program has both required and elective courses and all students must take the required theory course, which introduces students to a broad range of theoretical and conceptual perspectives on social justice and equity issues.

Reflections on Pedagogy

> A class is a course embodied; it has a certain temporal, locational, dynamic a personalized make-up. It has a specificity that cannot be duplicated no matter how many times the course is offered or taken, no matter how the story is told; it is a course caught in the act. (Crane, 1995: xiii)

One of the intriguing aspects of teaching is the varied and unexpected constitution of a classroom, particularly in seminar style courses. As the quote above acknowledges, while one may teach the same course over several years, the class composition, combination of personalities and myriad other considerations ensure that each iteration has its own unique temperament and atmosphere. Assessing the «success» of a course is a tricky business and both the university administration and faculty rely on a variety of tools including class discussions, informal feedback and various forms of anonymous input including formal class evaluations. As many have noted, course evaluations are a

highly problematic way of obtaining feedback on student impressions and suggestions for improvement or change (Briskin, 1994; Khayatt, 1992; Skelton, 1997; Nast, 1999; Solem and Foote, 2008). While the combination of persons and circumstances considered here may never be recreated in another class, it is still useful to examine the specific ways that certain expectations, knowledges and assumptions played out in order to contribute to the on-going discussion about the gendering and sexing classrooms. Such an examination may also suggest strategies and approaches that might alleviate or diminish some of the difficulties discussed here.

When I taught the required theory course as a graduate seminar, I still considered myself a new faculty member being some four years from completion of my PhD. Academic life is a second career for me, taken up after spending 10 years in private law practice before completing a master's and a PhD in geography. My research interests are in feminist, LGBTQ, queer and transgender/transexual urban geographies which is clear from my publication record available on the graduate program website. In the introductory session for the graduate seminar, I discussed my primary scholarly interests and my life experiences as a lesbian in both private legal practice and academe. Students were also asked to introduce themselves and indicate their research interests. Their degree of self-disclosure was a personal one and although all students provided some detail about their age, class and racial or ethnic affiliations, they either identified as heterosexual or were silent on that point.

Feminist geographers employ a critical pedagogy in challenging normative gendered and sexualised assumptions in the discipline. Ann Oberhauser (2002) argues that feminist approaches to critical pedagogy in geography fall into three main areas. First, feminist geographers fruitfully highlight the embedded sexist and masculinist biases framing geographical research (Monk and Hanson, 1982; McDowell, 1992; Rose, 1993). Feminist critiques help deconstruct hetero-normative assumptions about gender, sexuality and embodiment and the role of the spatial in the constitution and maintenance of hegemonic modes of knowledge production (Valentine, 1997; Skelton, 1997; Longhurst, 2001; Browne, 2004; Nash and Bain, 2007). Second, feminist geographers focus on specific teaching methods as important aspects of knowledge production, including syllabus design, classroom exercises and fieldwork (Nast, 1999; Nairn, 1999; Oberhauser, 2002). Part of this work highlights the uneven power relations often in play in the classroom that structure and organize how knowledges are both produced and consumed. Finally, feminist geographers have developed a critical pedagogy that engages with the «contested spaces of the classroom and the specifically power-laden dynamics among students and the instructor» that can «lead to conflict and cases of homophobia, sexism and racism that are directed towards other students and faculty» (Oberhauser, 2002: 21). Presuming an unproblematic power structure of domination-subordination between instructors and students may render invisible how shifting interactions constantly reposition individuals within an ever-changing (and unequal) network of social relations (Broughton and Potts, 2001; Bondi, 2004).

As Glen Elder (1999) notes, the spaces of the classroom are locations where multiple and contested identities are constructed in ever shifting patterns thereby complicating straightforward presumptions about social organization and social hierarchies.

Although these three foci have been central for feminist geographers, it is certainly not exhaustive as a critical pedagogy requires continual reflection and application in practice in ways that seek to respond to changing circumstances (McDowell, 1992; Oberhauser, 2002). As I argue here, several decades of feminist pedagogical interventions, while productive in many ways, have also generated new and sometimes unanticipated complications.

Gendered expectations

> A sensitivity to the place-specificity of processes or oppression and resistance, and to the play of differences within those places, permits sophisticated explanations of the politics of creating and recreating «otherness», of how «micro» processes of power and oppression fit within the big picture of societies by enduring classist, racist, sexist, heterosexist, ableist and ageist power relations or structures. (Chouinard and Grant, 1995: 160)

One of the main objectives of the required graduate seminar under consideration here is to introduce students to a range of historical and contemporary scholarly perspectives on social justice and equity issues. As the above quote suggests, critical geographers are uniquely positioned to bring a spatially-informed perspective on social justice issues, that is, how inequities and injustices are materially and symbolically embedded in everyday landscapes including the spaces of the classroom. The quote also points out that attention to the «micro processes of power and oppression» operating within classroom social relations can demonstrate how normative gendered and sexualised expectations are both reinforced and/or challenged.

