Using Information Literacy to Build LGBTQ Cultural Literacy

André P. Grace
University of Alberta, Canada

Abstract: This paper engages the idea of using information literacy to build LGBTQ cultural literacy, exploring how the latter relates to learning and personal development. In doing so, it troubles both education and literacies as hegemonic social constructions. It also explores the notion of critical Queer cultural literacy as an inclusive, ethical practice.

Introduction

Information literacy can be understood as having the technical and strategic capacities to retrieve, analyze, evaluate, exchange, and distribute information via media such as the Internet. LGBTQ (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender or transsexual, and Queer) cultural literacy can be understood as having knowledge and understanding of being, believing, desiring, becoming, belonging, and acting for persons across a spectrum of sex, sexual, and gender differences, and having insights regarding how the prevailing social hierarchy and the dominant culture-language-power nexus impact LGBTQ culture.

In this paper I take up the notion of using information literacy to build LGBTQ cultural literacy, exploring how the latter relates to learning and personal development. In doing so, I trouble both education and literacies as hegemonic social constructions. I also explore the notion of critical Queer cultural literacy as an inclusive, ethical practice.

The Culturally Illiterate Queer Me

Not only do heterosexuals and those questioning their sex-and-gender differences need to build knowledge and understanding of sexual orientation and gender identity, but LGBTQ persons also need to be so engaged. This is because we have usually grown up without seeing ourselves accepted, accommodated, or represented in any aspect of schooling or formal education for adults. Just as those who clearly see themselves as male/masculine or female/feminine and heterosexual need to address their ignorance and fear around LGBTQ identities and differences, those whose gender identity and/or sexual orientation lie outside what hegemony has deemed culturally accepted and acceptable also need to become Queer literate to counter heteronormative educational and other socialization processes that have shamed us and left us out.

Purves (in Fagan, 1996) maintains negotiating the personal and the cultural involves mediating a life or cultural curriculum:

In order to be an accepted and functioning individual within one’s cultural context, the cultural curriculum must fill three functions: (1) to develop cultural loyalty, to know the expectation of one’s primary culture, (2) to move beyond the primary context and learn how to interact with a wide range of people in terms of the use of oral and written language, tasks, and activities, and (3) to actualize oneself as an individual, to formulate goals and plans peculiar to oneself, to map out a course of action for one’s future. (p. 2)
For a heterosexual who is male/masculine or female/feminine, fulfilling these three functions, while onerous, can at least proceed visibly and naturally or normally, as these terms are accepted and appreciated in a heterosexualizing culture. As a closeted gay man until my mid-twenties, I never knew the luxury of such fulfillment. In terms of my education, developing cultural loyalty meant adapting to the patriarchal, homophobic, sexist, and heterosexist environment of the Catholic schools that undereducated me and undermined my Queer difference, relegating it to the domain of the depraved. In larger cultural terms, developing cultural loyalty meant being co-opted by a heterosexualizing culture and compelled to adopt heteronormative standards. This meant denying the Queer me, struggling with self-hatred, and assuming a straight-acting, straight-looking persona, a guise that probably fooled few who knew me. Interacting with others never meant getting to know Queer others or getting to experience Queer culture. Too fearful, too consumed by internalized homophobia, I never made that leap. I kept on hetero-assimilating and hiding the real me. I remained culturally illiterate of what it meant to be, belong, and act Queer, even though the desire to name myself and live Queer overwhelmed me in many moments.

Self-actualizing obviously never happened during this period. That happened later when the self-denial and self-hatred became too much. Physically, mentally, and emotionally worn out, I reached a point where I either had to come out or collapse. So I came out. However, formulating goals and plans peculiar to me initially meant experiencing the throes of teenage angst and socialization at twenty-five, all of which was exacerbated by the trauma of feeling like I was ten years behind in my life. Thus I still wasn’t happy. For a long time, I cried a lot and lived to make it to my weekly appointments with my psychologist. Yet even then I knew I wasn’t broken. It was a heterosexualizing culture that said I was broken, that wanted to break me. Thus the problem was the cultural curriculum. It wasn’t a Queer curriculum, so I struggled, feeling dislocated, disconnected, and disempowered. Since cultural literacy is largely attained through formal education and informal interactions and experiences in families, communities, and other sociocultural settings, I had been denied, at least in terms of attaining LGBTQ cultural literacy to help me deal with my Queer identity-difference and socialization. Indeed, from a Queer perspective, I was culturally illiterate. I knew very little about Queer history, culture, politics, language, etiquette, and survival strategies.

