

CHAPTER 19.

COMING OUT AS OTHER
IN THE GRADUATE
WRITING CLASSROOM:
FEMINIST PEDAGOGICAL
MOVES FOR MENTORING
COMMUNITY ACTIVISTS

Jess Tess

Oakland University

Trixie G. Smith

Michigan State University

Katie Manthey

Salem College

We argue that facilitation of coming out moments of otherness in the graduate writing classroom is a way to mentor students to foster social change. In order to study the pedagogical moves made by instructors that facilitate (or not) moments where graduate students come out as other, we conducted surveys and interviews with students and instructors in order to elicit stories about their coming out moments in classroom settings. We examine writing as a social-justice practice that can be important for coming out, itself a feminist rhetorical act. Then we consider how seemingly micro moments can become macro moments to the students involved. Likewise, we look at how instructor reactions to coming out moments model behaviors for other students in the class, arguing for feminist pedagogies that can guide or support transformations into activist stances in classes and in students' lives.

INTRODUCTION: RECONSTRUCTING OURSELVES AND OUR STORIES

[¹ I was sitting in my office a few hours before class started during the second week of fall semester. It wasn't my office hours, but I have an open-door policy and it's not uncommon for people to come in. This morning, I was running behind on a project and was, admittedly, a little annoyed when a student in one of my writing classes came into my office and said, "I need to talk to you. Can I talk to 'Katie' right now instead of 'Dr. Manthey'?" I smiled warmly at her and offered her a chair. She sat down, looking very distraught, and told me, "I'm a terrible writer. I just can't do it."

She explained to me that when she came to campus this morning she had planned to drop out of school. She was a perfectionist and a "casual" 200-word blog entry about goals for the semester took her four hours and left her in tears. She felt that her inability to write the way she thought, and the way she talked, was a personal flaw and beyond repair. She told me that she didn't have any confidence in herself—or her writing.

So I asked her: "Who are you? How did you get here? What happened that has led you to believe this about yourself?"

This surprised her. She sat back and looked at me for a minute. Then, she leaned forward, smiled at me for the first time that day, and told me about herself.

She had been a professional model, and had been in a car accident and had to have her entire face reconstructed. She was now a motivational speaker because of her experiences with bouncing back from her surgery. She had always been terrified of writing and had found other ways to communicate her complex, engaging emotions to others: through visual art, poetry, and theater. For her, speaking extemporaneously was significantly easier than writing an outline. And she was damn good at it. The story that she told me about herself sounded like a motivational speech—and it was all off the cuff.

When she finished I smiled at her and told her that she was a writer. I suggested she audio-record herself talking through her writing assignments and transcribe herself. She couldn't believe that that wasn't considered cheating. This felt safer to her

1 You will see three different fonts used throughout this essay. This font for the argument of the essay. This second font for our stories. *This third font for participants' stories.*

because she was confident in her ability to convey a message through speech.]

We start our chapter with this story because we see story as the theoretical foundation for our work and an important strategy for feminist interventions. Thomas King (2003), native novelist and scholar, tells us that “The truth about stories is that that’s all we are” (p. 2). He also tells us (warns us?) that they are wondrous and dangerous. Our stories illustrate what we believe, how we act, and how we envision and experience the world. From King’s theorizing and our own experiences with stories/theories, we have come to the conclusion that storytelling as embodied knowledge production is an important methodological practice for making, theorizing, and sustaining feminist projects such as ours.

Furthermore, we start our chapter with this story because it highlights a coming out moment, a feminist student-to-teacher moment that was made possible by Katie’s willingness to listen and to ask why—to issue an invitation for more. These moments also happen in classes, student-to-student, or student-to-class. In *Techné: Queer Meditations on Writing the Self*, Jackie Rhodes claims that it is “an ethical, feminist move to come out” (2015, p. 6A). She stresses that it’s important because “We pay for (in)visibility when we seek to contain or erase our multiple spaces, identities, affiliations” (p. 6A). Furthermore, the ways we as instructors react to students in these moments set the tone for how others will react (see Godbee, Chapter 17, in this collection for more on cultivating agency and interrelatedness for/with our students); we become the model for the rest of our students and perhaps other instructors as well. How then should we react as feminists interested in mentoring our students and in modeling activist stances and behaviors?

