Sexualities, technologies, and the teaching of writing: A critical overview

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Abstract

In this introduction to a special issue of Computers and Composition, the authors critically review current literature on computer-assisted writing pedagogies that grapple with issues of sexuality. Although this body of work is small, it points to provocative ways to develop our students’ critical and rhetorical sensibilities about the constructions of sexuality in our culture. Further, such work innovatively addresses the place of networked communication technologies in the interrogation of such constructions. The authors conclude with both an introduction of the work in this special issue that addresses the intersection of sexuality studies and computer-assisted writing studies and with a call for additional work in this field.

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1. Introduction

Among the many scholarly and pedagogical innovations undertaken recently in the theory and practice of writing instruction, some of the most exciting and provocative work has been occurring both in computer and composition studies and in the use of sexuality studies and queer theory to theorize anew the teaching of writing and the uses of classroom space. Recent conference and workshop presentations at the 2003 and 2004 Conferences on College Composition and Communication (CCCC) attest to the continued vibrancy of both modes of intellectual and pedagogical activity. However, while scholarship that concerns sexualities and

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writing is steadily growing, such scholarship often fails to discuss technology; likewise, while scholarship on writing and computers is flourishing, with the exception of a few recent articles in *Computers and Composition*, little work seriously considers the intersections of sexuality and teaching writing in computer-mediated spaces. Our interest in a special issue of *Computers and Composition* has grown out of the productive work happening in the sub-disciplines of queer-and-sexuality studies and writing-and-technology studies. Bringing these two fields together, as some scholar–teachers have been attempting in various conference presentations and workshops, will further an exciting dialogue that is beginning to take shape at the national and international level. This special issue of *Computers and Composition*, on Sexualities, Technologies, and the Teaching of Writing, is designed to explore and productively complicate that connection.

How so? First, this special issue joins previous (though less focused) conversations surrounding the topic of difference. We think specifically, here, of the special issue of *Computers and Composition* from 1997 entitled “Computers and Diversity,” edited by Margaret Barber, Laura Sullivan, and Janice Walker (1997). Although the articles from that collection began the important work of considering seriously the ways in which difference can be used, abused, normalized, subverted, and valorized in the teaching of writing, this collection looks specifically at the pressing concerns facing teachers who value integrating queer issues into the computerized writing classroom, or who use technology to tease out the intricacies of subjectivity and identity vis-à-vis issues of sexuality. In conversations with colleagues, we hear how hard it is to add one more item to the litany of multicultural concerns already facing the writing teacher, and yet we also hear how important teachers think the work of dealing with sexuality and gender issues can be. Contributors to this special issue consistently demonstrate why sexuality is not just one more thing to add, but is integral to the ways that we already conceive of technology and writing, as well as the bodies that produce texts (and are texts themselves) in the writing classroom.

Second, both sexuality and technology studies are concerned with the intertwined issues of space and identity. Although theorists continue to puzzle out the intricacies of what it means to be queer—as well as what we mean when we talk about the various sexualities that exist—at the heart of such discussions seems to be an agreement that marking spaces as queer, or even marking the role that unspoken sexualities play in class discussions, disrupts easy binaries of representation and reification. For instance, in works such as Harriet Malinowitz’s (1995) *Textual Orientations*, Annamarie Jagose’s (1997) *Queer Theory*, Tim Dean’s (2000) *Beyond Sexuality*, Calvin Thomas’s (2000) *Straight with a Twist*, and William J. Spurlin’s (2000) *Lesbian and Gay Studies in the Teaching of English*, theorists and teachers demonstrated how acknowledging queerness undermines the assumption of a family-centered heterosexuality and opens up a space for discussing those who live and craft their lives outside of the heteronormative paradigm; further, such work allows all participants in the discussion of sexuality to reflect on how norms for sexuality are socially, culturally, politically, and psychologically constituted—a realization that helps us reflect a bit more carefully on the intersections between politics and the mind and body. This is research that readers of *Computers and Composition* may not be familiar with, although they will certainly know the work that has been done in technology and writing studies regarding the ways that various technologies disrupt traditional notions of writing and writing instruction, effectively queering spaces that were once dominated by pens,
pencils, and loose-leaf paper. Articles in this issue bring together these various subfields so that scholars and teachers can reflect on and interrogate the ways sexualities, their accompanying epistemologies, and a variety of communication technologies impact and inform one another in the computer-mediated classroom.

Third, as Cynthia Selfe (1999) noted, the failure to pay attention runs throughout popular discussions of technology and its place in the writing classroom, as well as in education more generally. Although Selfe spoke primarily to issues of access, we would extend her concept to include paying attention to the sexed and sexualized bodies that sit in our classrooms and that use various technologies. Yet conversations among techno-savvy academics often fail to deal with inequities and disruptions in computer-mediated and online courses, such as those caused by homophobic flaming and the more subtle intimidations enacted through heteronormative language. Although scholars have commented extensively that computers and technology are not panaceas for developing socially responsible classrooms and learning environments, we have noticed, most recently during a workshop at the CCCC 2002, that many teacher–scholars continue to see merely mentioning queer issues as an appropriate method for dealing with problems like homophobia. Others, however, strive to include lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender (LGBT), and queer students and epistemologies into classroom discussions, often mediated through chat rooms or discussion boards, in an attempt to create not only spaces for alternative perspectives but to use queerness as a mode of critique and critical inquiry. In many ways, Malinowitz (1995) gestured toward this in her conclusion to Textual Orientations, but we suspect that computer technologies are being used in many other, even more exciting ways to elicit, foster, and develop such perspectives. This collection of provocative articles demonstrates many of those methods.

And finally, although queer theories—fluenced often by Marxisms, feminisms, and the discourses of deconstruction—proliferate, rarely do these theories bring their important ideas to the classroom in ways that make sense to teachers who are not already advocates of queer theories. They simply do not make the important rhetorical and epistemological move toward what Paulo Friere called praxis, the thoughtful blending of theory and practice. Perhaps it’s difficult for teachers with extensive teaching loads to translate those theories into classroom practice. Regardless, the articles in this collection demonstrate those connections between theory and practice, connections we believe are as useful to the experienced queer theorist as to those just entering that particular theoretical fray. Significantly, these articles engage praxis in ways that test our current theories of gender, sexuality, and technology, demonstrating why our theories may need to be revisited based on what happens in the interactions between theory and practice.