I argue here that in the required graduate seminar, a particular set of gendered expectations arose in two main ways both during the course and in the final anonymous, student evaluations. First, some students, drawing on feminist pedagogical discourses from their undergraduate experiences, made assumptions about course content, student input and course management that came into conflict with how the course was structured. While a substantial body of scholarship demonstrates there can be serious resistance to (and dismissal of) feminist knowledges by students (and colleagues), in this course, various appropriations of feminist scholarship surfaced to buttress student challenges to course content and administration (Webber, 2005; 2006). Second, some students made broad gendered assumptions about both course content and classroom dynamics based on the fact that it was an all female class with a female instructor. This included assumptions about student influence/input in course readings and instructor approaches to course difficulties (Overall, 1998; Nast, 1999).

The graduate seminar was composed of 12 female students, who identified mainly as white, heterosexual and middle class. A majority of these students had a social sciences background (sociology and women's studies) and had some familiarity with feminist pedagogical traditions. The first 3 weeks of the course were designed to introduce students to the «classic» writers in social justice (e.g. Hobbes, Locke and Rawls) whose thinking continues to underpin dominant discourses on social justice in the North American context. The remainder of the course (9 weeks) introduced readings that were both critical and transformative of the traditional liberal approaches (e.g. Michael Foucault, Nancy Fraser and Iris Young) and explored more contemporary concerns including animal rights, environmental justice and global justice movements.

Expectations about curriculum design, course administration and classroom dynamics were clearly predicated on understandings of me as a «feminist» and «queer» scholar and the gendered composition of the classroom. From the outset, several students initially raised concerns about having to read what they saw as more «classical» work in the social justice field. Several students spent a substantial amount of seminar time openly contesting the merits of readings they labelled, in a derogatory fashion, as scholarship by «old white guys» —a labelling that served as a form of short-hand for a number of perceived failings. Those who initially verbalized their discontent positioned their arguments within classic feminist arguments that certain work privileges masculinist ways of knowing while marginalizing others (McDowell, 1992; Rose, 1993). Students also raised well-practiced feminist critiques of curricula that focus largely on readings from a hegemonic and masculinist perspective that often marginalise alternative ways of knowing and being (Oberhauser, 2002). One student was so strongly convinced of the «wrongness» of engaging with this work, she actually refused to read the material even though it constituted only an introductory and relatively minor part of the course content.

Attempts were made to mediate this conflict in several discussions in the first few weeks around why it might be important to understand this material in its broader intellectual context. Despite students' appearing to understand the course structure and the need to understand this work, the students who contributed to the course evaluations (six of twelve students responded) reiterated their strong exception to readings perceived as «white, male» scholarship. By drawing on feminist critiques of a discipline's «classical canon», students raised important arguments about the drawbacks of some of the classical writing in the social justice field. Nevertheless, valid feminist critique was somewhat misappropriated by some students in ways that unfairly denigrated such work (and a course that makes it required reading) and unduly stifled students' intellectual horizons. Ironically, although perhaps not surprisingly, students did not have the same concerns («old white guy») around readings by Marx or ideologically-based Marxist authors or the work of Michael Foucault. Despite these preliminary objections, these «classical» readings remained in the course

and students were required to grapple with them both in seminar and in their written assignments.

Exercising a form of Instructor 'prerogative' in keeping these readings as part of the course highlights broader concerns about classroom dynamics and the seemingly often unavoidable, hierarchal relationship between students and instructors (McDowell, 1992; Nairn, 1999). Feminist scholarship notes one particularly well-known problem experienced by female professors — assumptions that reflect gendered expectations about how women instructors should conduct their classes. Feminist philosophy scholar Christine Overall argues that feminist instructors face what she calls «role muddling» —«a set of discontinuities, contradictions and ambiguities generated by conflicting expectations» about the instructor's role in the classroom (1998: 31). This is reflected in student expectations that female professors (overtly feminist or otherwise) are more flexible and open, will create a more «nurturing» classroom and be more «sensitive» and «understanding» about student difficulties (McDowell, 1992; Nast, 1999; Webber, 2006).