Our own experiences as students coming out to professors or classes, as well as our experiences as instructors who have had students come out in our classes², led us to question this phenomenon and to ask in what ways we facilitate and/or hinder growth in these pivotal moments as students take the risk of coming out. But what exactly do we mean by the phrase coming out? Coming out is a shortened term for the phrase “coming out of the closet.” In *Another Mother Tongue: Gay Words, Gay Worlds*, Judy Grahn (1984) explains that the “term ‘closet’ implies a scandalous personal secret, or skeleton, in the family closet.” More specifically for many gay persons it refers “to *being* the skeleton in the family’s closet,” where the reality of being gay, or gayness itself, becomes the skeleton (p. 23). People remain in the closet to maintain the illusion of the expected—heterosexuality, which as Michael Warner (1993) explains is the default for sexuality and what is always assumed unless one indicates something different, an idea he calls “heteronorma-

2 Which you can listen to on Soundcloud and read in Google Docs at https://drive.google.com/open?id=0B2Vu6VfSpS_rOHppMVpIMlIzbVk

tivity” (p. xxi). According to Warner, every ideological, political, and economic structure in mainstream society is built around or upon a heterosexual norm or model (as well as a white, middle to upper class model), which is, as are most forms of oppression, “pervasive, persistent, and severe” in nature (Weber, 2009, p. 23).

People come out of the closet to contradict this assumption and to break the illusion of heterosexuality. Coming out is a rite of passage into a gay or lesbian identity, according to Gilbert Herdt (1992). In *Inside/Out* Diane Fuss (1991) explains that, when one comes out, one comes into a new identity and into a new community. The act of coming out and the narrative about it, the coming-out story, permeates gay culture. The telling of these stories helps constitute membership in the community and lets other members know where someone stands. Naturally, these stories differ from person to person. Even one person’s story can change as she moves from one context to another.

Many theorists, however, have expanded the idea of coming out and what one might come out about; the term has come to be used in contexts other than sexuality, which we in this paper call coming out as Other. That is, people come out about many other identifications and identity categories that can be anything other than what Audre Lorde (2009) calls the mythic norm: white, male, thin, middle to upper class, heterosexual. It is this expansive form of coming out, personal moments of vulnerability, that we reference throughout this essay and that we label a feminist act.

We start with our own varied coming out stories, pieces of our identities, and how they led us into research and collaboration. We then move to some stories generously shared with us by participants also interested in this work. We discuss the patterns we see emerging from the data of these collective stories and what they tell us about mentoring students into and through coming out, particularly through writing. We consider all coming out moments as a feminist rhetorical practice because it is a moment of making the personal political and of taking a stance that often sets oneself up as other. Therefore, it is important to consider how seemingly micro moments often are and/or can become macro moments to the students involved. Likewise, we look at how instructor reactions to coming out moments model behaviors for other students in the class; feminist pedagogical responses require rhetorical listening and self reflexivity as instructor, perpetual student, and cognizant citizen (see Royster and Kirsch (2012) for more on this concept). It is only through such feminist responses to students that we can possibly guide or support their transformations into activist stances in their classes and their lives. For other examples of feminist response in practice, refer to Walls et al. (Chapter 20, this collection), who employ feminist theories of listening in their design of a smartphone app and Williams’ discussion of listening to community partners as feminist praxis.

