

Virtual disruptions: traditional and new media's challenges to heteronormativity in education

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December 2008

Abstract

Schools generally reinforce heteronormative discourses to the degree that queer representations surface primarily through traditional mass media, and new cybermedia sources. In order to inspect possible future trends in the field of education, this paper reviews the most current research available on the role of media in shaping the perceptions of sexuality by youth. It focuses primarily on representations of queerness that challenge heteronormativity in changing traditional media sources such as television and film, and in emerging media such as avatars in online virtual worlds and social networking websites.

These challenges, as virtual disruptions, open up discourse and offer opportunities to engage in critical pedagogy. In conclusion, I outline how teachers can begin to use critical pedagogy to leverage their knowledge of virtual disruptions in media in order to challenge heteronormativity in schools.

Keywords: sexuality, education, future, media, society, gender, networking, virtual worlds

Virtual disruptionsⁱ

Schools are a space where identity is solidified and redefined. Students with marginalised identities, such as sexual and gender-variant ones, find schools to be difficult spaces to express their identity. René DePalma and Elizabeth Atkinson (2006), researchers from the University of Sunderland, have challenged the traditional focus of schooling using what Judith Butler (1999) refers to as the “heterosexual matrix. This matrix, according to DePalma and Atkinson citing Norm Fairclough (1988) and James Gee (1996), ensures that “normalizing discourses maintain and support heteronormativity in all social contexts” (p335). Simply, heteronormativity assumes heterosexuality and furthers the squelching of non-heterosexual discourse. Schools reassert heteronormativity. Discussions in schools attempting to breach the “heterosexual matrix” are reined in as inappropriate (Pascoe, 2006), deemed too sexual, silenced through political correctness or verbal abuse (Pascoe, 2006), possibly “labeled as evil” (Ricks, 2005) and accused of promoting a “gay agenda” (DePalma, 2006). Initial exploratory research shows that this trend appears to be international in scope (Ferfolja, 2008; Morris, 2002; Reimers, 2007; Rothing, 2008; Sears, 2005) though challenges exist to the universality of the construct’s application (Boellstorff, 1999; King, 1993). Schools remain important battlegrounds for social change (Miceli, 2005), but heteronormativity shapes the direction of that change.

Since students are not taught in schools to understand deeply their own and their peers’ sexualities, learning about sexuality becomes largely the terrain of mass media. With the advent of the mass media as a government apparatus affecting perceptions on the local, national, and international levels (Iyengar, 1997; Edwards, 2001), social science research - centered on the effects of the media in political and social struggles - has shifted research paradigms from solely content analysis of the media to “how media news coverage affected an issue’s salience on the agenda” (p226-230) (Rodgers, 1997). In this theoretical context, the heteronormative discursive environment of schools relegates rights for, and understanding of, non-heterosexual persons to relative unimportance.

But the media of today is not the media of the past, so it requires diverse approaches to understanding it. Traditional media outlets such as film, television, and print media are being supplemented with – not totally supplanted by – cybermedia sources: social networking sites, YouTube, video games and even online virtual worlds. Students can be at school during the day and submerged in a virtual world at night (Buckingham, 2008). What are the implications of this media shift on educating all students about sexuality in the 21st century? How does heteronormativity function and affect perception in these new spaces?

In this critical review of current literature on sexuality, education, and technology, I outline how current media shape youth’s perceptions of sexuality.¹ To accomplish this, first I suggest we need to learn from mistaken assumptions that traditional media no longer matter. Then I analyze structures of social networking and virtual worlds while acknowledge challenges to and advances of heteronormativity. In conclusion, learning from the prior discussions of media, I suggest formalising a queering of pedagogy and teacher’s roles more generally to help resist heteronormativity in schools. Throughout and in my conclusion, I argue that the dynamics of an ever-shifting media environment creates a critical space for a virtual disruption of heteronormativity: where heteronormative frameworks are not taken

¹ Some avenues for future study were also explored during this critical literature review, but did not feature directly into my analysis include: the application of theory regarding queerness, disability, and gender and how they work in tandem to silence students (McRuer, 2006; Pothier, 2006; Wehmeyer, 2006); sexuality and its role alongside social class, race, and gender when selecting higher educational institutions (Reay, 2005); masculinity, queerness, and the focus on boy’s experiences in school (Connell, 2006); sex work among youth, locally and globally (Escoffier, 2007; Padilla, 2007). There is much to be done on these subjects for the future conceptualization of sexualities.

for granted and the lessons of virtual lives are brought to bear on real life. The virtual disruption of heteronormativity, in particular through new media, challenges assumptions about the possibilities of education. But as this disruption is only virtual, researchers, educators and activists need to promote explicit connections between worlds – instead of treating the “virtual” and the “real” as entirely separate.