One of our goals in editing this special issue was to allow those teachers experimenting with ways of interrogating sexualities an opportunity to describe, study, and reflect upon their work in computer-mediated, writing-intensive classrooms in the hopes that the broader community of composition professionals might find encouragement from these experiences to enact such transformative pedagogies in their own classrooms. We do not believe these goals are too lofty. In fact, our experience just last year leading a week-long email discussion list focused on the topic of this special issue for the 2003 Computers & Writing Online Conference reminded us why the work we are doing here is so important. Participants that week—teacher–scholars from around the world—were eager to hear, learn, and contribute more to discussions about how
considerations (and interrogations) of sexuality can contribute to writing instruction. Topics that week ranged from how to introduce issues and ideas about sexuality to students to what roles class and race play in our understandings of sexualities; from questions of whether we can ever remove traces of our sexualities when we go online to what role rhetoric can play in helping us to work through these complicated issues; from the ways avoidance of dealing with sexuality plays out to what role discomfort plays for both straight and LGBT/queer teachers, as well as our students. These topics all connect to the sorts of questions that we and the contributors to this special issue hope to raise and answer, even if only provisionally, throughout the following pages. Most important to us, the questions participants raised and the possible answers suggested in the articles that follow this introduction demonstrate that queer theories and issues of sexuality are applicable—in fact, integral—to classroom practice.

Despite the relatively few number of articles on sexuality studies, we’ve come a long way since scholarship on computers and composition has emerged. If we look back at Gail Hawisher and Cynthia Selfe’s visionary collection from 1991, Evolving Perspectives on Computers and Composition Studies: Questions for the 1990s, we see no substantive mention of sexuality issues. However, Catherine Smith’s article from that collection, “Reconceiving Hypertext,” included some discussion of gendered virtuality, and she asks the right questions, given her claim that “we do not all interact with the three-dimensional world in the ‘same’ way”; as such, “Have the designers of virtual realities encountered our differences? Do the systems those designers design know about difference?” (p. 233). Whether they do or not, it is clear that teachers and scholars have begun addressing Smith’s questions from positions that critically consider issues of gender and sexuality as they circulate—sometimes productively, often provocatively—in the networked composition classroom.

As we survey the available research, we find that there are four key issues that surface consistently in discussions of sexuality, technology, and the teaching of writing: introducing LGBT/queer texts and issues; investigating safe(r) spaces in our classrooms and on the networks; creating and problematizing identity as a stable trope for narration, discussion, and argumentation; and using the notion of sexual literacy as a lens for teaching and research.

2. Inclusions of LGBT/queer texts and issues

Perhaps the most work on sexuality issues throughout our discipline has been done on the topic of how to include the texts and issues of the other into our courses (see Adams & Emery, 1994; Chapkis, 1994; Freedman, 1994; Hart & Parmeter, 1992; Mittler & Blumenthall, 1994). Often, the work of inclusion is undertaken with the best intentions—to acknowledge difference and diversity, such as diversity in sexual orientation. Inclusion of texts by gay writers who discuss their queerness openly is a frequent strategy of inclusion used by many textbook authors. But we should also consider other forms of inclusion and exclusion: What gets included and excluded from web spaces, especially those developed by, for, and about LGBT people? And how might that question be useful for our writing students to work with? Here, we’d like to mention three points: (a) what others have said about inclusion; (b) how teacher–scholars are making inclusion work; and (c) other research options for teacher–scholars to consider.
On the first point, Malinowitz (1995) argued effectively that we do not accidentally omit discussions of sexuality from the classroom; rather, such omission constitutes “an expression of institutionalized homophobia, enacted in classrooms not randomly but systematically, with legal and religious precedents to bolster it and intimidate both teachers and students” (p. 23). When we use the term homophobia, however, we want readers to understand that at its root—fear—we know there are reasons for LGBT people and straight allies to fear the inclusion of queerness in the classroom. We live in a climate where such inclusion is definitely risky. Yet some teachers have worked hard to place the lives and experiences of LGBT individuals in their courses. For instance, Malinowitz’s book-length study of lesbian and gay students in a writing class is one text that attempted to bridge queer theory and classroom ethnography. Others include Paula Ressler’s (2002) work on creative drama, in which students enact various kinds of role-playing dramas—some scripted, some improvisational. Likewise, Ingebretsen (2000) and Talburt (2000) demonstrated the problems and possibilities of the teacher-as-text when LGBT teachers out themselves to their students, and Miller (2000 [1994]) brought up the important concern of how we assess homophobic texts by students. We must acknowledge, though, that Malinowitz (1995) concluded her study by noting “that mere ‘inclusion,’ [...] renders impossibly simple the experience of the margin, which is a site both of annihilation and actualization, of disempowerment and electrifying resistance” (p. 251). To discuss or appropriate LGBT people, lives, texts, and issues as only oppressed is to do harm; these lives and texts are more complicated than that.

So what might we gain from considering inclusion a bit more carefully? We’d hope for some of that “electrifying resistance” that Malinowitz (1995) alludes to. For instance, non-normative sexualities can serve to complicate and disrupt normative sexualities, and in saying this, we also mean the ways in which bisexuality and transgender identities disrupt both homo- and heterosexualities. Michelle Gibson, Martha Marinara, and Deborah Meem (2000) made this point in their article “Bi, Butch, and Bar Dyke”; of bisexuality, for example, they noted that when one can be ‘straight’ and ‘lesbian’ simultaneously, one doesn’t get an already codified, easily recognizable closet narrative. [...] Bisexuality, defined as an incomplete dominance of either sexual trait, defies easy social categorization; it is an identity without visible rules, almost without referent. (p. 73)

Including bi and trans texts and identities, then, is one way to disrupt even those spaces that have normalized the hetero/homo binary. As Jagose (1997) suggested, the value of the queer in cyberspace can be that “queer describes those gestures or analytical models which dramatise incoherencies in the allegedly stable relations between chromosomal sex, gender, and sexual desire” (p. 3). We know that web pages, MOOs/MUDs (synchronous chat-space and object-oriented programs), instant messaging, blogs, and other online sites offer spaces for such queer plays of—and with—sexuality.