METHODS: ORAL HISTORY OF DISCOMFORT

We begin our methods section by linking to our own stories about coming out as other in our graduate writing classrooms. Since this study emerged from those stories, we present them reflexively as the foundation for our research questions and design and will refer to them again in our discussion section. These were the stories that we told (and retold) each other when we met early last year to talk about a common issue: feeling out of place in graduate school. As women who identified as straight, white, able-bodied, and cisgendered at the time, Jess and Katie felt conflicted about their feelings of discomfort in the graduate writing classroom. Coming from places of privilege, coming out and feeling like an other seemed like something that they couldn't claim as their own embodied experiences. So Jess and Katie met with Trixie, an out queer woman, and together the three of us discussed the validity of our feelings, and the commonality of these moments for the three of us. We wondered if other people had experienced these feelings, both within and beyond coming out in relation to sexuality, in the context of the graduate³ writing classroom.

In order to study the pedagogical moves made by writing instructors that facilitate moments where graduate students come out as other in graduate writing classrooms, we conducted surveys and interviews using oral history methods⁴ with graduate students and instructors. We wanted to elicit their stories/theories about their coming out moments in these classroom settings, similar to those we have given above. Through various listserves, we distributed surveys and solicited interviews from both students and faculty because we expected to see differences between these perspectives that relate to authority and wanted to investigate those divisions.

We collected five participant stories through these various methods. Interestingly, all participants turned out to be students; no professors responded, or at least no one responded from a professorial point of view. We present these stories, these theories, in the form of short vignettes in our results section, followed by very brief points of discussion. We performed our analysis of the stories by looking for emerging patterns in the data. To frame our analysis we specifically asked 1) What stood out or came up repeatedly? and 2) What connections can

3 We have chosen to only look at graduate classes at this time as a way to narrow our focus, but we all believe what we've experienced and learned is also applicable in the undergraduate classroom.

4 "Oral history interviews seek an in-depth account of personal experience and reflections, with sufficient time allowed for the narrators to give their story the fullness they desire. The content of oral history interviews is grounded in reflections on the past as opposed to commentary on purely contemporary events." Oral History Association. "Principles and Best Practices." 2009. <http://www.oralhistory.org/about/principles-and-practices/>

be made across these stories? This analysis is presented in the discussion section following our results. We conclude with our list of feminist interventions for instructors teaching in graduate writing classrooms who have and do grapple with these coming out moments.

RESULTS: OUR EXTREMELY VULNERABLE POSITIONS

A's STORY

[An asexual, white, female grad student explained that, "in my very first course as an English graduate student, I took a literary theory class. Eventually, we were asked to contribute a short essay on Queer Theory in literary criticism. We were then asked to share a summary of our paper with the class. I felt that I was in a safe, judgment-free environment that called upon me to be honest. I didn't feel as though I could fake my way through the assignment, so I chose to reveal why. I wrote about my confusing experience as an asexual, and how I identify with the community; specifically, I wrote that my disinterest in and inexperience with sexuality left me at a bit of a loss at understanding works of literature through a sexual perspective."

She explained that most of her classmates seemed to accept what she was saying, but some seemed confused. She stated that, "one particular student (an older, 50s-something woman) told me openly that she didn't think asexuality was an orientation." While the instructor of the class didn't intervene at that moment, she later "called me 'brave' when I received feedback on my paper."

Looking back on the experience, she reflected that coming out to the class "definitely made me a bit defensive with that particular student. But overall, I felt relieved to have come out at all. Being open about my asexuality allows me to accept it as a real orientation that others share. Before, it just seemed like a quirk that was wrong and shameful. I never thought anyone would understand the fact that I don't feel sexual feelings for anyone of any gender."]

A's story brings up important pedagogical opportunities for instructors wishing to model feminist/activist stances: instructors should thank students for sharing (at the very least); instructors should invite further discussion in these moments or on these topics—inspiring confidence, especially in vulnerable moments/situations; instructors should be prepared for private discussions of these public moments.

THEY'S STORY

[A self-identified white, working class, nonbinary/trans/genderqueer, first generation, queer grad student explained that, “our instructor had everyone teach something to the class—spending 2-5 minutes on it per person. I chose to teach about using gender neutral pronouns and why it’s a good idea. In the process I mentioned that I am nonbinary and use ‘they’ pronouns.”