When writing about sexuality, word choice affects the way any text is received. Writing becomes unavoidably more difficult when choosing between words “gay” or “queer,” both of which hold very different histories and connotations in different locales. I choose to use the word “queer,” as an American who identifies as such and who has been influenced by “queer” theory, though I realise that using “queer” tends to be viewed as academic, subversive² and to some, derogatory. On occasion I use “gay” to connote a broader social movement that may or may not be radical or centered on subversion or resistance. I unpack “queer” identities whenever possible by being explicit about whom I reference, navigating between identities and designations when appropriate and available in the literature.³

The persisting effects of traditional media

Traditional media has been simultaneously complicit in perpetuating stereotypes of queer individuals, and downplaying the sex part of sexuality to appeal to, and to not upset, mainstream viewers. This denies audiences the opportunity to inspect heteronormative assumptions. A recent case from California – the outcome of which remains undetermined – reveals this dynamic.

Supporters of Proposition 8 – which seeks to define marriage as being between a man and a woman – aired television advertisements in California where “first graders were taken to a lesbian wedding as a teachable moment.” Another advertisement warned, “Some of the most profound effects (of not passing Proposition 8) are for *children*.” The speaker in the advertisement then delineates how gay marriage will be taught in public schools (*Yes on 8*, 2008). In this case, the assumption that teaching about sexuality is equivalent to teaching children about sex is used as leverage to organise supporters against civil rights for queer individuals and families. *Yes on 8* mobilised a reactionary citizenry to rescind rights granted to same-sex couples by invoking the spectre of teaching about queer lives in schools – resulting in the proposition passing. Traditional media, in this case, did not encourage people to pull away from society and become cloistered denizens of their living room: living virtual lives spent in front of the television (Austin, 1995). Media presence in people’s lives seems to become more and more ingrained, habitual, and ubiquitous, but withdrawal from civic life is most certainly not a by-product of this transaction.

Traditional media has the potential for challenging assumptions about sexuality.⁴ More recent films which do appeal to, at least, secondary school students, include the genre of secondary school and college, comedy films (including *Old School* (2003), *American Pie* (1999)). In these films there are diverse constructions of masculinity, usually “jocks” and “nerds”; “frats” and “pledges” that inevitably resort to stereotyping sexuality, gender, race and ethnicity, immigrants, ability levels and just about any combination of the above. The

² Even some proponents of queer theory argue that it has lost its usefulness for creating social change, though this argument is mediated by the cultural context in which the theory is applied (Kirsch, 2006).

³ A source for discussing the benefits of using the word queer can be found in an essay by Judith Butler (1993), *Critically Queer*.

⁴ Film has also had an interesting role in educating about sex that will not feature directly in this analysis since images from popular culture are the primary area of study (see Eberwein 1999).

static portrayal of the characters is, at times, strangely queer because of the need for unique and awkward situations that are humorous. Such films as *Legally Blonde* (2001), *Sorority Boys* (2002), *American Wedding* (2003) and *The House Bunny* (2008) present audiences with opportunities to observe the effects of assuming too much about gender or sexuality.