If we do gain something from inclusion, however, teacher–scholars must also be careful that inclusion is not its own reward, but that it functions in such a way as to “challenge the academic mindset that assumes the centrality of White, middle-class, male, heterosexual values and desires” (Gibson et al., 2000, p. 93), or we end up merely reifying the centrality of a White, class-privileged heteronormativity. Rhetoric provides us with excellent methods for such work. Just recently, Janet Bone noted in a 2003 Computers & Writing Online conference discussion...
that she used the American Psychological Association (APA) online guides for gender- and sexuality-inclusive language with her advanced writing class for psychology graduate students. She was unsure, however, how to include this work in first-year composition courses where, she said, she had to use the Modern Language Association (MLA) style guide. One obvious option is to have students work through statements made by the APA and MLA (maybe even the National Council of Teachers of English) on gender- and sexuality-inclusive language and to think through why these policies exist, how and why they’re different, and what that means about language and writing. Such work can happen in anonymous online spaces, on class discussion boards, or face-to-face, but the result, we hope, would be students who know more about the gendered, even heteronormative functions of language. We need more of this sort of pedagogical dialogue, particularly because, in the last ten years of dialogue on WPA-L, one of the largest and most active listservs for composition and rhetoric professionals, not once has a teacher posed a question like Janet’s. Why is this list—to which over 1,000 teacher–scholars in our field are subscribed—unable to have such a conversation? It worries us that a list that large is more concerned with the words of (mostly) dead people—witness the ubiquitous plagiarism discussions—than with protecting and validating the languages and lives of the students who inhabit the classes we teach.

We’ll end this section then by noting that inclusion can also serve as a powerful trope for research for our students—and for us. Beyond the question of whether or what to include in class comes the question of what is and isn’t included outside the boundaries of the classroom. For example, do we ever really get to see homophobic responses to online queer sites and communities? When we read magazines like Newsweek or Time, we see letters to the editor that often seriously question content—or even letters that seem to argue with each other about a recent article or point of view expressed in the magazine. Sometimes, we find homophobic letters among these missives. But many LGBT/queer web sites, despite the fact that they have more space than a print-based magazine, do not include this sort of information or such responses. Do we have any idea what sort of letters these sites get from surfers who arrive accidentally or on purpose and who do not like what they have seen? In these cases, teachers and students (as well as scholars) might interrogate the reception of these sites, pondering the illusion of acceptability or normalcy that a supposedly uncontested audience reception might entail. What new illusions of acceptance or safety are these sites creating for LGBT and non-LGBT visitors? Students may equate the number of LGBT sites with legitimacy, but is such a notion valid? We’re not sure, but we think in rhetoric and composition classes, these sorts of questions are always relevant because they deal with audience, purpose, and the persuasive value of extrinsic evidence. They are even more relevant in computer-mediated classes because they demonstrate the rhetorical uses of technologies to effect social change, or at least the illusion of change.

3. A critique of safe spaces

The subject of safety in online spaces deserves particular consideration, if only because so much writing about LGBT/queer students in the academy has focused on the importance of creating safe spaces for these students to express their opinions, talk about their lives, and con-
tribute their views to important discussions. As Lester Faigley (1992) pointed out in Fragments of Rationality, network-enabled communication platforms seem ideal in creating spaces for the disenfranchised or marginalized to contribute, sometimes forcefully, to group discussions. Faigley wrote, “In oral class discussions, the remarks that stand out are those that neatly state positions and seem to tie up segments of knowledge. In InterChange [synchronous chat program] transcripts, however, there are no such peaks followed by nods of agreement. The movement of discourse in InterChange is more wavelike, with topics ebbing and flowing intermingled with many crosscurrents” (pp. 182–183). Since Faigley’s initial contribution to the discussion of safe spaces, the work of scholars in sexuality and technology studies could easily be read as focusing on two primary issues regarding safety: (a) What does safety really mean to LGBT/queer people online, and (b) How do we as instructors—if indeed we can—create safe spaces online for LGBT/queer students to discuss issues of sexuality? At this point, we believe it relevant to introduce yet a third question into the mix: What do these safe spaces do to make themselves equally safe for heterosexual students to explore and interrogate their own sexualities in productive ways, rather than just through normalizing rhetorics of legitimation?

Nina Wakeford’s (1997) article “Cyberqueer” (republished in 2000) reviewed much of the early scholarly work on analyzing queer use of the Internet. Looking at how queers have used newsgroups, chat rooms, and web sites, Wakeford asked, “[W]hat is queer cyberspace?” (p. 404). Her answer was suggestive: “Cyberqueer spaces are constantly reconstituted as points of resistance against the dominant assumption of the normality of heterosexuality in ways which are familiar to activists engaged in other struggles against heterosexism” (p. 408). More specifically, though, she maintained that “The importance of a new space is viewed not as an end in itself, but rather as a contextual feature for the creation of new versions of the self” (p. 411). Other writers have taken up this claim—for example, Steve Silberman (1998) in “We’re Teen, We’re Queer, and We’ve Got E-Mail”; David F. Shaw (1997) in “Gay Men and Computer Communication: A Discourse of Sex and Identity in Cyberspace”; Joanne Addison and Michelle Comstock (1998) in “Virtually Out: The Emergence of a Lesbian, Bisexual, and Gay Youth Cyberculture”; and Jennifer Egan (2000) in “Lonely Gay Teen Seeking Same.”

We should note that some of our own research has likewise taken us into these spaces (Alexander, 1997, 2002) to help us assert the value of online spaces as sites for queers to exchange information with other queers, discuss important issues, and experiment with and craft a sense of self. Beyond that, we are currently involved in additional research projects that investigate the use of online space and communities to construct identity. For example, although there seems to be no print-based lesbian young adult magazines, two exist for gay youths: XY <http://www.xy.com/index.php?t=8> and Xodus <http://www.xodusmag.com/>. Both of these texts host print magazines and online sites and bring a number of Internet sites to their young adult readers. Here, the Internet versions of the print-based media are opening more spaces of connection for young gay men, particularly since the print-based magazines can cost as must as $10.00 per glossy issue. XY also recruits young writers, artists, and photographers to contribute to its print and online magazines, providing researchers with a wealth of options for researching rhetorics employed for coming out and developing community support. Xodus offers similar educational and informational resources on topics like sex, health, psychology, the arts, and music. These, and many other sites, offer chat spaces for gay men (young or old)
to come out or play with their sexual identities online. We can think of no end to possible research projects for scholars in rhetoric and sexuality studies.