There was no immediate reaction from the class, and this ended up being the trend for the entire semester: both the students and the instructor “ignored [the information] and continued using the wrong pronouns.” The instructor even kept using the wrong pronouns through email. They explained that, “I stayed in the class, but stopped trying to be social/interact with my classmates. I stopped sharing personal information with instructor and classmates even when relevant and even when it might have helped. Because neither students nor instructor ‘heard’ me, I knew they wouldn’t hear me about anything else. So I stopped trying. My final paper for the course included personal information by nature of the method I was using. Because of the way that my instructor responded to me in class, I heavily edited out the information I included in the essay.”

They stated that this coming out experience, for them, ultimately hindered their personal and professional growth, “I withdrew into my shell that I had just started getting rid of:”]

Again, a feminist pedagogical intervention would be to listen to every student, every time—true listening that results in engagement with what is being said or asked. More importantly, an appropriate feminist response would be to honor the student’s request and practice/model the appropriate use of pronouns and encourage others in the class to do so as well.

R'S STORY

[R, a 28-year-old heterosexual white male “from an affluent family in an affluent town,” began responding to our main prompt about experiencing any coming out moments of otherness in any of his graduate writing classes. R explained that he didn’t experience a peak moment but rather underwent an ongoing process of realization around his identity in regard to privilege. R then explained that he began experiencing distress at the contrast between the outlooks of his grad school colleagues, who were aware of privilege, and his

friends and family back home in an affluent town, who were not. He used the example of the protests over the death of Michael Brown to illustrate his point. R and his grad school classmates and some instructors attended a rally to join in protesting the issue of systemic violence in the African American community as exemplified by the shooting of Michael Brown. Soon after, R also went to visit his hometown where he heard his privileged friends and family criticize the protesting as barbaric and inappropriate. R felt paralyzed and painfully torn between these two communities.

When asked if he ever shared his feelings of distress over his new-found views of identity and privilege with his classmates he reflected, "Oh yes. During most of my classes last year I would preface something by 'I'm coming to terms with the evil and imperialism of the white male (apparently I read different history books?), so please forgive my ignorance. I am desperately trying to learn' And that led to rewarding conversations outside of class as well. My classmates would explain things in more detail and talk me through power structures in ways I'd never thought of. I'd never HAD to think of." When probed for further detail about the typical responses both his instructors and classmates would give R in response to his questions he said, "They've almost always been friendly. My instructors were always women, always a double minority (Eastern European, Black) and were perhaps more eager to help guide a student to realization. My classmates never derided me. They saw the struggle in me. They saw the hurt and sadness." He concluded that these conversations in his graduate writing classrooms affected him by completely changing his views and his research interests.]

The feminist pedagogical practices modeled for R included inviting him into the conversation, both in class and outside of class, and providing space for him to come out and ask questions or reveal his struggle without derision or ridicule.

M's STORY

["I have come to know how important my body is to all the ways that I come to academia. Knowing that my body matters in terms of what and how I interact with students, colleagues, research subjects and communities is an extremely vulnerable position to embody. I must account for the privileges that I have as well as the ways in which I choose to mark my body. The notion of studying my own body, my own story as part of my research has been difficult to

navigate. “Coming out” time and again to talk about infertility in an academic setting can be emotionally grueling. I recognize that not everyone understands why I study infertility and why I account for my own identification with it. But it is this continued pressure to silence myself and my infertile body to others that serves as a reminder of exactly why I should be talking about it and studying it. This felt desire to keep quiet is exactly the type of power systems that must be better understood so as to explain how such systems marginalize and silence so many “othered” bodies. This capturing of my body, my body’s relationship to other infertile wo/men’s bodies, and the stories that our bodies carry are all traces of a cultural rhetoricians orientation to research.”]

A feminist intervention means that we need to remember that coming out is a recursive process that happens over time to varying degrees. It can be a transformative moment, for you and/or your audience, but it doesn’t (always) have to be. Also, keep in mind that coming out is a choice; we encourage you to measure how safe you feel in the particular moment, program, class, assignment, etc.