For example, in *American Wedding* (2003), Stifler, the “jock” prototype known for getting girls, enters a gay bar where, due to an inability to realise where he is, he entangles himself in a dance-off with a tall, hairy club-goer named Bear. He enters an environment most men would find threatening, yet when he realises he is in a queer space, his heterosexual claim to masculinity allows him to feel comfortable. Stifler and Bear dance off while a montage of music from the 1980’s plays including “I’m Your Venus” by Bananarama and “Sweet Dreams” by the Eurythmics. Stifler engages Bear by dancing around him, staring at him, and verbally challenging him. He rolls under Bear’s legs thrusting his pelvis in Bear’s direction, who then returns thrusts his direction. They do not touch but make their desires for each other clear. After the dance competition is completed with no clear winner, Stifler collapses in Bear’s arms. He regains his senses and leaves the bar. Bear comes out and mentions “he manages some girls” who may be useful for the boy’s bachelor party – relying on his ability to manage women’s bodies to gain acceptance among the presumed heterosexual protagonists. Bear hands Stifler his business card and Stifler remarks, “Told you that guy wanted to fuck me.”

As the other boys brush him off, the audience lands firmly back in heteronormative discourse after briefly journeying through an amazingly queer scene. Stifler attempts to justify his actions by saying that the other queer man wanted to fuck him presumably because he is so attractive; but as his vanity is proven rhetorically by the other man wanting to fuck him, there is something still queer about his position. Bear’s masculinity, assured through his “management of girls” and his imposing figure, does not challenge Stifler who relegates his experiences to manly competition – and thus not technically engaging in queering himself. He does not claim his enacted desire for Bear, yet the moments where the two danced so intently together allow for a virtual disruption in heteronormativity.

The effects of the discourses in these films on heteronormative assumptions, including their overlap with adolescent fag discourse in America (Pascoe, 2006), have yet to be examined in the research on media studies, likely because they are seen as low-brow schlock, primarily for adolescents, or simply not serious film.⁵ Yet as Pascoe argues, American adolescent male masculinity constructs itself in relation to, not based solely on, these primary sources of information on sexuality. Masculinity in these films often require the usual displays of queerness and sexism to reify itself, but the continued shift in this genre to discuss and show queerness more openly will likely impact understanding of queerness by future generations. Further challenges to sexism as an essential element of masculinity, and a deep understanding of gender identity in general, are also needed within these influential genres.⁶

In the past, and particularly within the British context, images from television and the movies have unified queer movements to fight for positive representations (Weeks, 2003). Television has definitely had wider impact than film for youth, however. In a study

⁵ More work needs to be done to understand the differences between the American adolescent fag discourse and British “laddism” as means by which masculinity is constructed.

⁶ If adolescent’s acceptance of same-sex peers depends both on sexual orientation and gender expression with gender expression being rated as less acceptable, then an understanding of being queer relies on a complex understanding of gender (Horn 2007).

conducted in 1994, two groups of participants were assessed on measures of homophobia and empathy both pre- and post-intervention. The experimental group which received lectures on homosexuality, homophobia and the role of the media in perpetuating this, exhibited lower levels of homophobia and higher levels of empathy than their control group peers (Walter, 1994). Converging evidence comes from a pilot study of heterosexual television viewers, in which participants were asked to recall which homosexual characters they remembered best (Bonds-Raacke, 2007). Their impressions of these individuals were then evaluated to determine if the participants had an overall positive impression. While it is difficult to separate the fact that some participants only remembered positive or negative portrayals, positive role models in traditional media appear to foster positive feelings toward homosexuality, and prime social attitudes for future relationships (Bonds-Raacke, 2007).

These last two cases appear to rest on a theory that positive gay or lesbian role models in the media provide a way to promote the normalcy and acceptability of homosexuality, which may be true. However, television programmes have also helped normalise and fictionalise high-class gay and lesbian cultures. The impact of which has effectively solidified and sold heteronormative and classist visions of queer sexuality as simultaneously hypersexual and asexual, as fashion-obsessed, overtly body-conscious, young, hairless, urban and largely Caucasian. This begs a comparison with images from the American adult gay press – *The Advocate*, *Genre*, *Instinct*, and *Out* – which also mirror this trend (Saucier, 2008). The impact on this for queer youth and thus for their aware heterosexual peers is that many youth have to either accept or reject these images when speaking about a community of which they may or may not claim to be a member.⁷

Images from traditional media have defined what it means to be queer and have shaped an international culture where one can be “globally gay”: moving from one country to the next, and never having to leave a gay ghetto. The concept of being “globally gay” must be taken along with a push that traditional Western terms to define sexuality in non-western contexts upsets the universal assumptions of labels like heterosexual, lesbian, or bisexual which seem to not apply with the same rigidity everywhere (Boellstorff, 1999; King, 1993).