Given these research possibilities, we must also forward a critical question: What exactly does coming out mean in online spaces? How does one come out in cyberspace and is this outing comparable to coming out in real life (IRL)? One of the articles that Wakeford referenced, Randal Woodland’s “Queer Spaces, Modern Boys and Pagan Statues” (2000 [1995]) discussed such coming out in online spaces in the following terms: “These on-line ‘queer spaces’ [. . . ] are ‘third places’ in [. . . ] combining the connected sociality of public space with the anonymity of the closet” (p. 418), producing seemingly safe spaces for identity experimentation. But how safe are they?

Some scholars have undertaken a critique of the relative safety of these spaces—critiques we need to consider if we’re using such spaces in our writing classes. First, Wakeford (2000 [1997]) reminded us that “Cyberspace has its own dominant history of how diverse sexual identities are expressed or silenced, yet this is rarely acknowledged. For the most part those producing and consuming cyberqueer spaces are obliged to work within what is technically possible within computer systems, and the representations which they have the skills to construct in each forum” (p. 412). This raises a serious question about the representation of diversity and the possibilities of inclusion in cyberspaces, such as who is participating in cyberqueer spaces—and who is not? (p. 413). In “Homo-pages and Queer Sites: Studying the Construction and Representation of Queer Identities on the World Wide Web,” Alexander (2002) summarized some of the primary concerns some writers have raised about the representation of difference, particularly race and ethnicity, on the Internet, including one’s desire to hide his or her (or hir) ethnic or racial background, or the inability to make a dent in the invariably White space (see Padilla, 1998; Tsang, 2000).

Lisa Nakamura (2002) extended such critiques in her recent work, Cybertypes: Race, Ethnicity, and Identity on the Internet, which explores not only the ways that representations of racial and ethnic difference often get short shrift on the Internet, but also how individuals from diverse racial and ethnic backgrounds are frequently missing in the production of content for the Web. Given such issues of access and use, the safe spaces of the Internet seem limited to those with basic access and technical know-how, creating sites for those who are privileged enough to afford them and who have the necessary technological skills to implement them; in the process, representations of difference are consequently limited, or put in the hands of the majority of users, the White middle-class.

Second, perhaps the most vexed discussion about queer cyberspaces is the notion of the safe space itself. We call it a vexed question because, on one hand, some argue that perhaps such spaces are not safe enough, and, on the other hand, some argue that they are perhaps too safe. Randall Woodland (1999), in “‘I Plan to be a 10’: Online Literacy and Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender Students,” reminded us that “users concerned about confidentiality should understand that almost any electronic system is subject to eavesdropping and that any communal norms are subject to individual digression” (p. 427). We don’t want to torque an analogy here, but much like the move among sex educators from saying safe sex to saying safer sex (since no sex is completely safe), we hear Woodland referring to cyberspaces as safer spaces—not safe. Even in anonymous discussions, in which we have attempted to provide spaces for students to talk more freely about hot topics (such as sexuality), any admission of
homosexuality or even a student’s willingness to bring the topic up elicits a strange curiosity on the part of many other students, as they look over the tops of their computers, furtively seeking out the queer one in the group.

Like Woodland (1999), in Joanne Addison and Susan Hilligoss’s (1999) “Technological Fronts: Lesbian Lives ‘On the Line,’” the authors analyzed some of their experiences participating in an “online study of academic women and computers” (p. 23). Reflecting on their negotiation of lesbian identities in the supposedly liberating realm of cyberspace, Addison and Hilligoss rightly maintained that “to come out online is [to] articulate an identity that our society works to render invisible” (p. 38). At the same time, such self-(cyber)-outing is fraught with potential unexpected difficulties. The authors claimed that “coming out online as a lesbian may be harder than doing so in face-to-face interactions” because the “visual cues” of identity that are present in face-to-face performances of teaching no longer exist (p. 38). On one hand, such concerns might seem a bit overstated, particularly since identities based on sexuality or sexual orientation are not always legible through particular visual cues. On the other hand, Addison and Hilligoss were correct in pointing out that “coming out [online or in discussion forums] may threaten other members of the discussion by implicitly sexualizing the discussion, moving it beyond an isolated body to relationships between virtual bodies. The dominant assumption is that being homosexual means being sexual in every situation” (p. 35). Potential queer participants in online chat spaces might refrain from coming out, given the cultural assumptions that Addison and Hilligoss correctly identified as accruing around the performance of homosexual identity: If coming out automatically sexualizes social spaces, then some queers may choose to be silent about their queerness for fear of appearing or being inappropriate. Such silences unfortunately reify the normative silencing of queerness (or certain performances of queerness) by conflating it with the taboo or the inappropriate, and queers sometimes feel the pressure of such normative binds, even in online communication spaces that otherwise should be or feel safe, such as the academic group that Addison and Hilligoss described in their study.

Conversely, online spaces run the risk of being potentially too safe. Consider further Woodland’s (2000 [1995]) comments on how potentially restrictive such safe spaces might be:

> By presenting queer spaces as equivalent to spaces for other identity groups, the system architecture suggests a moral equivalence (or at least neutrality). Shoe-horning lesbian and gay spaces into these less controversial spaces yields some interesting decisions and compromises; we can see this mainstreaming of the lesbian and gay community as either empowering or trivializing. (pp. 427–428)

While acknowledging the powerful sense of connection and even identity construction that some have encountered online, Woodland wondered if, as in the real world, the LGBT community runs the risk of being ghettoized online; the power that LGBT voices carry is diminished as they are relegated to a corner of the cyberworld—you know, the gay part of the virtual town. As such, the vision of sexuality that the LGBT communities might offer—the critique of existing heterocentric social structures and the possibility of exploring alternate modes of intimacy, allegiance, and friendship—becomes subsumed under the category gay or queer, or under categorical headings with disconcertingly consumerist overtones: gay male chat room, lesbian online book club, transsexual support group. Most straight cybervisitors probably gloss over such categories, turning to other venues and missing out on interesting discussions of sexuality.
And by the same token, LGBT folk probably head to their assigned online spaces, missing out on opportunities to problematize heteronormative assumptions in other spaces. Woodland (2000 [1995]) remarked that the creation of specifically gay spaces on the Internet “assumes a unified and distinct Gay Community that exists only in the dreams of gay activists and the nightmares of religious fundamentalists. The realities of gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgendered communities defy such simple definition” (p. 428). In ignoring those realities, the larger world is robbed of the distinctive vision, insight, and critique that many queers have to offer about intimacy, communication, sexuality, and gender.

