

Comfort the Disturbed Disturb the Comfortable: Queering Pedagogy and Transmutations

Dr Janet A McDonald, delivered at the Beyond Tolerance Conference, Lismore, 2007

Introduction

I was sitting in a chapel service listening to the Chaplain of a school rail on the students about the notions of service; he used an archaic term “stewardship” (familiar, no doubt, to Sunday school teachers from the 1950s). The Chaplain softened, close to tears at one point when he positioned the notion of Christ as a social change agent, Marxist even, in describing his stewardship as the practice of “comforting the disturbed and disturbing the comfortable”. So simple is the definition, so singularly clear in its prescribed methods, made me wonder how so many religious institutions could get it wrong. The key here is not in the institutionalisation of the concept, but in its one-on-one application; the concept is action oriented, imbedded in practice, simultaneously altruistic, realistic, kind and potentially very dangerous.

I began my career as a Drama teacher, which often holds a precarious position in most schools because “drama” invites a language and practice of passion in the classroom that can confound (because in some cases it is seen as “feminized” and a “soft” academic option) and be seen “in opposition to” by non-drama teachers and students. When I began in 1987, my first three years revealed the drama teacher role in the school as the repository for stories, intrigues, information, personal details of students who felt compelled to speak in the safe haven of the drama room, because they felt no trust with the Guidance Officer. This also positioned me as a disruptive influence so that my behaviour both internal and external to the school was surveilled and queried by an anxious Deputy Principal. In the spirit of self preservation and to stop my role evolving into the Agony Aunt, the Chaplain’s phrase began resonated deeply as a possible practice for liberational pedagogy in my classroom. Now, I am not talking about sets of content that needs to be taught, or even a strict guide of pedagogic methods, but rather an attitude toward the process of education that contests, blurs boundaries and embraces the “mess” of life as something to be expected, not avoided. I felt that I needed to make transparent the suspicion that can ascribe and inscribe the institution upon the individual, because my own students were very much aware of the surveillance of their teacher and their subject. They channelled their concerns into a dramatic presentation of a beheading on Bastille Day in the quad area of the school during class time – to disturb the comfortable - so that all classes might witness the display. They came up with the idea, they

rehearsed it and passionately re-enacted it knowing full well the consequences would be that their teacher would again be called to the office – to comfort the disturbed - and they would be ridiculed as “radicals”. They did it anyway. They didn’t just learn to sing La Marseilles in French or learn about agitational propaganda, they enacted their desire to create metaphors that expressed their anger at the conformative pressures placed upon them. They became critical thinkers that day as they were prepared to transmute and feel uncomfortable in disturbing the comfortable which, is no less potent if it is committed with humour.

Many other small moments of emancipation like these have happened since then and I would like to outline three basic principles that I feel describe the pedagogy that might encourage students to “go beyond”:

1. Pedagogy frequently works best as a practice of transgression and transmutation (favouring transformation rather than transmission) between binary oppositional thinking;
2. Pedagogy uses desire most ardently (intense, passionate, ambivalent, fervent, zealous, fierce, burning) to ensure against docile bodies;
3. Pedagogy is not a knowledge (pedantic and inscriptive such as in actor-training) but a process (a verb), sometimes beyond language.

These principals are anchored in the themes of this conference of going Beyond and transgressing Tolerance, and my reserach on masculinities in institutions as well as the work I conduct in remote regional communities attests to moving beyond the often stagnant proposition of binary oppositions of masculine/feminine; gay/straight; rural/metropolitan. To take a stand on critiquing the binary can take you beyond the binary looking at how it is constructed and how it can be contested with multiple voices and affects; the comfortable will undoubtedly be disturbed under this premise. The two fields of theoretical discussion that I am passionate about reading in regard to trying to find a language for my pedagogy are critical pedagogy and queer theory. According to William Spurlin, they both “enable critique of the reproduction of knowledge and cultural narratives that serve the interests of dominant social groups” (10), to ultimately expose and contest normalising processes in society (Kopelson 20). What intrigues me most about queer theory is that it subsumes critical pedagogy and actively aims to dismantle the myth of binary oppositions; to move beyond “oppositional designations for sexuality”, to “*disorganise*, rather than merely *organise around* our terms” (Kopelson 19; Sedgwick in Spurlin, 2002: 9). Queer theory offers a

platform to discuss the various transmutations that occur at the site of “disturbing the comfortable and comforting the disturbed”, whilst “queering” suggests an impulse to transmute.

Let me say, I do not want my queer or straight colleagues to panic about the use of the term “queer” – it is not my intention to miss-appropriate it or dilute its power as a political marker of difference, nor am I trying to impose a queer tag on teachers or morally outrage parents of students who might hysterically assume that queer approximates paedophilia. Often, the barriers to educational access and success are tied up with these kinds of hysterical reactions; diversity is somehow problematized as overly complex and cynically “democratic”. As human beings, our belief and investment in the spoken and written word - the nomenclature – of ideas is heavy with bias that simultaneously includes and excludes, whilst suspicious inferences can indict even the most innocent mumblings. The word “democracy” seems loaded with relief and libertine values such as freedom and respect, but the experience of democracy is very different for people on the margins. I no longer use the term “educate” when I visit remote regional communities as this suggests a superiority in my stance which negates the communities experiential knowledge; I prefer to use “enable” and “engage” to signify my intentions in the community. Terminology is a genuine problem if we believe that terms are fixed and unshakeable (structuralist view); terminology (etymology) is a process, as is tolerance, pedagogy and gender. And the notion of process invites slippage, participation, and experience over time.