J’s STORY

[“In the classroom in 2014, I was in a class called Literary Methods and Practice, which was an Intro to English Studies kind of course for grad students, both Lit and Comp, and we had a guest lecturer talking about the place of story sharing in English Studies. She was a Comp professor. She asked people, if they were comfortable, to tell a story of sharing something important and getting an unexpected reaction. So I briefly recalled the story of my coming out at college, disclosing that I’m gay, and repeating my cousin’s comment about “butt lovers,” which I think made people uncomfortable (I don’t blame them, as it had made me uncomfortable years before). That said, I think people were pretty accepting.”]

When asked how he felt about this experience, J responded, “Maybe like I’d had a load off my back, but it wasn’t anything huge. There was another lit/philosophy class in my grad program called Re-Thinking Race & Gender that was a bit more difficult for me to come out in. It was a 10-day intensive seminar over 3 weeks with a lot of difficult reading, with some history I was familiar with, but because I did know some about African American Studies (I took some classes in it in undergrad), I took a conscious step back so that I wouldn’t take over the classroom by talking a lot. I believe it was

around the second week, where we were reading about transsexual and transgender issues as well as gay and lesbian history, and at the very end of the day, as like the last comment (if I remember right), I raised my hand and said that I was gay. I had my eyes closed because I was really nervous, which is not always the case when I come out, and I think I sounded kind of shaky (another person said I seemed nervous or scared), and I think part of it was that I wasn't sure how much bigotry or negative reaction there might be. I talked about internalized self-hate that one of the authors had talked about and how that's very real for a lot of LGBT people, including me, so that felt a lot more vulnerable."

"The reactions that I got after were positive. I go to a pretty working-class institution with some progressive English faculty (like really into Marxism or Feminism or any number of other schools of thought that are conscious of justice), so that may explain why it was safe. The next week there was a presentation by a guest faculty about homophobia in popular culture, and I also shared that I have Asperger's syndrome when we were asked about messages we got about gay people growing up: my anti-social behavior was called "gay" as an insult, and later I realized I was actually gay."]

J's story illustrates how important it is for feminist instructors to monitor their own affect, while paying attention to that of the students in the class. Paying attention to both the words and body language of those in class, will clue you in to how they are feeling and what types of responses they are looking for.

DISCUSSION: MAKING COMING OUT MOMENTS TRANSFORMATIONAL

These diverse stories offer a lot to think about in terms of writing pedagogy, coming out as feminist practice, and responses to coming out that embody feminist practice. We will discuss some of these themes in this section and will end the essay with a call for more stories, more research.

WHY WRITING?

We have chosen to situate our study in writing classrooms partially because it is a convenience sample for us and partially because of how we understand the nature of writing and its potential as a social justice, and hence feminist, practice (in this collection, see Sheridan, Chapter 9, as well as Mathis and Boehm, Chapter 6, for more on writing and community engagement). If we accept that the

personal is political and vice versa (see Myatt in this collection for more on this personal/political connection) and that the goal of a social justice-informed pedagogy is to help students become better/more informed, more critical, citizens/consumers, then we must help them learn to begin by being reflexive about their identities and positions. It means helping them write from what Harriet Malinowitz (1995) calls “their most secure rhetorical footing” (p. 37), the place(s) and/or experiences they truly know and feel confident in. Consequently, this reflexivity often expresses itself in moments of coming out—to oneself, in one’s writing, and potentially to others, as our stories show.