**Troubling Education, Troubling Literacies**

Sadly, despite an explosion of Queer in popular culture, it isn’t much better for Queer and questioning youth and adults navigating education today. Tolerated hatred of LGBTQ persons persists across educational sectors (Grace et al., 2004). Ignorance and fear of Queer continue to lead to forms of symbolic (leaving Queer out of curriculum and instruction) and physical (beating Queers up in schools) violence against those of us whose sex, sexual, and gender differences lack hegemonic sanction. In Canada and the United States, attempts to address sexual orientation and gender identity in regular curriculum and instruction in K-12 education usually result in battles on moral and political grounds that let us know ignorance and fear as well as stereotypes and myths are alive and well in purportedly public education (Grace & Benson, 2000; Grace & Wells, 2001). It’s no better in Canadian and US adult education, despite the rhetoric at the annual national conferences of AERC (US Adult Education Research Conference) and
CASAE (Canadian Association for the Study of Adult Education) that suggest our field of study and practice values community and the political ideals of modernity – democracy, freedom, and social justice (Grace, 2001; Grace & Hill, in press). In fact, historically, the field has largely ignored the LGBTQ educators, students, and practitioners in its midst (Hill, 1995; 1996; 2003). Even critical adult education, which emphasizes ethical practice, social justice, and meeting the needs of the disenfranchised, has, for the most part, been complicit in maintaining a heteronormative status quo through its usual omission of queer in its theorizing and practice. In this dim light, Herbert Marcus’s notion of repressive tolerance is actualized across our field of study and practice: While adult educators and learners may believe that sites of learning, research, and practice are open spaces where justice and freedom of speech and expression are pervasive, the fact is we are all working in a field that keeps a hegemonic status quo and accords in tact through its exclusions, omissions, and enforced silences (Brookfield, 2001). Thus queer and allied adult educators and learners working to queer adult education take considerable risks in the face of colleague and institutional reactions that overtly or subtly dismiss queer work or place sanctions on it (Hill, 2003).

Whether it takes place in a K-12, adult, or higher educational environment, when formal education leaves LGBTQ persons out, we have to find a Queer curriculum in other spaces like cyberspace. Using information literacy to build LGBTQ cultural literacy can be a technical and strategic way to build a Queer curriculum. “Information Literacy is the set of skills needed to find, retrieve, analyze, and use information” (ALA, n. d., p. 1). As the ALA Presidential Committee on Information Literacy (1989) relates, it is about positioning people as arbitrators of information:

> Ultimately, information literate people are those who have learned how to learn. They … know how knowledge is organized, how to find information, and how to use information in such a way that others can learn from them. (ALA, n. d., p. 1)

This suggests that information-literate people are thinkers (with critical capacity) and doers (with technical capacity). However, while this sounds promising, we should not rush to employ literacies without exploring their parameters and problematizing the forms they have taken. After all, literacies have power in contexts and social practices. As Carrington (2001) concludes:

> The mythic quality attributed to literacy by Western social and educational theory, as well as in public sentiment, has obscured the self-limiting features of school-based literacy pedagogy. … In this sense the universal “right” to literacy becomes the “right” to be inculcated into particular subjectivities and politicized versions of social reality. (p. 283)

Thus literacies have to be critiqued. Since certain ways of knowing and understanding frame literacy work as a key element of educational work, we ought to interrogate what perspectives and principles under grid literacy practices. For example, from a Queer perspective, literacies can be seen to be tied to heteronormative understandings of citizenship, constitutional personhood, and democracy. Like other educational ventures literacy programs are embodied and embedded in politics and purposes, so they should be carefully scrutinized to determine whom they enable or disenfranchise. We need to do this in a continuous and consistent manner.

Historically, literacies have been hegemonistic, so, like education in general, they have not been attentive to the struggles associated with the exclusion of outsider sex,
sexual, and gender differences. Indeed literacies have been normative tools that restrict sex, sexual, and gender positionalities and practices to the confines of heteronormative legitimacy. “Locked within a particular sanitized and phobic perceptual environment” (Carrington, 2001, p. 276), heterosexuals who are male/masculine or female/feminine are often illiterate regarding the social realities of those who articulate their positionalities and practices outside the heteronormative box. For many in this cultural group, the notion of individuals occupying a spectrum of sex, sexual, and gender differences is taboo, with contemporary foci on intersexuals, transsexuals, Two-spirited persons, and others only adding to what they perceive as a Queer anathema. Of course, considering their formal under-education in these matters, LGBTQ persons also have to contend with this cultural illiteracy. Moreover, we have to confront malediction (the words that demean and defile us) and self-deprecation since Queer persons are “trained to judge themselves as subordinate, thereby sealing their social fate in a hierarchical society” (p. 277).

