

Chapter 26. Coaching Queerly: Healing in Writing Center Work

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There are few things more draining than the constant cycle of coming out.

My boat, compared to the sea of academia, is still small and made even smaller by my queerness. I'm a graduate student at the gateway of my career, existing in the liminal, blank-horizon tides where the boundaries of student and professional are blurred. So often I feel adrift, unsure of my course, relying on distant stars in a midnight sky to guide me to my next port.

As I try to navigate the waves and swells, I'm disrupted by the wake of larger vessels—the monstrous, leviathan ships that demand I yield to their course. Each time one of these rogue waves rocks my boat, I brace myself: shield my face from the spray, seize a rail to hold tight, and pray I'm not thrown from my craft.

This is how it feels each time I come out in academia. I don't know if I can ride out the wave, if I'm going to be safe, if I'm going to, once again, feel the sting of saltwater in my eyes from someone's telling silence. And though I've developed a feel for the fickle water, I remain pervasively seasick.

In my first two weeks of graduate school, I encountered more of these disruptive unmoored moments than I had in years. I sat paralyzed in my department orientation, uncertain of how my identity might be received. When my cohort was pushed to define our research interests immediately, I shied away from the word queerness, instead evasively mentioning “justice rhetorics” and “minoritized student belonging.”

In that first tumultuous week of adjustment, I was confronted with another unexpected ship in my path. As part of my graduate assistantship, I would work in my university writing center, which required a biography using a woefully small number of characters.

Are you going to come out to your clients? The slithering voice murmured in my ear, almost mocking me, taunting me with images of no-faced students expressing horror, disgust, and storming away. I doubted, as I so often do in the workplace, whether my identity was something I “should” share. In a heteronormative world, I have internalized the risks and pitfalls of centering my sexuality at the forefront of who I am. In academia, I've grown accustomed to peers wrinkling their noses, faculty's eyes flickering in surprise, or worse still, the positing of microaggressive statements in class surrounding queerness that I then meekly and guiltily confront by mumbling about my wife—and the resulting awkward silence from all in the room. These uncomfortable situations are just a small corner of the possible consequences of coming out, many of which are far more damaging.

The cursor blinked at me as I pondered what to write in the text box. The biography genre is inherently threatening to queer people; its unsaid expectation of authenticity and quick summary is conducive mainly to the straight experience. I had to pause, to consider if I wanted to elide my sexuality or confront it. This moment felt like a crossroads for me, a definitional moment for my fledgling journey as an academic. Either I was going to face the waves head-on, or I was going to turn for quieter waters at the cost of my own ethos.

With shaking hands, I typed what I quietly hoped to study: LGBTQ+ rhetoric and writing, to try it on. *Send a light in the dark*, said the kinder voice in my head, despite the cruel smirk from my self-doubt.

I have worked at the same institution for nearly ten years: as an undergraduate, a student affairs professional, and then a graduate student.

As an undergraduate, I made just one appointment at the writing center in four years, and only at the request of a professor for extra credit. I brought a rhetorical analysis paper that had received, at least from my fragile perspective, a woefully poor grade. I was an “A” student, and the “C” on this paper cut me deeply. At the time, I did not know that rhetoric and composition would become my greatest passion.

When I searched for a coach, I didn’t see any mention of queerness. I remember the slight sink of my heart, but I wasn’t surprised.

I don’t remember the specifics of the appointment with the graduate student I chose, other than the rush of blood in my ears and my sweaty palms. I remember the crushing fear of offering my writing, already critiqued by my professor, to a stranger. I recall the welling in my stomach that I might have to sidestep any conversation around my identity with a quasi-peer.

The appointment didn’t go badly. Instead, it was just as all my other academic experiences had been thus far: expected, unsurprising, normative. And when I recalled this feeling, I realized that perhaps there was an unrealized potential. Maybe the writing center—with a staff willing to invest the labor needed to make it so—could become a safe space for students struggling to connect to their university.

As an undergraduate, aside from my partner, I had no queer companions. I had no mentor; I had no hands to grab in the dark. I never told a peer or a professor I was a lesbian. I was never encouraged to study queer theory. I didn’t even know the field existed. There were no indicators that identity should be offered, let alone celebrated. To hide was the smart and safe step, even as I was surrounded by pervasive straight expression.

So, as I waivered over the keyboard, considering deleting the research interest I’d typed, I thought of the ghost of my previous experience in this same writing center and how she didn’t come back again. Instead she haunted the space, reminding me how she didn’t feel like it was a place she could be herself.

I thought of how she left with confirmation that sharing writing was difficult, and she felt isolated and alone in her university.

I thought of how desperate she was for someone to understand, and no one—from her perspective—bothered to try.

I saw her standing there, black and gray backpack over her shoulders, waiting for me to make a decision: to rewrite the story or not. To face the waves or turn for smoother, though inauthentic tides.

And for her, I left the line in my biography.

To my knowledge, I was one of very few, if not the only, coach to specifically mention queer topics as a research interest in their biography. At the time, I didn't understand what would evolve from this decision: not only a bold, if not slightly unstable, healing of my self-authorship, but the agency to approach my coaching style with "queering" at the forefront.

What I observed, over time, was that my declaration seemed to draw students who were experiencing a similar sense of disillusionment, whether that was with their writing, their identity, or their experience as a student.

A moment this was particularly clear for me was when I worked with a student on a piece that they quietly confessed they were very proud of, but their instructor had reprimanded them severely. "I love to write," they said softly, "but I don't feel like I should anymore."

I spent that session with the student, not only working through the instructor's comments, but assuring them that, regardless of the situation in this classroom, I didn't want them to lose their joy in the craft. This wasn't the only example: students brought me papers on topics of queerness, taking solace in my affirmation of their work. I worked with students from all kinds of minoritized identities: they were my most consistent clients. Writing is full of labors, and too often, the traumas students carry with them are dismissed. In some ways, particularly in the stressful ethos of college, methods of care and empathy are a facet of queerness themselves. "Getting over it" and "getting through it" are too often served up. My clients often expressed to me how a kind word from me made their day or boosted their confidence to head back to class. That was kindness I did not feel as a queer undergraduate.

Of course, this role was imperfect. There were moments where I found myself slipping into old habits: when I'd introduce myself, for example, I'd say I was studying rhetoric and composition generically. My healing was imperfect, and there were students who I suspected did not appreciate my signaling—I certainly got the occasional hard look and closed-off interaction.

But in general, as I worked with my students, as we faced their traumas and celebrated their successes, as I watched my clients beam with pride as they indicated their improving assessments, as I held back tears as they told me their applications to scholarships were accepted, as I quietly grinned to myself when they told me what a wonderful professor I'd be one day. I thought of my younger self, who'd sat just a table away from my station. She'd been so lost back then, so unsure. And throughout my tenure in the writing center, she haunted me less and less.

On that final day of work, when it was time to say goodbye, she smiled at me.
And I smiled back.