

meet. The turning point for Bridgman was when she and her partner were misplaced with them and was subsequently taken away from them. After this, Bridgman decided that not being true to herself, and being true to others, was no way to live an example for any future child she may have. The process of being true to herself grew as she ultimately became a mother.

In Chapter 19, Garcia provides an honest reflection on his life as a gay teacher, admitting that he is still figuring out his identity, and revealing that for him, coming to terms with his true self is a continuing process. It was the relationships he developed into his early 20s that have been instrumental in bringing him to where he is today in his own acceptance. His story continues with a transition from the classroom teacher to a guidance counselor, where Garcia believes he is able to make a bigger difference in the lives of teenagers, many of whom, he says, share a similar background to his own.

Martin shares with us, in a unique style in Chapter 20, what he calls a kaleidoscopic reflection of his life as a queer educator. Instead of a chronological detailing of events, Martin describes, through a series of events, the process under which he went to move from two separate identities, teacher and gay, to an integrated identity that brings the two together. In this process, he has also found the means to foster an environment in which his students are able to freely explore their own identity without fear of judgment.

The last section, Out Advocate for the LGBTQ Community, introduces the memoirs of four respectable educators in Chapters 21-24, who have been keenly fighting for LGBTQ rights and have made efforts to meet the needs of LGBTQ students.

In Chapter 21, Bednar retells the heartrending story of Carl Joseph Walker Hoover who committed suicide at the age of 11, a tragedy which prompted her to play a more significant role in teaching her students tolerance in her narrative essay. Furthermore, Bednar meticulously explains how she created a teachable moment by introducing the devastating death of Carl to the fifth grade students in her class. Bednar's piece portrays her palpable growth as a teacher activist for all.

Zaino tells her personal coming out story in Chapter 22, and in doing so reveals her self-discovery. She was ashamed of who she is, afraid of revealing herself at school. In that fear, she found herself to be powerless and vulnerable. But when she found balance in being open about who she is, without making everything about her sexual identity, she found herself at peace, in a better relationship with her students and with her colleagues.

Friedrich's chapter tells us about his respectable teaching career that he has established for decades as a K-12 and university queer educator. Friedrich's narrative indicates that he has successfully developed and

## CHAPTER 20

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# KALEIDOSCOPIC MUSINGS ON A QUEER PRAXIS

**Adrian D. Martin**

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When I began teaching more than 10 years ago, I strongly believed that my sexual identity played little role in my professional life. As a male working in an elementary school, my gender was enough of a variant to make me stand out among the overwhelming female faculty (I was usually the only male staff member, perhaps alongside the custodian and principal, wedged in the middle of that hierarchical pyramid). I, the sole man working with young children, was most certainly “queer” in the midst of all those ladies. Nonetheless, I believed that my interactions with students, my being a member of the school district, and my role as a classroom teacher were devoid of any ontological influence as a result of being a gay man. The tacit extension of this belief indicated that queerness ended, and I ceased to be gay, upon entering the classroom. It was as if walking across the student-drawn chalk lines on the playground magically removed any vestiges of gayness, otherness, and queerness. À la Cinderella, with the drone of the morning school bell I transformed into an asexual, decontextualized being identified as “teacher.” Not until the 3:00 P.M. buzz at the end of the academic day (and crossing over those chalk lines again) would I metamorphose back into my habitual self, my “real” self, from Dockers to denim, from “Mr. Martin” to “Adrian,” from

"teacher" to "queer." Viewing queerness as a performance, my identity and epistemological understanding of my practice as a pedagogue were mutually exclusive. If this were true, who was the "unreal" man sitting before a group of first graders, sharing literature or deconstructing the language of mathematical word problems? Perhaps a deconstruction of self would be advisable.

In this chapter I will describe my shifting conceptualization of self as a queer educator and hypothesize a queer praxis. I do not subscribe to the notion, nor do I believe, that my story is best reflected through a linear progression of thought or as a tightly knit aphoristic experiential evolution. The grains of insight culled from reflection are more analogous to a mutable kaleidoscopic portrait than a "straight" intellectual investigation. Time, memory, experience, and consciousness tumble and turn within my mind. The past is fractured, reframed, ebbing and flowing through a myriad of observations, perceptions, insights, ignorance, participation, and exclusions. Indulge with me in this, and imagine yourself looking through the oculus of a kaleidoscope.

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One turn the kaleidoscope reveals a little boy called by his *abuela* to come inside from the back yard. It was time to take a *siesta*. On this afternoon in late spring the rose bushes in the back yard have bloomed, fiery petals ensconced by stems and thorns. Savoring the fragrance, he turns from this sensory delight and runs inside. He places the doll he had been playing with in the toy chest and lies down for a nap. *Abuela* covers him with a cool cotton sheet, kisses his cheek, and walks to the kitchen. She sits down, sips black tea with lemon, and watches the afternoon *novela*.