These stories indicate that writing, and prepared presentations that also require moments of planning and composing, affords the writer some measure of control over the coming out moment that may be lacking in other rhetorical situations. Trixie and Katie, as well as A, all used specific assignments to reveal things about themselves and their lives and how these experiences affected their academic work. Using assignments like this allowed time for planning, thinking, and revising to occur. Similarly, this time allowed They to remove these personal moments from their final paper since their initial coming out met with resistance and outright denial. Jess’s spontaneous classroom moment was also met with resistance, but perhaps it would have been different if she’d had more time to express herself in writing, allowing for more precision and thought behind her words. Writing happens in various modes, for varying audiences, and for varying weight or credit, especially within the context of the classroom, all of which allow for control over what is revealed or not. We should also note here, however, that this control can also be a burden as people struggle over what to say and as they have to make continual, repeated choices about coming out. As M reveals, “‘Coming out’ time and again . . . in an academic setting can be emotionally grueling.”

We believe it can often be grueling because writing is an embodied meaning making practice that is also part of a composing or making process (for more on this topic see Kristin L. Arola and Anne Frances Wysocki’s excellent collection (2012) *composing(media) = composing(embodiment): bodies, technologies, writing, the teaching of writing*). For example, in A’s story, they found that coming out as asexual made their orientation seem more real: “Being open about my asexuality allows me to accept it as a real orientation that others share. Before, it just seemed like a quirk that was wrong and shameful.” Coming out in their writing (and in the writing classroom) made it more real, concrete, and able to be shared. Likewise, coming out as fat in her queer rhetorics course was a career-changing moment for Katie, concretely pushing her into fat studies and activism around body positivity. The same transformational moment happened for Trixie as the first coming out in writing led to coming out moments in

class discussions, which led to study and research in gender/queer studies and scholarship and activism focused on creating “safe enough” space for diverse students. We use the term “safe enough” as a way to acknowledge that safe space is a mythical ideal that can never truly be achieved. The very circumstances that make a space safe for one person can make it threatening for another. We also acknowledge that writers often take risks even though they don’t feel completely safe, just safe enough. Through these various risk-taking moments, one can see the process of becoming more and more out, more and more public, more and more vocal and potentially activist, marking both the story and the body in ever-increasing ways.

MICRO MOMENTS ARE MACRO MOMENTS

One commonality among these stories of coming out is that they can seem like micro-moments to the instructor/classmates, but in reality they feel like huge moments to the student. One place we saw this was in Trixie’s story, as she came out about her sexuality when talking about communicating with her same-sex partner. While this was reportedly her first coming out moment in the classroom, and thus felt extremely risky, she received no response from the instructor. This caused her disappointment but also led to questioning: “How could he know the pain I had suffered writing this simple report?” On the other hand, R reported that he usually received friendly and receptive feedback from his classmates/instructors when he asked questions related to his ignorance about privilege; as a result, R ended up changing his research interests and entire life outlook.

In both of these examples, the micro moments are actually macro moments because they are recursive in nature. In order for these recursive moments to become transformative and lead to growth, it is the job of the instructor to catch them and give them proper attention. Otherwise, the rejection or ignoring of these moments may lead students to shut down or remain stagnant in their learning and personal/professional growth. Jess, for example, was derailed in her academic pursuits when she came out about her lack of knowledge and met with resistance. They also shut down and withdrew when their efforts to educate the class on pronoun usage were met with denial. R, as mentioned above, continued to come out and to become more and more vocal as his initial coming out moments were not just acknowledged but embraced by instructors and classmates. As we see in these stories, when the response from the instructor takes the form of acknowledgement, receptivity, and/or requests for extrapolation, students will be encouraged to engage in what we call “recursive risk.” This is the idea that students (when they are not shut down or ignored) will come out continuously

over time and reveal a little bit more each time as long as they continue to feel heard (see also Hawkins and Giroux in this collection for a related discussion on the iterative process of collaboration which also leads to growth and evolution).

Take J for example. He tells a story of coming out as gay in a variety of university or classroom settings, all of which carried what seemed like different levels of risk for him. In a class about stories, it made perfect sense to tell his own story about coming out, which then served as another coming out moment. Later, in a class focused on race and gender, telling his story was more difficult but his previously positive experiences helped him push through, even if he did close his eyes to the class as he announced, *"I'm gay."* As he states,

It did help my personal growth in that class. I felt a lot freer afterwards, like there was less of a load on my shoulders. At that point, I think it helped my academic performance—not like a better grade because of it, but because I was able to be more open in my final portfolio describing [my] relationship to race and gender privilege.