The gendered nature of this graduate seminar seemed to create a particular set of student expectations grounded in rather stereotypic, gendered assumptions about a «democratic» classroom and the «sharing» of authority in the class. Students complained in the course evaluations (and not during the course itself) that an insistence that certain reading remain in the course curriculum over their objections was unduly «authoritative» and «uncollaborative» (*sic*). These comments reflect at least in part, gendered expectations about the organization of classroom administration. Yet while scholars such as Pamela Moss et al. argue that «the destabilizing of the professor's authoritative voice» is a key component of feminist praxis (Moss et al., in Webber, 2006: 459), feminist scholars have also struggled with the challenges facing those who attempt to recalibrate classroom power relations. Arguably, «sharing power» with students often assumes students are more «equal» than they are and that they already possess the background, maturity, motivation and discipline that is part of what they should be acquiring as part of their graduate education (Briskin, 1994; Webber, 2006). As Michelle Webber argues, «while the demeanour of the faculty member may be less authoritative, in the end by virtue of their presumed expertise and academic freedom, they ultimately need to have the final say in order to ensure intellectual rigour and academic integrity» (2006: 459). This can clearly come into conflict with student expectations that female professors will be less «authoritative» in general and students' notions that an instructor who is perceived as «feminist» will more readily acquiesce to student requests about course requirements.

In a «female» gendered classroom, scholarship also notes that students often seemed to expect a more relaxed and flexible attitude from female professors towards such things as late assignments, inadequate preparation and uninspired written and oral argumentation (Overall, 1998; Nast, 1999). Pressing students to articulate clearer responses in oral and written work and to develop reasoned arguments was represented in the course evaluations as «aggressive»

or «legalistic» and any reasoned critique of a poorly argued statement seen as «insensitive». While admittedly difficult to validate, anecdotal evidence suggest that male colleagues are not subject to the same charge of «insensitivity» or «aggressiveness» when they press vigorously for intellectual rigour (Elder, 1999; Nast, 1999). For example, Webber (2005) argues, in her work on feminist pedagogy in sociology, that female faculty in her study perceived that «they are judged on a personal level by virtue of being women more so than their men colleagues» and that gendered characteristics such as «nice», «sweet» and friendly were expected characteristics of the female academic (p. 188). These sorts of gendered expectations can make it difficult to press students for greater student participation in course composition, intellectual rigour at the graduate level and «enforcement» of late policies and assignment deadlines. For students exposed to feminist pedagogy and/or having gendered expectations about female instructors, any form of perceived «traditional» classroom setting may be regarded as «masculinist» and therefore unnecessarily provoking «fear» and «anxiety» —an emotion that an appropriately «feminist» or at least «female» classroom is supposed to dispel. Striking a balance between what might be regarded as «traditional» classrooms requirements for intellectual rigour and notions of student collaboration, input and engagement raises different issues for male and female faculty.

Queering geography: Heterosexist and homophobia

> I was often made to feel uncomfortable and shameful for being heterosexual… I simply felt «bad» for being «straight» —as though I could not possibly understand the issues and concerns faced by these groups [graduate student comment on evaluations].

One of the most difficult issues for lesbian, gay, bi-sexual, transgender/transsexual and queer (LGBTQ) instructors is whether to be «out» in the classroom, that is, to be openly visible as a «queer», «lesbian» or «gay» instructor, and is a complicated decision grounded in both personal and professional considerations. While many professors occupy a privileged social position as an academic, recognizing that individuals are differently positioned socially, means thinking through how being a queer academic complicates one's already unstable positioning as a white, middle classed and female (Skelton, 1997; Elder, 1999).

While many might agree with bell hooks' call for a more «creative and socially transformative pedagogical approaches in university classrooms», many also recognise the personal and professional risks that go with such an endeavour (in Nast, 1999: 102-103). Feminist pedagogy argues for the incorporation of the «personal» in teaching in order to make clear how who we are at the most intimate level operates in the research we do, the knowledges we produce and in how we teach. As Browne argues, making some aspects of the personal visible helps to undermine the «associations of knowledge with neutral-

ity and objectivity» as well as «challenging inequitable power relations in feminist classrooms» (Browne, 2005: 340). Conversely, helping students to incorporate their personal or experiential understandings in the learning process is also important in working against the artificial boundaries established between what we understand as the public/private and the personal/professional. When successful, such an approach can make learning more relevant and useful through students' engagement with and recognition of their own values, assumptions and social locations. Nevertheless, feminist pedagogy has struggled to find ways to incorporate the personal into the classroom while walking a fine line between useful disclosure and tangential discussions that depart from the intellectual focus at hand (Moss and McMahon, 2000; Browne, 2005).