Institutional critiques are also relevant here. For instance, by safer, are we talking only about what’s safer for our students or also what’s safer for LGBT/queer faculty members and staff, particularly the lesser-protected classes of adjuncts, graduate students, and pre-tenure faculty members? In the 2003 Computers & Writing Online (CWO) conference, a thread persisted on the notion of genuine discomfort with addressing sexuality issues in the classroom, and it’s worth mentioning here that safety isn’t only an issue for our students. In his last year of graduate school, when Will was offered an opportunity to teach for a second time a course he had designed called Queer Rhetorics, he chose not to do it. Teaching that course the first time took a lot of energy and, more than that, took a tremendous toll on his body through illness, worry, stress, and concern—embodied experiences that we might expect when each day of class represents a complex matrix of rhetorical adventures (see Banks, 2003). We may be gay and out at school, but that doesn’t mean we want every day of class to open itself as a possible attack on our selves—even as it comes (by extension) through attacks on texts, topics, or other components of our courses. Likewise, one CWO participant talked about her own feelings of discomfort when introducing such issues. She’s straight but her embodied performance is often (mis)read as lesbian, and she worried what this pedagogical move might do to her credibility with students at a tech-heavy school where she’s already disempowered by her gender. Secondly, she worried about appropriating LGBT issues or identities and misrepresenting them; she feared, quite simply, that she’d get it wrong, screw it up, and do more harm than good by making mistakes in how she talked about queer lives and experiences. We also received a few back-channel emails from CWO participants who didn’t want us to think they were avoiding the topic, but they, too, feared getting it wrong. There is no shortage of reasons why LGBT/queer faculty members and staff, as well as straight allies, do not feel classrooms—even their own—are safer spaces for themselves or their students.

Nonetheless, despite these critiques, we feel it is important to create in our classrooms safer spaces for the discussion of LGBT issues in particular and sexuality in general, to experiment with them, and to work them for what they can offer our students in terms of insight and appreciation for difference. And some research suggests the efforts may be worthwhile. In “Teacher Involvement and Transformative Power on a Gender Issues Discussion List,” Kathleen Boardman, Jonathan Alexander, Margaret Barber, and Peter Pinney (1999) analyzed the use of multi-class listservs to discuss issues of gender and sexuality with a variety of students and instructors. The initial hope in using this platform was to create a broad but safe space in which difficult issues could be discussed via a listserv—openly and honestly, without the hesitations that usually accompany embodied discussions of such topics. The authors also hoped that their presence, as instructors, might help mitigate any potential flaming, given the nature of the discussions. However, the authors did not get the academic and rational discussion
they had hoped for; students periodically flamed one another, responding out of misogynist or homophobic beliefs. Instead of shutting the list down, though, the authors attempted to intervene productively, using each other to address some of the more bigoted positions of their colleagues’ students so that these students would not feel that their particular teachers were coming down on them. Soon, other students chimed in to question the more sexist or homophobic comments. Ultimately, the authors argued for the construction and use of cross-class, collaborative lists—with the following warning:

[...] the “oral” quality, particularly the ease of fluency on a computer, as well as the presence of a reading audience to whom the novice writer may be unaccustomed, increases the likelihood that someone will make comments or references that offend—even hurt—some list members of whose presence the writer was unaware. This is why we suggest that the list’s potential as a de-centered, nonhierarchical medium be balanced with instructor involvement in a variety of roles. (pp. 184–185)

The authors suggested that using spaces such as listservs to negotiate the parameters of participation was a good idea, leading them to conclude that the “variety of teacher (and student) styles of involvement, along with the consistency of the ground rules, allow for both open space and safe space” (p. 186).

4. Beyond identity: Queering cyberspaces and interrogating sexualities

Beyond creating, fostering, and facilitating such online spaces, other researchers, scholars, and writers have been asking us to consider critically the impact of queer theory on teaching and thinking about sexuality in particular and identity in general. Queer theorists start from the assumption that identities are socially constructed, and as such, are always in flux, always pulled apart and put together, working to make and unmake themselves at every turn. As Jagose (1997) described it in her *Queer Theory: An Introduction*, identity is an inherently conservative construct:

[I]dentity has been reconceptualised as a sustaining and persistent cultural fantasy or myth. To think of identity as a ‘mythological’ construction is not to say that categories of identity have no material effect. Rather it is to realize—as Roland Barthes does in *his Mythologies* (1978)—that our understanding of ourselves as coherent, unified, and self-determining subjects is an effect of those representational codes commonly used to describe the self and through which, consequently, identity comes to be understood. (p. 78)

This assumption, however, is not commonplace in our culture yet, although much of what we’re seeing from youth cultures, particularly on the web, is suggesting that the coming generation will be much more comfortable with the social construction of identity. Yet, as Judith Butler (1990, 1993) pointed out repeatedly, although we may perform our identities, we are not absolutely free to make such performances. There remain aspects of self that are outside our control. Malinowitiz (1995) made a similar point when she warned us that LGBT students “in mainstream writing classes who wish to write from a position of acknowledged lesbian or gay subjectivity must inevitably confront the ways that they function as social metaphors for their audience—their audience being, presumably, class peers and teachers” (p. 111). Likewise,
Sherry Turkle (1995) noted in *Life on the Screen* that of the many subjects she interviewed throughout the 1980s and early 1990s, a large number had gone online because they felt confined by essentialist notions of identity, the absolute fixedness of self; Turkle suggested that such narrow notions of identity may even do a great deal of psychological harm to individuals (p. 184).

With this in mind, here are a few things we’ve learned about the roles that online technologies have played in the construction of identity for LGBT individuals and what further studies of sexualities and technologies might do for our thinking about identity and self as cultural objects.