As we have discussed, traditional media may be shifting in response to the increased use of the internet by youth, but since the emergence of a trend toward moderating the influence of television and film on perception, research is in danger of forgetting the persisting effects of traditional media – both positive and negative. Thus teaching media awareness in schools requires approaches to both types of media and an ability to distinguish between opportunities for learning about heteronormative assumptions and the momentary disruptions of it.

New media’s challenge

The dissipated interest in television and film and the focus on the impact of the internet has had a profound impact on education today. Marginalised identities have found on the internet “an opportunity to share in the benefits of group membership” (McKenna, 1998), and “to express their true-self qualities” to someone else (Bargh, 2002). With shifts in technology have come shifts in the ways we conceptualise and talk about sexuality (Cooper,

⁷ Due to the disparity between actual and perceived queer people, many seek other communities that better suit their personal body image, for example Bear communities which embrace hairy and sometimes overweight men (Manley 2007).

2000; Ross, 2005). How will media representation and personalisation shape the future? If “cybersexuality is a space between action and fantasy” (Ross, 2005), what does it offer? In addition, how have the creation of avatars and virtual lives also directly influenced sexual expression in offline lives? In the following section, I attempt to address these questions and more by reviewing two common forms of new media and their potential for producing virtual disruptions of heteronormativity.

Social networking sites

Social networks in and of themselves do not necessarily challenge heteronormative assumptions. In order to understand the potential of virtual disruptions of heteronormativity in this area of new media studies, a few cases must be presented. By discussing the potentials of MySpace and networked activism, I describe how social networks can shape and inform sexual identity through meaningful discussion and the creation of viable non-heteronormative spaces.⁸

When filling out the details of a MySpace or Facebook profile sexual orientation as a descriptor is presented differently. MySpace’s choices include “Bi,” “Gay/Lesbian,” “Straight,” “Not Sure,” and “No Answer.” Facebook asks applicants to check if they are interested in “Men” and/or “Women,” avoiding a direct statement of one’s sexual orientation.⁹ So personal details on MySpace require a user to select a non-dichotomous answer or potentially no answer, and Facebook does not explicitly ask for an answer but does not necessarily assume heterosexuality or homosexuality. So for a brief moment during the “profile creation” phase where one is “initiated” (boyd, 2008), social network users step outside of heteronormative assumptions and are allowed to identify or not identify as they wish. Where else would students have the opportunity to identify as they choose?

A critical essay by danah boyd (2008) describes a youth culture where “If you are not on MySpace, you don’t exist.” The implications I introduce to this statement are that all youth participating in social networking are asked questions about their sexual interests explicitly. She then defines the social networking environment through her construction of networked publics, participation, initiation, and identity performance. Of most interest here is her description of how MySpace allows for a fluidity of identity negotiated by one’s perceived audience yet monitored by an unseen audience. She describes a cautionary tale where a black applicant to college who wrote about struggling with gangs in his neighborhood in his admissions essay was nearly declined because the admissions officer reviewing his case discovered allusions to gang membership on his MySpace page.

So, extrapolating back to the example of sexual orientation given above, how revealing one’s sexuality online could be unevenly mapped back into reality. MySpace members could be playing with the possibility of being queer online, but hiding their sexual orientation or gender identity to various offline acquaintances. boyd’s examples reveal how future generations, while given the opportunity to disrupt heteronormativity, are faced by heteronormative pressures in their lived experiences, thus potentially censoring or obfuscating their online lives.

⁸ In the field of education, social networking is still presented as a new idea with students networking among each other and many teachers and parents left unable to understand the extent of this contact. Examples abound from the media where teachers variously are not allowed to interact with students via social networking sites, engage students inappropriately, or thankfully provide help for homework (Simon, 2008; Trotter 2008).

⁹ Note the exclusion of transgendered individuals who identify as neither male nor female and those who may be attracted to them from both of these websites.