Making a conscious decision to be visible as a queer academic means making visible very personal aspects of one's life. As Skelton argues, «one does not have to come out as a woman, as white, or able-bodied, and so these personal aspects of our position as lecturer/teacher are not at issue in the same way [as coming out as gay or lesbian]» (1997: 427)[1]. In deciding to be open in my graduate seminar, I hoped to bring questions about sexuality into the classroom and to make my social and political commitments more transparent. Generally speaking, students assume their professors are heterosexual unless they teach LGBTQ issues or instructors overtly make their sexuality clear (Skelton, 1997). For heterosexual teachers, teaching sexuality means they may be assumed to be «homosexual» in ways that are quite discomforting. However, making clear that one is a heterosexual can also appear defensive and unsupportive of gay and lesbian colleagues and students (Skelton, 1997; Valentine, 1997; England, 1999; Knopp, 1999; Browne, 2005).

Being out in the class also requires more particular assessments as well. My decision to be visible as a lesbian in this graduate class was also based on a consideration of the class structure (seminar), course content (social justice issues), and academic level (graduate). It also included an assessment of the professional risks associated with the disclosure including institutional support; possible student opprobrium and concerns over career progress (obtaining tenure, faculty relations; teaching evaluations etc.). Given it was a graduate class with a focus on social justice issues, I made assumptions about the positive sensibilities of the students and presumed the program was supportive of LGBTQ issues. Both my home department (geography) and my institution, have a strong commitment to «safe classrooms» as well as to the goals of «diversity» and «tolerance» (although these are becoming increasingly contested terms). I took an optimistic view of the possibilities of being «out» in the classroom particularly as one can enter into conversations with students without evasion and dissembling about one's personal life (Valentine, 1997). Being «out» has the added

1. This statement is now considerably more problematic in light of contemporary trans scholarship which calls into question whether we can or desire to be straightforwardly 'read' as through the binary categories of 'men' and 'women' or male and female (Stryker and Whittle, 2006).

benefit of allowing me to draw on my own life experiences to illustrate the instances of marginalization and homophobia and to place my research interests in their proper context.

In particular, being visible provided the opportunity to illustrate how heterosexuality is taken-for-granted and naturalised in and through spaces, including the spaces of the classroom, in ways that might need to be challenged and contested (Skelton, 1997; Valentine, 1997; Knopp, 1999). Assumptions that instructors and students are heterosexual presumes a collective heterosexual experience that is embedded in classrooms spaces and that silences LGBTQ students. In this graduate seminar (and in other small classes I have taught), there were a number of pre-class discussions about husbands, boyfriends and male partners and about the difficulties of being a graduate student with concurrent and gendered responsibilities for heterosexual households and children. None of this is inappropriate, of course, but it does raise interesting possibilities for teaching about the impact of these discussions in this context. On several occasions, students related tales of male partner neglect of household chores and childcare in ways that assumed recognition or familiarity with the circumstances by everyone present. On several occasions, I took the opportunity to suggest that such events were not within my experience as a way to highlight the presumed heterosexuality in these conversations that marginalized other ways of understanding graduate student life. Such interventions seemed particularly pertinent for students interested in social justice issues in encouraging them to consider how their own presumptions might make others invisible or feel their lives are less valid.

Comments on the course evaluation, similar to the one quoted above, indicate that these interventions were not received favourably by everyone nor did they achieve their desired effect. Perhaps my approach was too heavy-handed or undiplomatic in ways that made at least one student feel reprimanded (not my intention) for engaging in what might be seen as exclusionary conversations. Students may also take the interjection of a lesbian perspective as «male-bashing» and as a personal (and public) rejection of the heterosexual life choices made by particular students (Khayatt, 1992; Valentine, 1997). Combined with examples drawn from my personal experiences and my research, students may have felt that I injected too much of a focus on «sexuality» or that it drew too much of the personal (theirs and mine) into public discussion. As scholars have documented, when faculty are «out» or raise feminist issues, no matter how briefly, students often complain that the instructor talked about it «all the time» (Khayatt, 1992; Overall, 1998; Moss et al., 1999). This experience highlights the difficulties of «sexing» the classroom through being visible or «out» and in pointing out heterosexist assumptions in classroom discussions. While one's presence may be enough to challenge the heternormative constitution of classroom spaces, being more proactive or interventionist may be seen as too aggressive, no matter how gently the issue is raised.

