



# TEACHING DECONSTRUCTIVIST IDEAS SURROUNDING SEXUAL IDENTITIES: PRODUCTIVE RISKS AND EFFECTIVE PEDAGOGY

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# INTRODUCTION

Currently involved in research and teaching in the Department of Social Practice at Unitec: social work, counselling, and community development.

Strong thread of post-structuralist ideas woven throughout our programmes. E.g., understanding that identities are constructed in the context of socially and historically specific relations of power.

In this presentation, I explore the promises and risks associated with my approach to teaching content around the construction of sexual identities. Focus on two class exercises.

Teaching contexts: one bachelor's level course (Discourses of Social Practice), and a postgrad course (PGDip Counselling).

# BACKGROUND

To set up this material, I draw on Foucault's writings (1978) on the invention of sexual identities in the 'modern West', in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century.

The identities heterosexual, homosexual, bisexual not only about 'sexual orientation': also indicate 'types' of persons.

Persons are categorized as if particular 'kinds' of sexual desire constitute different 'essences' of personhood.

I also refer to Foucault's concept of 'dividing practices' (1965), particularly around the binary of heterosexual/homosexual

# BACKGROUND

I draw on Derrida (1997 [1967]) here as well: comparing the marked (stigmatised) and the unmarked (normalized) identities, and the ‘absent present’ of each in the other.

For Foucault, marked identity terms entail more totalizing representations of identity than unmarked identity terms. I.e., ‘homosexuality’ is seen to define a person ‘more fully’ than ‘heterosexuality’ (classroom discussion: culturally dominant idea/assumption, a person who identifies as homosexual might be thought to be ‘always thinking about sex’).

In this light, we consider the social interest in the ‘causes’ of homosexuality – but not of heterosexuality. When I teach, I point out that whether or not we can say that there are such causes, Foucault would ask us to deconstruct our *interest* in this issue. Uncovers social relations of power.

# CLASS EXERCISE

Here's where the first class exercise comes in.

I ask the class to discuss in small groups the identities 'homosexual' and 'vegetarian': specifically, to consider similarities and differences in socially dominant responses to or assumptions about these two identities.

# CLASS EXERCISE

PGDip, similarities:

'The other' (to meat-eating, to heterosexual)

Requires 'allowances' (menus, conversation)

Discourses around 'choice' (are these identities 'choices'?)

Both are charged with connotations, as marked identities (e.g. men might be seen as 'more feminine': in both cases!)

Narratives of 'coming out', and how doing so can destabilize norms. In both cases, reactions of those in 'normative' positions can include a sense of threat and/or a questioning of norms.

# CLASS EXERCISE

Differences:

Conclusions about the question of 'choice' (vegetarianism more likely to be seen in this way)

Homosexuality seen as 'more' of an identity ('more' marked; seen to run deeper)

Key: the identity of homosexual is more stigmatized. Once listed as a mental health diagnosis; seen as more of a threat; vegetarianism often seen more positively (e.g. in terms of its environmentalist associations).

And in class, I draw out: for homosexuality: social interest in 'cause/s'. E.g. research on 'biological basis', nature vs. nurture.

(vs. 'broccoli gene')

# CLASS EXERCISE

I find that this exercise really helps to render accessible Foucault's and Derrida's ideas. Students can really 'see' how their ideas come into play in social life.

E.g., less distracted by the issue of seeking to answer the question, is homosexuality based in nature or nurture? Can see the value of stepping back from this question to query its politics and the power relations surrounding it.



# CLASS EXERCISE

However, some risks, esp. at bachelor's level.

In discussion, there can be a neo-liberal 'flattening' of the differences and similarities. Social progress around the stigmatization of homosexuality is pointed out in such a way that the value of the comparison is lost.

'Things are really improving'. Towards a level playing field, as if the main issues here are about 'attitudes' and, e.g., media visibility *per se*.

These ideas are then often countered with stories of abuse, which evoke a perceived need for 'tolerance' and 'acceptance'.

Larger structural issues get lost.

# CLASS EXERCISE

To addressing this common turn of events, I introduced another exercise the second time I taught this material at bachelor's level. Helped, but was also risky.

Activity: 'be an identity'. Used as an opener, to ground our discussion in something immediately experiential.

Nametags with identity labels on them pulled from hat and worn: heterosexual, homosexual, bisexual, vegetarian, parent, student.

Mingle and talk with at least three people, each with a different identity label. Conversation can be in relation to the identities only.

# CLASS EXERCISE

Very effective for illustrating issues around stigma (e.g. what's more difficult to talk or ask about, and why)

Also effective for discerning the fact that some identities have more totalising effects than others.

Risks: can reinforce stigma, in that students sometimes do not want to 'role play' the identities homosexual or bisexual. Also, there are risks here for some students about being 'outed'.

# CLASS EXERCISE

Another way of addressing a neo-liberal turn of events, very effective:

Posing questions around the comparison: which identity is seen as more of a 'choice'? Why might that be?

Point out degree of debate about nature/nurture research around the identity homosexual, as well as the variable findings of this research, and ask: why is this not a hot research topic for vegetarianism?

(Hubbard [1990]: there is an interest in researching 'difference' only when differentials of power are salient).

# REFERENCES

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