Net activism

Net activism has experienced resurgence, civic engagement is flourishing online in gaming, blogging, and petitioning, as well as personal sites not sponsored by non-governmental agencies (Bennett, 2008). Though the results of this shift are difficult to assess, Peter Dahlgren (2007) asserts, that knowledge and skills are being spread through activist networks and becoming institutionalised. As Dahlgren rightfully reminds his readership, the internet is not only an opportunity for progressive social causes to network, but fascist, racist, and undemocratic ideals survive there as well.

Bharat Mehra (2006) describes how cyberculture studies and action research can combine to document the empowerment of marginalised communities online.¹⁰ Through his examples, he traces how he largely assists racialised communities of difference, but the leap to queer and/or youth cultures seems reasonable. Mehra as a researcher and educator played the role of an active participant in constructing meaning for the communities in which he worked. His role as an advocate was magnified through his use of the internet as a means of communication. Similar stories appear to be played out across international contexts (for example, Foran, 2003; Terranova, 2001).

The role of the advocate is not always so straightforward, however. Sometimes advocates, instead of using their voices as leverage to benefit marginalised communities, can provide opportunities for these communities to advocate for themselves (Goldman et al, 2008). Through case studies of how digital media allowed youth to participate in school boards and in their larger community, Goldman et al showed how the role of the advocate becomes more nuanced, possibly as facilitator rather than arbiter of justice and possibility. They show how “the mix of social, cultural, and digital technologies, brought youth to new levels of participation – levels that surprise, inspire, and even threaten the adults who support their democratic engagement” (p203).

Net activism also exists in queer youth networks that inhabit spaces on the web where sexuality as commonly presented is redefined and challenged based on gender, race, ability, and nation. Digital queer youth discuss transgendered and bisexual identities more willingly; communicate safer sex practices “candidly”, and examine the sociopolitical nature of queerness thoroughly and provocatively (Alexander, 2006; Driver, 2008). Part of the energy that is channelled into reproducing networks of like-minded individuals online, likely arises from commercial descriptions of queerness that do not resonate with youth. Not all digital queer youth make it to these discussions, however, and most end up at more commercial websites such as PlanetOut.com or Gay.com (Alexander, 2006).

Networking based on sexual identity also has its drawbacks. Juana Rodriguez in *Queer Latinidad* (2003) describes an experience of getting rejected from a lesbian chat room because she could not prove that she was a lesbian; in fact her responses to the three questions asked by the members of the chat community caused them to label her a man and ban her. This is an example of how identity is negotiated in a space where anyone could be anything; proving one’s own identity can be difficult for the uninitiated or simply left out. Youth who may not know the necessary codes of behaviour or have the same knowledge base could easily fall into this category. Further, because of the persistence of speech acts online, a discussion about sexuality online could lead to offline consequences days, months, or years later (boyd, 2008).

Online simulation and gaming

¹⁰ Critical cyberculture studies also offers a lens through which to understand the perceptions of sexuality on-line (Bell 2007; Silver 2006).

The literature on video gaming and learning has grown recently (Gee, 2008) but has not directly assessed its impact on marginalised sexual identities. Even the creation of avatars, or online selves, and its potential for learning has been discussed (Gee, 2007). Video gaming – a transmedial phenomenon – can be defined as where the online world of gaming blends with the culture of reading strategy guides, buying tee-shirts, and playing board or card games related to the video game in real life (Taylor, 2006) How do we interpret and understand the impact of virtual lives, the creation of avatars, and virtual worlds on youth and their perceptions of sexuality given this complexity? I defer to an online resident to describe his experience with avatars and sexuality:

“Avatars are an amazing way of controlling the intensity of intimacy. This is why some people prefer Second Life and systems like it to the real world. Their intimacy and interaction can be more easily controlled and they feel more protected... But in fact we are more exposed precisely because we feel this way” (Meadows, 2008, p36).

Meadows continues to describe a world with “no narrative” that seems unbounded by anything but the imagination, yet concedes that some terrifying elements are present in the virtual world of *Second Life*. One of his first experiences online is with a slave trader who enslaves women and keeps them as pets; he stumbles into a forest where mice with oversized erections discuss contemporary issues; and he describes the inescapable influence of pornography. While different worlds exist for young and adult gamers, the blending of these cultures seems unavoidable.