Being an «out» academic also has other more minor drawbacks. Students may assume that LGBTQ faculty are «biased», less «objective» and more

«radical» and these charges can also surface in teaching evaluations. As well, university administrators can take an unduly narrow perspective on faculty interests in ways that limit that faculty members' opportunity for supervision or teaching certain courses, by pigeon-holing these faculty as only interested or qualified to supervise and/or teach LGBTQ-based projects or courses.

Finding institutional support

> One can be the best and most well-intentioned teacher; but if you deal directly with white supremacy, racism or homophobia —unless one is reassuringly heterosexual, exceptionally funny, skilled and/or experienced, aesthetically neutral or otherwise socially normative or unassuming— emotions will run high and evaluations will probable suffer. (Nast, 1999: 108)

In the last decade or so, many North American governments (local, state and/or provincial) have instituted educational initiatives advocating diversity, tolerance and multiculturalism in university classrooms. While worthy objectives in a general sense, the burden for the implementation and administration of such initiatives falls to frontline teaching staff (professors, tenured and untenured; sessional/contract instructors and teaching assistants) to ensure that such objectives are met in classroom curriculum and in everyday institutional practices.

The mission statement for the university under discussion here, states that the university is «a diverse and inclusive community» —something regarded as central to the university's wider contribution to the society beyond the academy. The university institutionalized a «positive space» campaign several years ago designed to foster «an environment where individuals feel welcome and comfortable in expressing their sexual and gender identities». A central goal of the campaign is to «help create a campus that is free of discrimination on the basis of sexual and gender identities» (Positive Space Campaign, 2007). Workshops are held for faculty and staff on issues facing LGBTQ students on campus and in the classroom. Those who complete the workshops are given a small «logo» or «sticker» for their office or work space to signal that space can be presumed to be occupied by someone with some understanding and awareness of LGBTQ issues. As with a number of universities in North America, the university also has a Human Rights and Equity Services Office mandated «to address all forms of harassment and discrimination» including sexual orientation. Taken together, this indicates a fair degree of institutional support for equity issues and suggests a relatively safe working environment for both LGBTQ faculty and students.

On a day-to-day basis, however, «safe space» is mainly understood in terms of student safety thereby placing faculty in the sometimes difficult role of policing university spaces such as hallways and classrooms. Being «out» in the classroom is one way to ensure that institutional spaces are not unproblematically heterosexual but it can make students who are unfamiliar with this «queering»

or «sexing» of space uncomfortable and resentful. Attempting to regulate what might be perceived as «homophobic» or «sexist» attitudes in particular spaces can also be perceived as a self-serving limitation on free speech and freedom of expression. Conversely, if faculty choose to remain silent about their sexual orientation, then they are presumed to be heterosexual. For LGBTQ students who either suspect or are aware of the faculty member's non-normative orientation, such silence can intimate that institutional spaces are not perhaps all that «safe» after all. Other students may regard suspected LGBTQ faculty as promoting a stealth «homosexual agenda» through that non-disclosure. So while there is ostensible institutional support for the objectives of diversity and tolerance, the day-to-day administration and implementation of these objectives can be quite complicated for faculty. This is particularly the case when assessments of faculty performance are based, in part, on anonymous, written student evaluations that are provided after the completion of a course thereby allowing no opportunity to address student concerns.

A detailed review of the difficulties of assessing faculty performance through student evaluations is beyond the scope of this paper but for many, evaluations can be both personally upsetting and professionally problematic depending on institutional approaches to tenure, promotion and teaching evaluation (e.g. Nast, 1999; Webber, 2006). As Nast argues, course evaluations and other «evaluative instruments are ostensibly designed to judge the performance and knowledge of faculty» in ways that assume that students have the background to make such a judgement (p. 1999: 104). Students may use their evaluations not only to express anger in the form of personal attacks over low grades, distress over workload, or failure to receive an expected accommodation (late work or missing a class) but to express disapproval of challenges to their personally-held social norms and assumptions. Similarly, when faculty are implicitly expected to promote institutional goals in their classrooms (diversity and tolerance for example) and decide to take up the challenge of gendering and «sexing» the class, they may also have to weather negative evaluations (England, 1999; Nast, 1999). Depending on how student evaluations are used and the weight given these evaluations by university administration, faculty can experience derailed or temporarily sidelined career aspirations. Course evaluations at the institution under discussion here are considered the property of the faculty member (according to the collective agreement) although the evaluations are collected by Program Director to ensure confidentiality and to remove the possibility of the manipulation of the results.