You turn the kaleidoscope again. Twisting forms settle and there is a gay youth who exits the 9th St. train station and enters Greenwich Village for the first time on a hot summer afternoon in the mid-1990s. Like Alice through the looking glass, he marvels at this newfound Wonderland and at the diversity of life therein. Chelsea boys, punks, dykes, NYU students, businesswomen, ravers, pot heads, lipstick lesbians, tourists, intellectuals, blue collars, artists, guitar players, feminists, yuppies, the homeless and he in this labyrinth of possibilities called New York. He strolls through Washington Square Park, lunches at a Japanese eatery in Astor Place, and posits the potential, the future, and his identity in this sea of dynamic energy and space. Queer certainly seems to fall within the center of this bohemian Mecca. There are no margins there, at least not in his eyes. The plethora of life, languages, cultures, sexualities, races, ethnicities, and any other identity politic plait to form lower Manhattan.

You turn the kaleidoscope a bit more. Those images begin to collapse and he who was once the youth emerges. A man now, a teacher, he is in an urban elementary school classroom. It is late spring. He looks at his pupils working at their desks. The heat in the room is almost unbearable. Beads of sweat roll down his back, and probably just as much as the students, he can't wait for the end of the school day to escape.

The boy was most definitely hurt. A seven-year-old with long dark brown hair and eyes full of tears approached the side of the teacher's desk. He called his name to bring awareness of the name that he was called.

"Mr. Martin, Joseph (a pseudonym) is bothering me," the boy said.

"What happened?" the teacher replied.

"Joseph said I'm gay."

He listened, taken aback that a child as young as seven would be labeled as "gay" by his peers. He was startled that his students, as young as they were, would have a notion of "gayness." The usual sentiment seemed to be that such name-calling occurred in middle or high school. Here he was, confronted by a first grader and his first (the teacher assumed) experience with this identity label.

"Do you know what 'gay' means?" he asked.

"No," the boy answered.

It didn't matter whether or not the boy knew what the word meant or whether or not he would grow up to be queer. For him, the word served the same purpose as being called "ugly," "stupid," "bad," or being told, "you're not my friend." The point was to hurt. "Gay" was the weapon of choice, a weapon devoid of meaning to this young boy, but a weapon with an impact revealed through tears.

And what of the teacher for whom being "gay" is part of his identity? What of his own beliefs and values regarding the diversity of life and respect for difference? Befuddled by and disappointed at the situation, he called the suspect over to seek clarification.

He approached, eyes downcast, hands behind his back.

"Joseph, did you call him 'gay'?" he asked.

"Yes," he replied.

"Why?" he asked.

"I don't know," Joseph answered.

"Joseph, do you even know what that word means?"

"No," he said.

"So why did you say it if you don't know what it means?"

"Because he wouldn't let me use his crayons," he answered.

"We don't name call in this classroom community. And we especially don't use words if we don't know what they mean, or use words to hurt."

'Gay' is neither a bad nor good word. It's just a word. Sometimes people use words to hurt others. But I think you know we don't do that here.'

You set the kaleidoscope down.

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Over a box of crayons, "gay" was employed to injure and separate, to divide between one child and another, to differentiate, to "other." My responsibility was to educate rather than judge or chastise the child. I believed that this situation called for me to inform him that this particular word, "gay," was not to be used to hurt because it is not a "bad word." I had taken the word and with the power invested in me as a public school teacher, "neutralized" its negative potency (at least with one child). As the boys walked back to their desks (where they eventually did share the crayons), I began to consider my thoughts, words, and actions and their relevance to my identity.

I set out teaching under the assumption that being gay bore no influence on my praxis. And yet, could I honestly say that that part of my identity did not affect my response to those students? Did being gay, or my sense of being gay, promote a particular kind of consideration on how to resolve the word attack? Did my queer identity and sensibilities really cease and surrender to a paradigm of heteronormativity in that moment? How could my prior experiences and my understanding of self as queer have no impact on my praxis? Being Hispanic forged a cultural connection between me and many in the school community that I served (predominantly immigrants from the Caribbean, Central and South America). If I knew that this served as a link with students and parents, how could my queer aspect bear no relevance?

I have found that it most certainly did (and does). *Of course* being a gay person would influence my response to a student being name called as "gay." How could it not? Even if I assumed that I could pass for straight when entering the school each morning, I could not remove or divorce myself (or my perception of the world and my assumed perception of the world toward me) from the lens through which I perceive life. Just as being Hispanic, bilingual, and the son of immigrants informs my outlook in all I do and in how I teach—so does my queerness, too. These multiple dimensionalities, or lenses, meld and compose the self that I am outside of as well as in the classroom. There are no boundaries or limits among these identities. They co-exist, drawing from each other, pulling and taking pieces of language and culture, of desire and love, of knowledge and emotion, all in an attempt to establish equilibrium in the space of awareness known as life. Those are among the pieces reflected and reimaged through my metaphorical kaleidoscope. The teacher is informed of who

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he is as much by the boy with the doll as by the youth in Greenwich Village. They/we are all one.

The concept of a divided self began to fade and what emerged was a new integrated understanding. I recognized that that particular moment (where "gay" was the word weapon of choice) informed my consciousness that queerness influences my teaching. But if so, then how else, in mundane, everyday moments, does this influence manifest?