The online world described by Meadows is imminently more sexual than traditional media outlets and more diverse in its expressions of queerness. The potential for users to construct new identities and even multiple or conflicting identities online needs to be examined in relationship to adolescent identity formation and sexuality. Through the experiences of your avatar, a gamer can play “gay” and experiment with their sexuality. Further, heterosexual-identified gamers are forced to confront queer identities online regardless of their desire to avoid them. The creation and design of avatars may be a way to escape or resist heteronormative assumptions as well.¹¹

A case available for examination within the public sphere, where the meeting of online and offline queer identities is challenged, involves an online massive multi-player role playing game (MMORPG) known as World of Warcraft (WOW): a game where at times, more than 8 million players take on a persona from one of ten different races and populate a pre-designed world. In an effort to escape the heteronormative assumptions and homophobic bullying present online, Sarah Andrews, a gamer who actively recruited members for her guild – a group or team that comes together to achieve game objectives – stated that her group was not “GLBT only” but “GLBT friendly.” Blizzard Entertainment, the owners of World of Warcraft, argued that Andrews’ recruitment inside the game was a violation of sexual harassment policies and policies protecting against sexual orientation discrimination. Blizzard threatened to ban her and her guild, dismantling the group before it began in an effort to protect online gamers, many of whom are adolescents, from harassment (Terdiman 2006). The heteronormative matrix became a filter through which preventing discrimination resulted in silencing the discourse on sexuality. Andrews was later allowed to reinstate her guild. If this action had occurred in an environment where there was little or no homophobia, heterosexism, sexism, racism, etc., then Blizzard Entertainment might have

¹¹ Some research conducted on adults who created avatars for viewing by their significant others reveals the diverse ways an avatar can be used to convey a variety of social messages (Vasalou 2008) and the leap can be made that this is true for adolescents as well, though research does not exist for us to evaluate this trend.

had an argument, however, a quick venture into this world proves otherwise. So in an alternate world to *Second Life* populated by many youth, any discussion of sexuality outside of the bounds of traditional heteronormative assumptions is eschewed, and sexually diverse users are acceptable if they silence themselves.

Video gaming and the roles of avatars in the virtual world provide the best and most anonymous space discussed heretofore for creating virtual disruptions in heteronormativity. In the case of *Second Life* and potentially *World of Warcraft*, that virtual disruption could exist everytime a gamer logged in – transforming the virtual to the permanent. This assumption, however, is contingent on the whims of a shifting corporate politics as evidenced above.

Reasserting heteronormativity through new media

Before discussing the implications of virtual disruptions of heteronormativity by media on education, there are a number of phenomena that need to be explored more fully that do the reverse. Through cyber-bullying and concerns about cyber-“safety,” heteronormativity gains new traction potentially in spaces where individuals were allowed to define the norms of their own discursive environments. Any discussion of the potential of unsettling heteronormativity needs to address these two trends that seek to resettle it.

Cyberbullying

Lisa-Jane McGerty (2000) (borrowing from Kendall 1999) acknowledges a missing element in the research literature focusing on use of the internet, simply that one does not live their life either only online or in reality. So discussing internet use without being situated in an everyday environment is inauthentic. Youth experiences on the internet appear to at least somewhat mirror those in real life. One of the difficulties of understanding the impact of cyberspace on queer perceptions is that the lives of youth are increasingly lived online, and the limits of what they are exposed to are unknown.¹² The U.S. Census bureau estimates that more than 57% of children and youth have access to the internet at home and more than 21% indicate going online to do school reports and assignments (2001). This has resulted in an extension of school grounds and thus the heteronormative discourses surrounding it. In a survey (n=1400) conducted on bullying experiences in cyberspace (cyberbullying), researchers identified that:

“Within the past year, 72% of respondents reported at least 1 online incident of bullying, 85% of whom also experienced bullying in school. The most frequent forms of online and in-school bullying involved name-calling or insults... When controlling for Internet use, repeated school-based bullying experiences increased the likelihood of repeated cyberbullying more than the use of any particular electronic communication tool. About two thirds of cyberbullying victims reported knowing their perpetrators, and half of them knew the bully from school. Both in-school and online bullying experiences were independently associated with increased social anxiety. Ninety percent of the sample reported they do not tell an adult about cyberbullying...”
(Juvanen 2008)