In addition, these coming out moments led to his coming out as a person with Asperger's:

The next week there was a presentation by a guest faculty about homophobia in popular culture, and I also shared that I have Asperger's syndrome when we were asked about messages we got about gay people growing up: my anti-social behavior was called "gay" as an insult; later I realized I was actually gay.

We see this practice of recursive risk as similar to Ahmed's idea of re-orienting. In *Queer Phenomenology* (2006), Ahmed describes orientation as the way an ideology gets perpetuated until it seems "normal" or "the way things have always been" by discussing the phrase "a path well trodden". On page 16 she explains that,

A path is made by the repetition of the event of the ground 'being trodden' upon. We can see the path as a trace of past journeys. The path is made out of footprints—traces of feet that 'tread' and that in 'treading' create a line on the ground. When people stop treading the path may disappear. And when we see the line of the path before us, we tend to walk upon it, as a path 'clears' the way. So we walk on the path as it is before us, but it is only before us as an effect of being walked upon. . . Lines are both created by being followed and are followed by being created.

Ahmed goes on to discuss how stepping off of a well-worn path onto another less worn path can be “disorienting” and potentially dangerous for an individual. We believe that coming out is an example of choosing an unfamiliar path. Under the right circumstances, walking along this path and being supported can lead to what we call “coming to.” Fuss, as mentioned previously, says that coming out leads to coming into community; this is true, but there is more, a coming to that is about self realization, the personal understanding that often leads to activism. J for example comes to a realization about how coming out as gay has helped him come out as a person with Asperger’s. R’s coming out as a privileged white male trying to understand colonialism and oppression has led to moments of stress and depression but also an activist determination to make a change in the world.

MODELING FEMINIST RESPONSES

We mentioned above that it is the job of the instructor to catch and nurture moments of vulnerability. We believe that this action is a way to practice feminist mentoring and pedagogy; as Sheridan notes elsewhere, “doing is central to learning,” so we must “enact that doing” (Chapter 11, this collection). To underscore the power implicit in this practice, some of our examples show what can happen when an instructor doesn’t do this. For example, in the story of They’s coming out as genderqueer, the instructor’s inattention to their request for certain pronouns (and the instructor’s continuous use of the wrong pronouns) led the student to shut down. Due to this response, this student also “heavily edited out the [personal] information” about themselves from the final paper and felt like their learning and growth in the class was noticeably hindered.

In terms of coming out moments from students, we argue that being publicly vulnerable asks for an equally public response of some kind from instructors, every time. In the example of coming out as asexual, the instructor made no comment neither directly to the student’s vulnerable revelation, nor when the student received an unaccepting response from a fellow student. Instead, the instructor later chose to privately tell the student that she was brave in the form of written feedback on the assignment. While in this case the student continued to only feel defensive with the one fellow student, it was also possible for students in this situation to interpret the lack of public comment from the instructor as lack of support for the student who came out or as agreement with the fellow student who argued back that asexuality wasn’t real. Such unresponsiveness from the instructor can cause students to shut down more generally. It is important to explicitly note here that we are arguing that non-reaction is still a reaction, especially in front of a classroom. We acknowledge that silence can be used to

empower voices when performed in the act of truly listening and understanding (see Ratcliff's (2005) work on rhetorical listening, for example). However, while it may not be true in all situations, especially in the context of Western cultural conventions, lack of response is often interpreted negatively or as rejection in itself. Thus, in the context of public response, we should not view a lack of response as somehow neutral. Likewise, when preparing to respond verbally, instructors should also monitor their nonverbal responses, which can just as easily communicate feelings like acceptance, indifference, or even hostility. In Jess's case, while none of her fellow students said anything positive or negative, their nonverbal cues such as avoiding eye contact, resulted in feelings of rejection.