The Need for Cultural Literacy

While we need to trouble cultural and other literacies, this critique should not belie the need for them. Indeed building literacies can be a crucial part of inclusive education that employs ethical pedagogical practices. Luke (1994) infers undergraduates need to engage media and cultural literacy in their studies so they can come to understand how social subjects are constructed in cultural texts. She defines cultural literacy as “a critical literacy of the cultural present—not of the canonized past—of which media literacy is just one component” (p. 30). Offering this critical perspective, Luke maintains undergraduate students have learned (and learned to learn) from media representations to a degree at least comparable to their formal learning using static print texts.

Media … provide powerful public pedagogies which shape concepts of self, gender and race identity and relations; ideas about which social groups count as culturally relevant and politically powerful; and what counts as ‘history,’ ‘progress,’ ‘science,’ ‘cultural difference,’ ‘family,’ ‘individuality,’ or ‘political processes.’ What I wish to argue here, then, is … students’ diverse and extensive knowledge of media(ted) and cultural texts, icons and practices needs to be acknowledged as valid and lived experience. But students’ knowledges need also to be interrogated and challenged toward a critical reappraisal of their own taken-for-granted assumptions about themselves and ‘others.’ (p. 31)

In this light, building critical cultural literacy challenges students to interrogate how individuals are named, represented, and located in maintaining the status quo. It teaches them to expose power inequities embodied and embedded in the hegemonic culture-language-power nexus that empowers some citizens while disenfranchising others. It situates a study of the cultural as a study of politics, language, and structures that impact what knowledge counts and what experiences are accepted and acceptable. It is important that students learn to problematize media texts and how popular culture impacts them; it is also important that student investigate how media texts impact the social identities and the cultural and political positions students assume (Luke, 1994).

Toward a Critical Queer Cultural Literacy

Since the 1990s, increasing attention has been paid in such disciplines as philosophy, sociology, and education to multi-perspective theorizing as a way to advance
social and cultural theorizing. Multi-perspective theorizing juxtaposes ideas from different theoretical discourses to create more encompassing theories that speak to contemporary social and cultural formations, problems, and projects. Engaging in such theorizing reveals both similarities and tensions in trying to compare ideas from competing theories. As an example of multi-perspective theorizing, it might be useful to consider the problems and possibilities of developing a critical Queer cultural literacy. Queer theory itself engages how the realities of ignorance, fear, hate, and oppression permeating the dominant culture-language-power nexus impact the sex-and-gendered subject’s positionality in contextual, relational, and dispositional terms. Critical theory has focused on domination, and on resistance and transformation in the face of power. In this light, there is common ground between these theories to consider the possibility of building a critical Queer cultural literacy with meaning and value to inclusive, ethical, and transformative politics and praxis. Certainly critical ideas like cultural democracy, ethical public practice (framed in education around being there for every student), and disenfranchised Queer citizens as change agents could be explored in terms of framing a Queer project to advance access, accommodation, and full constitutional personhood and citizenship for individuals across sex, sexual, and gender differences.

Education is a sociopolitical enterprise caught up in the larger contexts that bind society in particular ways; it legitimates particular ways of being and acting (McLaren, 2003). Nevertheless, education can also play a key role in political and cultural action for social transformation (Allman, 1999, 2001). Critical and Queer analyses reveal this paradox. In education both critical pedagogy and Queer pedagogy have focused on transgressing and transforming the mainstream field as a sociocultural and political site where discourse and institutional arrangements have traditionally aided and abetted an exclusionary status quo. Thus these pedagogies intersect to have common concerns and goals. Both can inform strategies of resistance to give Queer persons presence, place, and an opportunity to speak and be heard in education.

Of course, thinking of these possibilities for a multi-perspective engagement that involves both critical and Queer insights is not unproblematic. For example, Queer theory as a postfoundational discourse rejects critical theory’s notion of an autonomous subject with a prescriptive identity. However, Queer theory’s fluid subject with an unbounded identity, while most useful as we consider the spectral nature of the array of sex, sexual, and gender differences that keep Queer open, is itself problematic when we want to develop tangible plans of resistance to move Queer access and accommodation forward. Queer has to be captured, at least partially and for the moment, to help us think about resistance in relation to whom. Thus key issues in emerging critical Queer theoretical, pedagogical, and cultural literacy work include how to focus on Queer identities without essentializing them and how to juxtapose deconstructive practices integral to Queer theory with action research and productive practices (Ristock & Taylor, 1998).

Addressing these issues is necessary to mobilize Queer work for social action in vital and vigorous ways that attend to ethics, politics, justice, agency, and results (Ristock & Taylor, 1998). Such mobilization is an exercise in education for just and democratic citizenship that links inclusive education to the everyday needs of LGBTQ persons.
References