Student evaluations related to the graduate seminar in social justice were forwarded to me by the Director of the program without comment although with an offer to discuss the content if I so desired. Working through personal invective and what I constructed as heterosexist and homophobic content was left up to me. As scholars suggest, homophobic and heterosexist environments can have a negative effect on faculty and students. Rocco and Gallagher (2006) assert there is a need to «queer» career development to incorporate a recognition of the impact of heterosexist and homophobic experiences, including

inappropriate or hostile commentary on course evaluations. At a personal level, faculty have to work through inappropriate comments, separate out the legitimate from the illegitimate, and consider how one's own conduct might have contributed to the feelings expressed — a difficult task. Professionally, there is concern about how the evaluations are perceived by senior faculty and whether there is a need to respond personally or in writing and to which comments, without appearing either defensive or retaliatory. In the absence of a supportive work environment and proactively-engaged administration (at all levels), an institution can experience decreased faculty participation in the social and academic life of the academy. Faculty may decide to keep their sexuality to themselves thereby removing opportunities to challenge heteronormativy in the classroom in ways that help meet the university's goals of fostering diversity and tolerance and «causing their [faculty] knowledge and abilities to become wasted resources» (Rocco and Gallagher, 2006: 29; Valentine, 1997). As Nast (1999) argues, faculty may assume a «defensive posture» based on negative course evaluations which include manipulating the timing of evaluations; assigning less controversial readings and altering teaching style.

What can or should faculty expect from an institution in terms of support given the possible negative consequences for faculty who are subject to homophobic or heterosexist comments? Informal support is often found through collegial networks of like-minded faculty that provide safe venues to work through difficult teaching experiences although faculty may be reluctant to burden colleagues with personal concerns. Requesting a more formal intervention by a departmental chair or program director can make the issue «their problem» which they may not appreciate or want to deal with given their own workloads. Faculty raising these issues can be seen as «trouble makers», «difficult» or requiring «handholding» which reflects negatively on that faculty member and can have serious career impacts in terms of tenure, promotion, obtaining reference letters finding other opportunities. New faculty generally want to be taken as competent and professional and understand the value of not causing problems for senior administrators.

For those institutions committed to diversity, tolerance and «safe classrooms», it is reasonable to argue there should be some form of practical and accessible support for those who take up those difficult pedagogical positions that support the goals of the institution. There can be pro-active and informal interventions by Department Chairs or Program Directors when course evaluations expose problematic commentary beyond what might be considered reasonable or helpful for course evaluations. Discussing faculty perceptions about the underlying course difficulties or expressing concern about faculty reaction to negative evaluations reflects good management practices and goes some way to ensuring that faculty do not assume Nast's «defensive postures» with their negative consequences for both faculty and the institution. In small programs such as this one, where faculty will continue to deal with that same small student cohort, perhaps for several years, stronger interventions with students about the nature and impact of homophobic or hetero-

sexist comments might be worthwhile. Nevertheless, this could also prove to be problematic for faculty if students resentfully trace such interventions back to the particular faculty member in question. Other approaches might include discussions around discrimination in various forms in student orientations and a stronger statement from the program itself about the program's and the university's commitment to non-discrimination, tolerance and diversity ideals.

Conclusions

This paper began by raising the question of how far we come in «gendering», «sexing» and «queering» the classroom in ways that challenge heternormative power relations in these spaces. Feminist and queer pedagogical challenges have intruded, albeit unevenly, across university disciplines, carried by students exposed to such ideas and faculty with feminist-based and queer commitments. LGBTQ faculty, supported to varying degrees by university policies and broader stated-based protections, increasingly bring their non-normative perspectives into the classroom through personal reflection and scholarship. Not surprisingly, new challenges have arguably inadvertently emerged with these successes.

In North America, gendered expectations about classroom structure remain but arguably assume a different shape through their incorporation of both traditional and feminist perspectives about classroom organization. Female professors may still be expected to be «nice», more sympathetic and «nurturing» based on stereotypic gendered expectations but these expectations may now be reinforced by selective appeal to feminist pedagogical critiques about unequal power relations in the classroom and the marginalizing role «classic» male scholarship has played in course structure. The pedagogical difficulties we experience can be transformed by shifting historical and contextual circumstances in ways that are both unexpected and difficult to counter.