¹² One theory not advanced here is that cybersex and pornography are a sources of information for youth: but since these practices are illegal in many areas, documentation of these experiences is difficult (some examples of work that could be studied in youth include, Carballo-Diéguez 2006; Daneback 2005; Icard 2008; Rosenmann 2006; Ross 2005; Ross 2007)

These powerful findings appear to hold traction, and perhaps even reveal a more dramatic trend, when compared to similar findings by other researchers in more traditional school environments (McNamee, 2008; Warwick, 2006; Young 2004). So perhaps, it is easier to bully and thus more haunting to have unprecedented access to schoolmates online. Homophobic bullying has long been established as a norm, a rite of passage for young men, and even tacitly acceptable in most school systems. Some scholars argue that this is part of what distinguishes masculinity in adolescence (Pascoe 2006). Cyber-bullying appears to be an extension of the heterosexual matrix into the private online lives of youth. Within total institutions such as boarding schools, bullying in all forms must be even more pervasive, and this idea holds up historically (Wackenfuss 2007).

Cyber-‘safety’

Julie Frechette (2005), a professor of communication studies, comments on how “cyber-safety” concerns have been translated by market forces on the internet into a discussion of the internet as possessing “value-laden” content. Yet, most online “safety measures” do not confront the onslaught of advertising information directed at youth. So corporate interests still communicate mostly whatever they want to an eager audience: including pornography and exploitative materials. No effort is made to understand these materials. Instead, Frechette proposes that we teach students helpful media literacy skills to avoid them. Further, the author overlooks that if parents or schools impose “safety” measures, most youth are denied access to critical information about queer sexuality web because many of the programs “protect” children from queerness and not heterosexuality. Discussions of cyber-“safety” often assume an “innocent” and thus uninitiated youth who has never been exposed to sexuality in general. A quick look around oneself reveals how that is clearly false and how efforts to censor instead of understand are dangerous.

Virtual environments are not good or bad in and of themselves. Sometimes riddled with heteronormative assumptions and some of the same, perhaps worse, bullying trends present in schools, mostly the potential of new media can be evaluated. For some queer youth, as referenced by Alexander (2006), the internet is a lifeline, but for how long? Will trends like cyber-bullying and cyber-“safety” subsume the queering of online environments?

The implications for education and the 21st century

General recommendations

The last decades of the 20th century and the first of the 21st have brought increased visibility for diverse sexualities. Jeffery Weeks (2007) – a scholar of intimacy and sexual life – describes a post-war culture that has made enormous strides, yet has a number of “unfinished revolutions” regarding sexuality. Among these, he insists that fostering the coming out of homosexuality, preventing the continued institutionalisation of heterosexuality, monitoring the commercialisation of the erotic, and combating the “culture wars” hold enormous sway over the future of queer politics. In *The World We Have Won*, Weeks outlines a thorough and thoughtful history of how sexual and intimate life have changed for the better, but he acknowledges that the true power of these changes has not been brought out.

Similarly, throughout this critical review of the literature I have tried to report not only the extreme opportunities associated with digital media (social networking, video gaming and creation of avatars) – at times, bordering on utopian visions – but also some of the new challenges posed by media (cyber-bullying and cyber-“safety”). I have grounded this discussion in the reality that the effects of traditional media are not going away. Nevertheless, understanding the virtual disruptions in heteronormativity by understanding the different functions and thus potential of media sources will allow digital non-natives leverage their knowledge of the world outside of school to change the way schools work on the inside (Gee 2007). Care should be taken not to co-opt youth-friendly media and instead leverage our knowledge of media that engages youth (Gee 2007).

Moving from post-modern approaches of understanding the discursive function and presence of heteronormativity to practical solutions schools can address is difficult, however (Pascoe 2007). This is further compounded by issues such as the “digital divide” where access to technology is not even across class lines and where technology may indeed be used to exploit some people, while jettisoning others into high-profile lives (Buckingham 2008).