The sense of being an outsider (a product of heteronormativity) has made me keenly aware of how difference, even subtle difference, can rouse a response. Perhaps the inflections and tones of my speech periodically resonate a bit too much with the feminine. Or maybe my gestures are too pronounced and unbecoming for a "regular" guy. Positioned on the margins of society's definition of manhood, my unabashed enthusiasm for *Wicked*, Foucault, house music, Anne Rice, Paulo Freire, black beans, hot summer days, tight jeans, diamond studs, multicultural literature, Queer Theory, rhizome analysis, sushi, live concerts, constructivism, ethnography, a five o'clock shadow, linguistically responsive teaching, and early childhood education blend together to create a most unlikely elementary school teacher. Neither maiden, mother, nor crone, I am far from the image of the archetypal first grade teacher. I am outside of the heteronormative box, removed from the embrace of the common and usual.

The positioning of my identity as a gay man, a queer, in relation to the dominant cultural conceptualization of manhood, has facilitated the development of a psychogenic empathy towards others deemed *other*. My queerness serves as a lens toward an elevated awareness of difference in myself and in those around me. Perhaps this stems from the recognition, even as a very young boy, that there was something different about me from my peers (how many other *niños* played with dolls?). Perhaps it is a result of having been a 19-year-old who observed the varied individuals that followed the beat of their own drummer as I walked through Washington Square Park. It is my own difference/marginality that forces me to consider practices, customs, institutions, and discourses assumed to be normal from the perspective of someone whose identity exists outside of the normative paradigm. As a teacher with a queer identity, this has influenced my practice and promoted a consideration of the multiplicity of perspectives, attitudes, and beliefs manifest in the human experience. Therefore, I believe a queer praxis not only deconstructs the master narrative of normalcy, but also examines that which exists and manifests upon, and outside of, the margins of normalcy. I believe that to fail to engage in such pedagogical methodology is antithetical to a queer praxis.

A queer praxis must be grounded both in the lived experiences of queers and from the academic and intellectual investigations of Butler, Sedgwick, Warner, Jagose, Britzman, Kumashiro, Pinar, and Sullivan (to

name a few). It would unfurl the critical tenets of Freire and Giroux, swirl in the pragmatics of Dewey, and infuse it all with the affirmativeness of Ladson-Billings' culturally relevant pedagogy. The evolving axiom (for there would be no final product, no final philosophy) is an educational orientation that permits intellectual arguments, investigations, explorations, and dialogues beyond the nucleus of the normal and validates the individual as more than an identity construct.

Such a queer approach can assert little, and assume even less. In my own practice I can make no guarantees to my students. I make no promises that their education will result in financially successful careers, social mobility, or the acquisition of a body of knowledge reflective of truth. However, I can call attention to how specific kinds of knowledge are privileged and how these constructions omit other ways of knowing and other bodies of wisdom. Saturation of privileged knowledge, of the master narrative, only leads toward ignorance of peripheral identities, those on the margins, those who are queer. Turning the kaleidoscope, or enacting a queer praxis, the epistemological canon hegemonized through school curriculum buckles and caves into a new configuration, one that conceives of an ontology characterized by no center and no margins.

Classroom discourse through such a precept undermines social constructions of normalcy and appropriateness. To queer Judith Butler's term, a queer praxis does not resist "gender trouble," but insists upon gender trouble. Both teacher and student are more than a gender construct and/or a role enacted in the drama called schooling. Both are able to craft their own identities, explore and enact expressions of self, considered reflective of self, and rejoice in the freedom to *be* beyond sex, gender, or desire. While the larger social discourse of heteronormativity always slithers like a snake and subjugates whatever sense of agency the individual may hold, a queer praxis serves to crush the head of that snake and facilitate a journey toward mutual understanding and growth within a classroom community.

My years as a teacher, and in particular the years in which I have been aware of the influence of my queerness, have provided me with the first-hand experience of being able to observe young people in their own search for meaning and identity. I cannot shape or mold a student's identity. Even if I could, I would deem it unethical to do so. A queer praxis means that I facilitate a classroom context wherein students are free to construct an identity with no judgment from the teacher or from peers. Some identities may fit neatly into the heteronormative box. Others may be positioned on the margins of such discourse. Yet, in my classroom, there is no center stage for any particular identity. Each day is a new opportunity to discover oneself (and perhaps, in the process, someone else). Each day I am amazed at the burgeoning intellectual and academic

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growth and progress of my students. It is their understanding of self, of community, and of the world upon which I reflect. It is this understanding that I use in creating my lessons and academic exercises.

I hope that my students' understanding develops with a critical insight and an inquisitive nature. I hope the intellectual and epistemological space that I have worked to co-construct with them can move beyond the physical walls of my classroom and grow in the familial, emotional, and domestic sites of existence. I hope they are able to look through their own kaleidoscope and realize that they have the power not only to remake their own image, but also influence the image of others. I hope they are able to see the world as more than a binary between good and bad, light and dark, gay and straight. A queer praxis is one way they might recognize and appreciate the spectrum of wonder between those imaginary polar opposites and seize the rainbow of possibilities. I hope they can uncover the senselessness of so much of the normalcy society presents. In short, I hope they can enact a queer praxis for themselves.