«Sexing» or «queering» the classroom can involve faculty openness about personal issues that challenge student presumptions about collective experiences, uneven power relations and the role sexuality plays in ordering social relations. My experience in the graduate seminar discussed here indicates that despite school policy and contemporary acceptance of LGBTQ people, the challenges posed by our presence can still be frighteningly disconcerting for some students. When that discomfort is translated into negative course evaluations, there can be a very negative impact on a faculty member's career, on how they interact in the classroom and how they interact with students, colleagues and the institution at large. Again, the how we sex or queer the classroom must take into account shifting classroom dynamics and their embeddedness in broader social and historical change. This makes for unpredictable and unstable circumstances.

In hindsight, and in considering these difficulties, it is clear that faculty should be cautious (and less naive, perhaps) about making assumptions concerning the composition of a classroom based on the characteristics of the stu-

dents, course structure and course level. If the goal is to sex and gender the classroom in an overt way, some preparatory work near the beginning of the course (group discussion, exercises, presentations by the human rights office etc.) might help to pave a smoother path for the introduction of these issues. Providing student with some choice in course readings (including a mix of «classics» and alternative readings) might also encourage students to be more receptive to different readings. Finally, clearly indicating in the course materials that the course objectives included troubling the generally understood constitution of a graduate class (class, race as well as age, gender and sexuality) might aid in making students collaborators in reaching this objective.

While many North American universities are committed to fostering diversity, tolerance and multiculturalism on campus, responsibility for implementation and policing largely falls to frontline staff. Faculty with a commitment to these goals may strive for their implementation at some personal cost and risk. With career aspirations on the line, it becomes much more problematic to challenge heterosexist and homophobic conduct and behaviour except in the most egregious of circumstances. And while the university may have a number of mechanisms for addressing formal complaints, it is at the informal level that a large number of these issues should be addressed. Senior faculty, although busy with their own work, may be the best able to aid newer faculty with unpleasant aspects of the job including negative (personally and professionally) course evaluations and student assessments. Touching base with new faculty, being attentive to comments about difficult circumstances and generally being available as a sympathetic resource can make the difference between the creation of supportive work environment and an unsupportive one. Arguably, Program chairs, Department Heads and Unit Directors have a greater responsibility, as managers, to approach faculty, directly (and supportively), when issues surface around teaching and classroom dynamics. Finally, and despite our progress in breaking down many of the limiting aspects traditional academic life, we need to be vigilant for the evolving and often problematic permutations these successes might generate.

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank Dr. Mireia Baylina and the anonymous reviewers for their helpful and perceptive comments and directions. Funding for some of this work was provided by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council. Finally, a special thanks to Dr. Michelle Webber for her thoughtful review of earlier drafts of this paper.

Bibliography

BELL, D. (1997). «Sex lives and audiotape: geography, sexuality and undergraduate dissertations». *Journal of Geography in Higher Education*, 21 (3), 411-431.

BELL, D. and VALENTINE, G. (eds.) (1995). *Mapping Desire: Geographies of Sexuality*. London: Routledge.

BINNIE, J. (1997). «Coming out of geography: towards a queer epistemology?». *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space,* 15, 223-237.

BONDI, L. (2004). «Power dynamics in feminist classrooms: making the most of inequalities?». In: SHARP, J.; THEIN, D. and BROWNE, K. (eds.). *Gender and Geography: 20 Years On*. Glasgow: Women in Geography Study Group, 175-182.

BRISKIN, L. (1994). «Feminist pedagogy: teaching and learning liberation». In: ERWIN, L. and MACLENNAN, D. (eds.). *Sociology of education in Canada: critical perspectives on theory, research and practice*. Toronto: Copp Clark Longman, 443-470.

BROUGHTON, T. L. and POTTS, L. (2001). «Dissonant voices: the teachers "personal" in women's studies». *Gender and Education*, 13 (4), 373-385.

BROWNE, K. (2004). «Genderism and the bathroom problem: (re)materialising sexed sites, (re)creating sexed bodies». *Gender, Place and Culture*, 11, 331-346.

— (2005). «Placing the Personal in Pedagogy: Engaged pedagogy in "feminist" geographical teaching». *Journal of Geography in Higher Education*, 29 (3), 339-354.

CASTELLS, M. (1983). *The City and the Grass Roots: a cross cultural theory of urban social movements*. London: Edward Arnold.

CHOUINARD, V. and GRANT, A. (1995). «On being not even anywhere near "the project": ways of putting ourselves in the picture». *Antipode*, 27, 137-166.

CRANE, D. (1995). «A Personal postscript». In: GALLUP, Jane. *Pedagogy: The question of impersonation*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.

ELDER, G. (1999). «"Queerying" boundaries in the geography classroom». *Journal of Geography in Higher Education*, 23, 86-93.