Practical steps

I propose that schools should systematically teach media literacy, addressing each form of both traditional and cybermedia as an opportunity to ask, “Who benefits?” “Who is left out?” If these discussions involve a deep understanding of the way heteronormativity functions in these various spheres and how the spheres overlap, then educators can bring virtual disruptions into their own school environments. This will contribute to a queering of instructional practice to provide support to queer identities and challenge heteronormativity within schools.

A variety of scholars have presented methods by which teachers can learn through and about queerness and thus communicate that to their students (Grace 2000; Kumashiro 2002; Rodriguez 2007). A study (Mudry and Medina-Adams, 2006) of pre-service teachers and their sensitivity regarding sexual minority student populations, found that sensitivity training around issues of sexuality needs be incorporated into teacher preparation programmes. This appears to be even more important for male early childhood teachers and teachers who are non-white. The authors suggest that discussions in teacher education programmes need to match current issues in schools and not solely issues of race and racism, though she acknowledges them as important (Mudrey 2006).

Though methods differ, all agree that at present, it is dangerous for queer teachers to open up and tell their stories to their students for fear of parental retaliation, being fired, or being harassed by students, administrators, other faculty, and parents (Jennings 2005). So while researchers point out that queer autobiographical stories can serve as teaching points for classes, this comes with much risk and sacrifice on the part of the queer educator, and not on the heterosexual educator (Grace 2000). A possible solution to this quandary is the teaching of queer life stories through immersive online environments, both within schools and outside of schools taking pressure off just the queer teacher to tell his/her story.

So “queering” pedagogy, providing an instructional space where queerness is substantively present, involves *Queering Straight Teachers* as well as opening the possibility of accepting queer teachers, in reference to the title of a recent book edited by Nelson Rodriguez and William Pinar (2007). In the collection of essays presented, the authors pose that critical

pedagogy requires an examination of the assumption of heterosexuality in schooling, with heterosexuals leading the charge. A variety of techniques are presented, from video creation, to metacognitive discussions about sexual identities, from carnival moments celebrating queer performance, to introducing queer theory to straight educators. All of these appear to be possibilities, and if they can be translated accurately into strong instructional practice, they could very well be the future of education. If heteronormativity in schools is to be challenged, then everyone must recognise the virtual disruptions that start the process of change.

Conclusions

Protecting children from discussing sex will hurt them (Levine 2002) and protecting students from discussions of sexuality will as well. In September 2010, all British state schools will be required to educate children about sexual health from age seven on (Cassidy 2008). Now might be just the opportunity to prepare future generations to resist heterosexist assumptions based on media perceptions of themselves and others by engaging in lively discussions of sex and sexuality. Open discussions of sexuality in schools need to be accompanied with complex discussions of ability, race, immigrant status, nation, class, gender, and age, and should seek some sort of status in the curriculum, in school functions, and in classroom discourse.

But the danger for the future is that more of the same will continue: heteronormativity within educational institutions, along with normalising gay politics, will continue to censor queer representations. Opportunities granted by the virtual disruption of heteronormativity through media could be lost, due to a lack of serious attention by researchers, educators, and activists. Since the future is not predetermined, we have the opportunity to transform virtual disruptions into a lesson for all students. We have the opportunity to take discussions of sexuality in schools, in homes, and in virtual worlds seriously.

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ⁱ This work could not have been completed without the editorial guidance of Helen Haste, Visiting Professor at Harvard University's Graduate School of Education and Professor Emeritus from the University of Bath; Brahm Norwich Professor of Educational Psychology at the School of Education and Lifelong Learning at the University of

Exeter; and Jeff Gavin Professor of Psychology at the University of Bath. Discussions with numerous colleagues helped shape the content of this paper, including Tiffanie Ting for aiding in the conceptualization of virtual disruptions, and Chris Atwood for providing a sounding board for discussing heteronormativity. I am also grateful to Futurelab for giving me the opportunity to write about such an important topic for the future of education.

This document has been commissioned as part of the UK Department for Children, Schools and Families' Beyond Current Horizons project, led by Futurelab. The views expressed do not represent the policy of any Government or organisation.