First, we’ve realized that online spaces provide options for LGBT people or those questioning the rigidity of sexual and gender roles in our culture to rehearse and role-play identity with some limited degree of safety. Here, we see one version of the value of *ethical play*, where LGBT rhetors use cyberspaces to construct a self for future use. This works against the modernist individual who is stable or unitary, toward a recognition that individuals have a variety of options for performing self. In “Out of the Closet and into the Network,” Alexander (1997) noted the value of role-playing, where students are “allowed to experience a different subject position initiated by choosing a pseudonym, and participate without censure or the threat of retribution” (p. 210). Here, Jonathan starts us on some important work for complicating identity. Although non-LGBT students may attempt to represent gayness through particular stereotypical tropes that flatten the individual lived experiences of LGBT people, careful guiding questions from the teacher can move them past mere representation into a space where students see the complications of LGBT experience. Beyond this, Jonathan noted that because students are familiar with such social controls as Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell, “it is easy for [them] to see how gay lives are heavily inflected with and impacted by societal norms and pressures; it is less obvious to them that straight lives, largely condoned and thus naturalized by society, are also part of a complex interweaving of social pressures and forces” (p. 210). Beyond this, we should note that any casual perusal of the weblogs of LGBT/queer adolescents demonstrates how this group can already write about their experiences with role-play in their daily lives as members of a marginalized group. Using these texts in our writing classes can help all our students to pull apart what might be pat assumptions about the self, the other, representation, and the presumed unified self.

Second, we have come to recognize that because representational notions of identity are perhaps even more problematic in network(ed) spaces than in the real world, we need to think with greater sophistication about identity. In “Cyberqueer,” Nina Wakeford (2000 [1997]) asked, “Can queer identity reliably be theorized without also problematizing how it may be reconstituted or transformed by the nature of the individual cyberspace within which it is constructed?” (p. 412). In other words, is queer identity performed in cyberspace in ways comparable to that IRL? Are there modes of queerness that can be performed online that cannot be IRL, and vice versa? One’s online fantasy life may be provocatively queer, while the same person’s real life might look relatively mundane, even straight, by comparison. More basically, we’re not particularly confident that one can even have a queer identity, when the two terms seem by definition at odds—with identity implying a distinct notion of self and queer suggesting a continual turning or torquing of such distinctness and fixity. It may be that we need energetic scholars working in these areas to help us understand the complexities of queerness and identity in provocative new ways.
What if instead of identity we began to think in rhetorical terms about *ethos*? While identity pretends at stability—and certainly has a cultural connection to fixity in the present climate—ethos foregrounds audience-based performativity and a recognition that some aspects of self are always open for invention, depending on any number of personal and social constraints: confidence, linguistic ability, time, place, rhetorical distance, and audience attitudes, to name a few. Although Wakeford (2000) argued that we should be more aware of how socio-economic forces foreclose on queer identities, we would argue that teachers need to think more carefully in rhetorical terms about the roles that rhetors and audiences play in simultaneously opening and foreclosing the production of meaning of any given text (and its context). Here’s a specific space where writing teachers can get into the work of queerness, sexuality, and identity with their students, where discussions of the ethos the writer attempts to construct and the possible *ethoi* the readers construct are a central concern of the classroom. Examining when, where, and how people talk about sexuality or queerness offers teachers the opportunity to see what kinds of discourse surround the discussion (and construction) of knowledge about sexuality, as well as what silences attend such discussions. Analyzing a transcript in which students talk about a sexuality-related issue online can provide fascinating glimpses into how students and teachers carefully put forward ideas about sexuality, react to others and their ideas, and avoid certain topics. Straight students who participate in such forums and simultaneously disavow any identity as queer are not just staking out an identity as straight; they are also attending to the construction of their own *ethoi* in a homophobic culture—a move that is worth comment and discussion.

Third, any further research on the intersections, or interse(x)ions, of identities and sexualities must also consider carefully the role that heterosexuality plays in such discussions. As Adrienne Rich (1994) suggested, students come to class with the assumption that their heterosexuality is not only normal, but compulsorily so. When the students we teach discuss audience, we often ask, “Who is this text trying to reach, and how do you know?” The students almost always collapse all sexualities into the heteronormative so that, for example, any advertisement with a sexy (or sexualized) woman in it must be directed toward men or boys and vice versa. Likewise, we know that speaking only of the Other does nothing to question the centrality of the normalized. If teachers only investigate the other of homo/bi/transsexuality, then they fail to help students “realize the social implications of their heterosexuality as well as the social [not just private and personal] nature of all sexual orientation” (Alexander, 1997, p. 208). In “Out There on the Web,” Scott Lloyd DeWitt (1997) made a similar point about the roles that normative sexualities play in the non-normative. Discussing the process of coming out, DeWitt noted that “we should not forget that coming out always involves more than g/l/b [gay, lesbian, and bisexual] people” (p. 232). Straight people respond to queers who come out, sometimes positively, sometimes negatively, and such response shapes the coming out narrative for the queer individual. Moreover, queers who come out influence straights to re-examine homophobic attitudes and views, thus altering their identities and senses of self. Although DeWitt didn’t explore the significance of that involvement, he reminded us that identities are always constructed and that such construction works both on the homo/bi/transsexual as it does the heterosexual; to leave the latter out of our equations as anything other than normal or oppressive means we miss a vital part of our analysis and continue to privilege the normative as normative. Just recently, Cameran and Kulick (2003) argued that heterosexuality, as much
as queerness, needs to be studied as a sexuality in its relationship to, and construction within, language: “Heterosexuality is an important influence on people’s verbal self-presentation, shaping what they say, how they say it, and also what they do not say” (p. 11). We might add that the same is true not just for “verbal self-presentation,” but for representation of self and others in a variety of electronic forums, and we hope that some of the articles in this special issue demonstrate for readers how and why discussion and interrogation of heterosexuality and heteronormativity is a productive pedagogical move, even as we realize that much more work should be done on the often unacknowledged role of heterosexuality and heteronormativity in classroom spaces.