ENGLAND, K. (1999). «Sexing geography, teaching sexualities». *Journal of Geography for Higher Education*, 23 (1), 94-101.

JACKSON, P. (1989). «Gender and sexuality». In: *Maps of Meaning: An Introduction to Cultural Geography*. Boston: Unwin Hyman.

KNOPP, L. (1999). «Out in academia: The queer politics of one geographer's sexualisation». *Journal of Geography in Higher Education*, 23, 116-123.

KHAYATT, M. (1992). «Lesbian Teachers: an invisible presence». New York: State University of New York Press.

LONGHURST, R. (2001). *Bodies: Exploring Fluid Boundaries*. London: Routledge.

MCDOWELL, L. (1992). «Engendering change: curriculum transformation in human geography». *Journal of Geography in Higher Education*, 16, 185-197.

— (1997). «Women/gender/feminisms: Doing feminist geography». *Journal of Geography in Higher Education*, 21 (3), 381-400.

MONK, J. (1985). «Feminist transformation: how can it be accomplished?». *Journal of Geography in Higher Education*, 9 (1), 101-105.

MONK, J. and HANSON, S. (1982). «On not excluding half of the human in human geography». *Professional Geographer*, 34, 1-23.

MOSS, P. and MCMAHON, M. (2000). «Between flake and a strident bitch: making "it" count in the academy». *Resources for Feminist Research*, 28, 15-34.

MOSS, P.; DEBRES, K.J.; CRAVEY, A.; HYNDMAN, J.U.; HIRSCHBOECK, K.K. and MASUCCI, M. (1999). «Toward mentoring as feminist praxis: strategies for ourselves and others». *Journal of Geography in Higher Education*, 23 (3), p. 413-427.

NAIRN, K. (1999). «Embodied fieldwork». *Journal of Geography*, 98 (6), 272-282.

NASH, C. J. and BAIN, A. (2007). «"Reclaiming raunch": spatializing queer identities at Toronto women's bathhouse events». *Social and Cultural Geography*, 8 (1), 16-42.

NAST, H. (1999). «"Sex", "race", and multiculturalism: critical consumption and the politics of course evaluation». *Journal of Geography in Higher Education*, 23, 102-115.

OBERHAUSER, A. (2002). «Examining Gender and Community Through Critical Pedagogy». *Journal of Geography in Higher Education*, 26 (1), 19-31.

OVERALL, C. (1998). *A Feminist I: Reflections in Academia*. Peterborough, ON: Broadview Press.

POSITIVE SPACE CAMPAIGN (2007). www.brocku.ca/human-rights/positive-space. http://www.brocku.ca/humanrights (Last accessed June 11, 2010).

RHOADS, R.A. (1994). *Coming Out in College: The Struggle for a Queer Identity*. Westport, CT: Bergin and Garvey.

ROCCO, T. and GALLAGHER, S. (2006). «Straight privilege and moral/izing: Issues in career development». *New directions for Adult and Continuing education*, 112, 29-39.

ROSE, G. (1993*). Feminism and Geography: the Limits of Geographical Knowledge*. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press.

RUST, P. (1994). «Designing a course on sexuality: issues problems and parameters». *Critical Sociology*, 20, 155-168.

SKELTON, T. (1997). «Issues of sexuality in the teaching space». *Journal of Geography in Higher Education*, 21 (3), 424-431.

SOLEM, M. and FOOTE, K. (2008). «Concerns, Attitudes, and Abilities of Early-Career Geography Faculty». *Journal of Geography in Higher Education*, 30 (2), 199-234.

STATHAM, A.; RICHARDSON, L. and COOK, J.A. (1991). *Gender and University Teaching*. Albany, NY: Suny Press.

STRYKER, S. and WHITTLE, S. (eds.) (2006). *The Transgender Studies Reader*. York and London: Routledge.

VALENTINE, G. (1997). «Ode to a geography teacher: sexuality and the classroom». *Journal of Geography in Higher Education*, 21, 417-424.

WEBBER, M. (2005). «"Don't be so feminist": Exploring student resistance to feminist approaches in a Canadian university». *Women's Studies International Forum*, 28, 181-194.

— (2006). «Transgressive pedagogies? Exploring the difficult realities of enacting feminist pedagogies in undergraduate classrooms in a Canadian university». *Studies in Higher Education*, 31 (40), 453-467.

WEIGHTMAN, B. (1980). «Gay bars as private places». *Landscape*, 24, 9-16.

— (1981). «Towards a geography of the gay community». *Journal of Cultural Geography*, 1, 106-112.