

Pedagogue Bonus: Queer Theory and Composition (w/Timothy Oleksiak)

Pedagogue podcast

Transcript

Welcome to Pedagogue Bonus, a short episode that covers a single topic or question. I'm your host, Shane Wood.

In this bonus episode, I talk with Timothy Oleksiak about queer theory and composition.

Timothy Oleksiak is an Assistant Professor of English and the Professional and New Media Writing program director at the University of Massachusetts Boston. His work has appeared in *Peitho*, *Composition Studies*, *College Composition and Communication*, *Pre/Text*, and in edited collections. He is an enthusiastic lover of the composer Philip Glass and his given, chosen, and emerging families.

SW: You teach a class at UMass Boston on queer rhetorics and composition. What do you hope students learn or takeaway from that course? Are there any readings that you would encourage other teachers to take up who might be interested in exploring and incorporating queer theory in their own first-year writing courses?

TO: I love queer theory, and it's dangerous. It makes folks vulnerable in some ways, but it also can be life affirming. I think queer theory is dangerous and threatening because it challenges a way of life that fights hard for supremacy. Queer theory is a commitment to, I think, holding ourselves open, and holding others open. It's not about the Kama Sutra, right, and I think that we think we get this sense of like, "I'm not comfortable talking about sex." We can talk about it in ways that go across the intellectual spectrum, from first-year writing to graduate level writing.

We don't want to vacate sex. We just need to think about it in a way that deviant sexuality, non-normative sexuality, is a vector of oppression. It's an awareness that sexuality can be a vector of oppression. Queer suggests that non-normative sexuality just shouldn't be, and it shouldn't be because it replaces a normative ideal that fights hard for supremacy. To think sex and rhetoric in composition remains a bold act because queering peer review, or other kind of things, or thinking about the composing process through BDSM logics is going to remain a line of thinking that is immediately off-putting to a lot of people in our field.

Queer theory is cool, until we get to sex, and that remains such a fascinating aspect of our field. Like once we get to sex, it's like, "Can't do it." I think there's some problems and some legitimate barriers. We may be very uncomfortable having conversations about sex, talking about our own sexuality, even internally. We may be very uncomfortable about sexual expression. There may be feelings of disgust regarding sexuality, or considering sex as a vector of oppression. You may never have had to think about it, so this makes queer theory really difficult for people. When I teach queer theory and queer rhetoric, I hope that students don't just understand the deliciously and purposefully deviant, nor the harms that communities experience. That's one thing. We need

to talk about the harms. We need to talk about how horribly violent, vicious, and cruel state's response to HIV/AIDS was, and continues to be at a global and local scale. That's some hard stuff that queer communities, particularly gay men, have had to deal with. Gay men of color, particularly, it affects.

We need to talk about the violence regarding trans women and trans women of color. That has to be part of our thinking about justice in queer rhetoric. I want my students to explore how queer theory excites what is possible for them, as composers, though. That's really, really important. I think sometimes rhetoric and composition forgets that queer theory can excite our understanding of who we are, as composers, and what composers do, and what writing can look like. That could be writing about sex as a rhetorical act. That could be that. If you feel comfortable as a teacher saying, "Hey, let's write about the rhetoricity of sex." Cool. It could also be exploring sexual communities and their composing or commutative practices. There are scholars in our field who are doing great work on queer literacy or the literacy of LGBTQ youth, for example. That could also be a really cool area of research.

It could also be playing with gender in non-colonizing ways. If we're thinking about multimodal composition, how do we responsibly put on a drag show? How do we responsibly guide students through walking in their first pair of heels? What does that have to do with rhetoric and composition? We can think through the way that heels shift bodies and how bodies circulate, and that could be a multimodal thing. Drag, whether it's drag queening or drag kinging, can be a deep multimodal experience, but it could also mean thinking clearly about concepts that rhetoric and composition has deemed valuable, and this is the kind of primary mode of queer research that I do.

I talk about sex in "Composing in a Sling." I also use BDSM to think through elements of rhetorical listening and the composing process. What does BDSM kind of logics thinking communities tell us about the composing process or the limits of rhetorical listening? In another piece, I suggest that we must begin to compose as rhetorical bottoms if we are to offer new ways of theorizing the presumption of openness in our field. What does it mean to compose like a rhetorical bottom? Queer theory, in other words, opens up this new possibility and makes sense of sex to do that.

I want to know what my students do with revision and perhaps the image of the stone butch. When you think about stone butch and revision, what things do you think about now? I also want to know how thinking about drafts might change when we also think about reading and throwing shade, or about the beautiful and problematic taxonomies for gay, lesbian, and trans people. I'm talking about like a lipstick lesbian butch, boi spelled B-O-I, twink, salmon, otter, all of these really fun, silly, ridiculous, meaningful classifications. What does it mean to write twink rhetoric? How does that change our thinking about composing when we compose as twinks? I don't know what that looks like, but the questions are lobbied at my students when we read about queer-gay taxonomies.

Now, this is the exciting adventurous possibility that happens. We can think about introducing or structuring queer rhetoric from lots of different perspectives. We can think about bringing queerness into the writing classroom in lots of different ways that are not just talking about graphic images of deviant sexuality, or getting people to go on their hookup apps. It's possible, and all it takes is this desire to want to play and communicating with students that this play is serious, it's playfully serious. Play is sometimes the best response to something that takes itself too seriously, in the face of intense trauma or violence facing gay men, sometimes to just laugh or mock is a really great answer, a really great response, and queer theory can help us kind of think through that.

As far as reading goes, I want to think through maybe about like, "Okay, what do we read to do some of this stuff? What do we give to students?" Gayle Rubin, her classic essay, "Thinking Sex," and supplemented with *Blood Under the Bridge*, which is her thinking, reflecting on that important essay. Jonathan Alexander and Jackie Rhodes *Techne: Queer Meditations on Writing the Self*. It's a really hard digital multimodal text. I think, *A Light in the Dark* by Gloria Anzaldúa, anything by Violet Livingston. I think a special issue of *Pretext* that Jackie put together on sexy rhetoric is really life sustaining. This is what's super important. She was an editor who said, "Let's bring sex back, and then write with your full self. Write in a way that is not always yoked to the five-paragraph essay, or the tip of an academic argument."

We need teachers, we need editors, we need people in the field to enable this kind of sexy rhetoric, this kind of writing that feels bold, that brings in queer ideas into beloved values and concepts that circulate in our field. I think another piece is Benny LeMaster. They have an incredible piece on erotic/a, it's just glorious to me right now. Stacey Waite's *Teaching Queer* is really grounded in the sense of seeing how it all looks and plays out. In a non-queer vein that has helped me think more creatively about queer text: the *Uses of the Erotic* by Audre Lorde, "Theory as Liberatory Practice" by hooks, "When the First Voice You Hear is Not Your Own" by Jackie Jones Royster. Any reading that invites students to consider the creative ways that shape their understanding of writing, composing, and to our field. Eric Darnell Pritchard's concept of literacy, normativity, and literacy concealment is so good. It can be really cool, read *Fashioning Lives*, everyone, because it's just amazing.

What's important as the reading is allowing and encouraging students to write queerly or to reflect on what queer theory can keep open for themselves, as writers, for writing, and for the field. Without an enabling professor, and without assignments that require that kind of thinking, I think something deep will be lost.