5. Literate spaces: Networks, classrooms, and literacies of sexuality

One option for future research querying the intersections of writing, sexuality, and technology involves thinking through notions of literacy: What does and doesn’t count as literacy for LGBT/queer individuals? How does this differ online or in face-to-face classrooms? What are the literacies practiced by LGBT/queer students in online spaces? What about straight students? What are the opportunities to use sexuality to explore the notions of literacy—both online and IRL? And how are concepts of identity—for queers and straights—tied to notions of online and identity literacies? Indeed, the notion of literacy—of being able to read a space with the desire to enter into it and to contribute productively to it—is central to what we’ve been talking about, both in terms of creating safer spaces and in recognizing the social constructions of sexual orientations.

Woodland’s (1999) “I plan to be a 10” first began to probe this important connection to literacy as it reported on a survey Woodland used to cull out information about various young gay men’s use of chat rooms, discussion boards, and the Web. Broadly, Woodland reported that young gay men “create virtual identities, trying on new definitions of self, performing those identities to see what fits” (p. 76). For Woodland, cognizance of such virtual performances was crucial in understanding the many and varied literacy practices of our students. He noted that watching these young queers perform identities utterly separate from those they enacted IRL reminded him of how complicated all students’ literacy practices are, because students perform various literacies in various spaces (p. 77). Specifically, when topics were “deeply meaningful to them,” Woodland noted that these young gay men “ask questions, form hypotheses, test evidence, develop a personal voice and discourse style, see themselves as members of a community, and form themselves into thinking, writing, acting selves that they may (or may not) transfer to their lives offline” (p. 77).

But even queer cyberspaces are not free for alls; rather, they promote certain kinds of narrations, certain kinds of literacies about queerness. Although queer cyberspaces may initially have been established to provide community or safe spaces for discussion and understanding of LGBT/queer issues, “such spaces also become the sites where identities are shaped, tested, and transformed, both individually and corporately” (Woodland, 2000 [1995], p. 430). The complexities surrounding these sites, individuals, and ideas demonstrate, according to Woodland, the clear connections between online spaces and literacy:
The most obvious use of on-line spatial metaphors is to encourage certain appropriate kinds of
discourse and constrain others. Who defines such “appropriateness” is generally determined by
the corporate or political structures that govern each system; the function of spatial constructions
is to convey such decisions to users. When users have the opportunity to create such spaces
themselves (as on LambdaMOO and in an ephemeral way on America Online), the power to
encourage and constrain discourse is thus shared. (p. 423)

Or, put another way, virtual communities subsist on spatial metaphors that are utterly bound
up with identity issues. In LambdaMOO, the textual descriptors of places encourage particular
tones, content, linguistic performances, and thus the space is simultaneously creating and
created by the community that comes to it (p. 430). Analyzing such encouragements and
constraints provides teachers with insights into what kinds of discussions, and what kinds of
identities (or, at least, what kinds of representations of identities) are permissible in shared or
public spaces, both online and off.

Considering such analyses has clear implications for the kinds of spaces teachers con-
struct in classrooms—spaces in which they can productively discuss sexuality with students.
LGBT/queer students are most likely very sensitive to how, when, and where such spaces are
created. Pointing to LGBT students’ ethical performances, DeWitt (1997) noted that these stu-
dents are often hyper-aware of “allowed behavior in class, for it is but one more way that they
have learned to define themselves amid opposition and conflict” (p. 233). Given this, teachers
should ask themselves, What sort of behavior am I going to allow in class? And how does my
behavior call it forth? Writing teachers should remember that the spaces they create reflect who
will come to them, who will take part, who will help build or remodel that space—and who
won’t (see also Woodland, 2000 [1995], p. 426). All these issues converge on literacy—on
who will, who can, and who won’t have a voice in the pedagogical spaces teachers construct
with students.

The consequences of thinking about sexuality in terms of literacy extend far beyond potential
benefits to LGBT/queer students. What we are suggesting is that instructors interested in
approaching the topic of sexuality in their writing courses consider their approach not from
the standpoint of including queer voices, but as the possibility of ushering all students into
an understanding of sexuality in its sociopolitical dimensions and of becoming literate about
sexuality. Most queers probably understand the necessity of sexual literacy at a nearly intuitive
level. Being literate, for most LGBT/queer folks, is being able to read a given situation and
articulate either a safe self-representation or a challenging self-representation that critically
re-reads that given situation; they can choose to hide for safety, assert their queerness to
challenge heterosexist assumptions, or negotiate a path between the two. Such negotiations
usually manifest themselves as a meta-critical consciousness, often experienced as a running
meta-narrative, about how dynamics in particular spaces control, contain, prompt, or provoke
various self-representations.

Are straight students similarly literate about their sexuality? Sometimes yes; sometimes
no. For straight students, a literate understanding of their sexuality, and the way it circulates
in and is shaped by public discourse, might include a growing understanding of both (a) the
lack of safety many queers feel in online and IRL contexts and (b) the privilege that straights
have in largely not having to question the public performance of their sexualities or sexual
identities—within reason. Moreover, thinking about sexuality in terms of literacy opens the door to considering how our understanding of almost any aspect of sexuality in our culture is shaped by public discourse—a key insight of queer theory. And given the vast number of personal, social, and political topics related to sexuality—topics such as who gets to define what marriage is, debates about who is and is not appropriate for military service, control over access to reliable information about sexually-transmitted diseases and infections—it is imperative that students understand the complex connections between discourse, information, identity, and community represented by the term *sexuality*. Ignoring critical inquiry into these connections runs the risk of enabling, perhaps even furthering students’ ignorance about the strong connection in our culture between sexuality and identity.

Considering the literacy of sexuality, then, not only promotes a complex rhetorical awareness of an issue of great personal and political importance, but it also promotes students’ understanding of how sexuality is used to enable participation in the democratic project for some, while simultaneously constraining it for others.