Feminist pedagogy should also include reflection or examination of things that don't allow for full participation from all students. In A's story, for example, she chooses to come out about her asexuality because she finds the prompts they have been given too limited. She says that her "disinterest in and inexperience with sexuality left [her] at a bit of a loss at understanding works of literature through a sexual perspective." This is a learning moment for the whole class to think about making inclusive, open-ended prompts and assignments that allow room for everyone's story and point of view. We don't have this part of the story, but hope that the students in the next iteration of this class found more inclusive assignments.

In general, the behavior instructors model for their students, especially in the complex moments of revealing vulnerability and coming out, is critically important because it serves as an example to other students for how they should respond. In this manner, instructors can model behavior that helps students grow in their reflexive vulnerability personally to eventually becoming reflexive activists publicly (for a great example of this, see Godbee's example (Chapter 17, this collection) of dealing with microaggressions enacted in her class, *Writing for Social Justice*). We will discuss specific examples of what instructors can do to nurture these moments in the conclusion.

Finally, while we emphasize the importance of appropriate public response from instructors to coming out moments made by students, we would like to also note that students come out in classroom settings in different ways, not all of them public. Students may choose to come out privately to the instructor during a one-on-one session, like in the example of Katie's student who discussed her lack of confidence with writing during office hours. Likewise, students may take the opportunity to privately come out to the instructor in online discussion forums or classroom assignments not shared as a class. Similar to the manner in which we often have pedagogical discussions about how instructors should allow for different ways of student participation, not just public class discussions, especially in the case of introverted students, we argue that instructors should

also allow and prepare for nonpublic coming out moments by their students. We would also like to suggest that modeling open accepting responses allows room for positive coming out experiences through other classroom spaces and activities, where the instructor might not be found such as discussion groups, collaborative project groups, or even just one-on-one sharing or peer review. We offer suggestions for both public and nonpublic coming out moments in the conclusion.

CONCLUSION: PAYING ATTENTION

Negotiating moments of coming out in graduate writing classrooms opens room for feminist conversations and interventions about the role of writing and identity in spaces that are both public and private, personal and political, concurrently. Such negotiations can ultimately lead to deeper discussions of how we foster the development of activist student citizens who are reflexive in words and actions.

Based on our findings in these particular stories, here are some things for instructors interested in enacting feminist pedagogies to keep in mind when students come out in their classrooms:

- Thank students for sharing (at the very least)
- Say “tell me more about that.” Comments like this allow the instructor to situate the student’s moment in the larger context of the class and goals of the day.
- Listen to every student, every time.
- Recognize and honor what your students tell you about themselves.
- Monitor your affect!
- Invite private discussion and confidence, one-one-one, e.g., private forum messages, individual reading responses, email correspondence.
- Remember ways of coming out are varied and different—and are not always public.
- Similarly, based on the findings from these particular stories, we advise students interested in feminist and/or activist stances to keep these ideas in mind:
- Be open. There are many reasons why other people might not recognize a coming out moment when it happens. Something big to you might seem small to others—this is not a measure of the value of your embodied experience.
- Pay attention to your classmates, both their words and their body language; these will clue you into how they are feeling and what types of responses they are looking for.

- Remember that coming out is a recursive process that happens over time to varying degrees. It can be a transformative moment, for you and/or your audience, but it doesn't (always) have to be.
- Keep in mind that coming out is a choice; we encourage you to measure how safe you feel in the particular moment, program, class, assignment, etc.

These two categories of bullet points highlight the multitude of ways that coming out as other can 1) be a feminist rhetorical practice as well as an activist performance itself, and 2) provide space for modeling feminist pedagogical practice. We know this is not an exhaustive list and invite more ideas and continued conversations about feminist pedagogies and the role of coming out in the writing classroom.

NOTE

1. All appendices referenced in the text, including the authors' own coming out stories as both sound and text files, are located online at https://drive.google.com/drive/folders/0B2Vu6VfSpS_rOHppMVpIMlIzbVk

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