6. Where we’re going now

To incite and engage discussion on how technologically enhanced or enabled pedagogies can extend students’ and teachers’ understandings of sexual literacy, we proposed that contributors to this special issue of *Computers and Composition* turn their attention to questions such as these:

- What theories or scholarly approaches to sexuality (including queer theory, lesbian and gay studies, body studies and feminist studies—to name a few) have informed the teaching of writing with technology? How? To what effect?
- How might computer-mediated discussions provide space for the safe discussion of sensitive subjects, such as sexuality and sexual orientation? How might they not?
- In general, what has been the impact of computers on discussing issues of sexuality and sexual orientation?
- More specifically, how have the Internet and the Web emerged and been integrated (or not) into the discussion of sexuality and sexual orientation in the composition classroom?
- How might recent scholarship on the issues of race and technology reflect upon or be useful for considerations of sexuality and technology in the writing classroom?
- How have computers shaped sexual conceptions of self and identity as writer? as teacher? as student?
- How have definitions of and conceptions of sexuality changed with the use of computers?
- How are sexuality and gender constructed (and perceived) via writing and text in a supposedly de-sexualized cyberspace? In chat rooms? On discussion boards?
- How do current discussions of the post-human complicate the work of bringing sexualities into computer-equipped writing classes?
- What are the ethical possibilities and pitfalls of bringing together sexualities and technologies in writing classes? The articles published here address such questions in theoretically thought-provoking and pedagogically challenging ways.
The first article reminds us of the potential rhetorical needs and interests of queer students, as well as the ways in which technological venues for communication address those needs. Brad Peters and Diana Swanson, in “Queering the Conflicts: What LGBT Students Can Teach Us in the Classroom and Online,” argue that webbed writing environments can provide an optimal community site where LGBT and non-LGBT writers may construct and rehearse politically performative identities, primarily because the emphasis is on how language strategizes sexuality and sexual orientation without the complications or inhibitions that real-time, in-person conversation imposes on those who need the opportunity to process what they hear before they speak. However, such outcomes only occur if students supplement this rhetorical activity with face-to-face discussion and critique. In answering our call for articles that deal with classroom experience, Peters and Swanson demonstrate both how complicated and how rewarding it can be for teachers to bring queer theories to class; of greater significance, perhaps, they demonstrate how the space of the classroom can have its own queer agenda, its own needs that teachers must be more open to explore lest they risk normalizing the very venues they were initially attempting to queer.

The next two articles handily pick up the notion of sexual literacy and how it can be productively explored by all students and instructors in technologically rich spaces. First, in “‘Always a shadow of hope’: Online Discussions of Sexuality and Sexual Orientation,” Heidi McKee examines an asynchronous online discussion about sexuality that lasted for several weeks and involved students at three different universities. Her analysis, drawn from a reading of the posts and from interviews with participants, focuses on how these individual heterosexual and homosexual students discussed sexuality online and in what ways instructors might facilitate more productive online discussions of issues relating to sexuality and sexual orientation. Specifically, McKee presents for us the complexities of moving from theory to practice by demonstrating why binaries, though theoretically problematic, may be an essential rhetorical or conceptual step in students’ development vis-à-vis new concepts and ideas.

Second, Barclay Barrios’ article, “Of Flags: Online Queer Identities, Writing Classrooms, and Action Horizons,” explores how the evolution of cyberspace since its inception has seen LGBT/queer people forming increasingly smaller, specialized communities and identities. In order to examine the ways in which these subcultures have used online spaces to reconfigure identity, Barrios looks at a number of LGBT/queer flags to think through the ways in which sexual identities have shifted and proliferated, particularly as such flags signify interest in particular sexual practices as opposed to discrete sexual identities. He then considers the implications this proliferation of identities and practices has for the composition classroom by examining a series of writing assignments that ask students to engage issues of sexuality as they relate not to identity, which can all too easily be dismissed as other, to issues of sexual agency regarding particular political or cultural issues in which all students have an investment as citizens in a democracy.

The last two articles in this collection offer innovative views and formats to explore the continuing relevance of understanding the construction and composition of sexuality vis-à-vis technology. In “Sexualities and Technologies: How Vibrators Help to Explain Computers,” Colleen A. Reilly considers how, because genders and technologies are mutually constituted, sexuality can easily be forgotten or conflated with gender. Refocusing on sexuality can high-
light the presence of sexed bodies and sexual objects in virtual spaces such as MOOs or the World Wide Web, simultaneously belying the myth of transcendence in such spaces and emphasizing the role these spaces play in reflecting and reifying hegemonic constructions of sexuality. Specifically, Reilly provocatively demonstrates that the case of the vibrator, a medical implement turned household appliance, sheds considerable light on narratives of human sexuality; highlighting how the development of the vibrator both resulted from and perpetuated in designating female sexuality as a medical condition proves to be a powerful step in prompting students to see how technologies and sexualities interact. As Reilly maintains, practice in cultural analysis from a safe historical distance prepares students to perceive the interactions of sexuality and gender with and within contemporary technologies, including computers and communication technologies.

Similarly, Jacqueline Rhodes’ “HOMO ORIGO: THE QUEERTEXT MANIFESTO” creatively re-assesses the dominance of the written word in our sociocultural and political heritage to critique it from a queer perspective. Rhodes’ manifesto positions The Word—the norms embodied and enforced through language—against a queer ethos and experience that, while denying its own monolithic claim to critique, challenges the seemingly monolithic nature of the word and its norms.

Finally, an edited MOO transcript, “Queerness, Sexuality, Technology, and Writing: How Do Queers Write Ourselves When We Write in Cyberspace?,” is included on Computers and Composition Online <http://www.bgsu.edu/cconline/>. This transcript records an electronically enabled discussion among several queer-identified or queer-appreciative composition scholars about the ongoing and ever-developing exploration of sexuality, particularly queer sexualities, and their varied constructions in cyberspace. The MOO format emphasizes the give-and-take among participants, as well as parallels the fluidity of sexuality and its constructions. Although offering no definitive answers, the MOO transcript explores and performs multiple ways in which cyberspace allows writers to play with varied notions of queerness.

Readers will also find at Computers and Composition Online a set of web-based articles on similar topics, guest edited by Jacqueline Rhodes. No doubt, our readers can tell how excited we have been by the articles in this special issue on “Sexualities, Technologies, and the Teaching of Writing” and its online complement. We hope that others will be as encouraged as we have been by the research projects represented here, but we also hope that readers will find spaces within these articles to ask new questions and to search for new answers to the questions these scholars have posed. It is our hope that, together, the pieces in these journals will forward the discussion of the sexuality, technology, and writing nexus and offer newcomers to this discussion a sense of these articles’ significance and relevance to the technological and literacy needs—and desires—of our students.

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