Pedagogy as transgression and transmutation [return to first p-point]

Take the terms “man” and “woman”; pretty cut and dried terms?, biologically at least there is a difference but even anatomy can be cosmetically enhanced and changed to image something “other” than either. Man and Woman also take up a binary position so that, if we are not critical in our thinking, we may truly believe that anything unlike “man” must be “woman” (with all the social beliefs in inferiority that this brings with it) or anything unwomanly must therefore be masculine. Under this assumption we might also assume that anything not “man” or “woman” must be “gay” which stands to link “man” and “woman” as heteronormative in opposition to “gay”. For many people their experience of Man or Woman is invisible and therefore they sleep well at night, as part of the dominant ideological position (the comfortable)– everything around them seems to naturalise their experiences as

man or woman; which is fine, but the act of failing to embrace diversity or complexity often erases those voices on the margin. Binary oppositional thinking is a hang-over from the colonial modernist thought that places Us at odds with Them in order to articulate an “other” who (in Bhabha’s words) is *like* us, but not quite. It’s really Karl Marx who asked us to consider “who owns the modes and means of production” and stimulated critical thought, indeed critical pedagogy in placing emphasis on how the world is socially constructed; thus engaging the reader in how they construct themselves as man or woman or anything else. To consider man, woman or gay as a term that houses the mechanism of construction, is to rupture the power of these words to condemn or exclude. Critical theory saw women, people of colour, gays and the disabled have a critical mechanism for investigating where and how they got lost in the dominant stories of nations.

Marginality still has many names and terms for it depending upon where you read: intersectional, transgressive, third-space, liminal, border, hybrid, etc are all terms used for a location somewhere outside of and in between any binary oppositions. Here is where the complexity and messiness of culture and life reside; the places that we would rather have kept closeted and hidden in days gone by. Verbs such as “transmute” and “transgress” elicit notions of evolution, going beyond, and the deliberate violation of various naturalised “laws”. Because I’m a theatre scholar, Bertolt Brecht also articulated this in his ground-breaking theories that aimed to stretch theatre beyond its realistic constructions; his *verfremdungseffekt* literally means to “make the familiar strange” or make concepts strange whilst holding the familiar in mind: to simultaneously arouse and disappoint expectations. For theatre audiences, Brecht was very much hoping to disturb the comfortable into a new way of reading theatre; with a critical eye for change.

Much of the recent published scholarship about queer pedagogy articulates moving beyond “queer” as a simple identity category in opposition to straight, toward “queering” as a process of “disrupting dominant cultural understanding of the ‘naturalness’ of heterosexuality and conventional gender relations” (Anderson 2007, pg 3). To me, this is all about making visible the mechanisms that hide complexity and depth of understanding, in order to encourage inclusivity. Zoe Anderson tells us that “queering” becomes “a mode of teasing out the strange regulatory manner” that allows a normalising processes to persist, therefore ethnicity, disability – beyond gender – can also be interrogated. In order to truly go beyond tolerance we need to transgress the boundaries of absolutes and dogma that still hound the

concept of education and proffer the term “queering” as a verb (Britzman in Kopelson 25) that has playful and irreverent intent.

For me, then the term “queer” also can be added to the lexicon of things that are not easily divided into a binary space; indeed, the process of “queering” is one that I think could be renamed a “materialist” or Marxist “queering” (just as with Materialist Feminism) that promotes critical thinking, gender playfulness, and pedagogical practices that transgress and transmute, even triangulate the “other” in full concert with the binary so that is no longer marginalised. A queering pedagogy therefore moves beyond seeking discourse of contradictions, it can often be a subtle process that mimics the dominant/comfortable in order to mirror and “menace” the assumed stability of a dominant ideology.

I recently published a paper about the queering process at work on the most revered of all American masculine symbols: the cowboy, in the movie *Brokeback Mountain*. It was quickly labelled the “gay cowboy” film by the media, and the film proffers an unfortunate truth for rural queers who are often painted as “odd” and “unnatural” in rural settings (the outed gay characters die in this film), but to call it such seems to stunt the potential for the queering going on; the term “gay” suggests oppositional stances by the characters to heterosexual life. However, a closer investigation reveals that the film is actually an exercise in colonial mimicry where the melodramatic structure, heterosexual actors are almost like Westerns of the John Wayne type, but not quite. The homosexual relationship in the film openly contests the construction of “cowboy”, but also parallels the heterosexual relationships. Because the cowboys are hidden and privy only to the audience, the Us and Them binary is stymied by confused empathies: for whom do we feel sad? (the Us look and sound like Us, but they are ALSO Them). According to Chris Packard, the cowboy is queer when analysed inside a heteronormative cultural context; “he resists community, he eschews lasting ties with women but embraces rock-solid bonds with same-sex partners, and practices same-sex desire” (2006, p.3). In other words, everything that can be read as “homosocial” and perhaps safely heteronormative, can equally be read as homosexual. To me, this queering process illustrates Brecht’s *verfremdungseffekt* of “making the concept or masculine and cowboy strange whilst holding the familiar in mind”.

What do all these labels mean, anyway? On my last day of working at an all-boys school in Brisbane, my Year 9 English class threw me a small farewell at the tuck-shop where they

presented a cake and a bottle of Scotch! They knew that I was about to depart for the USA with “my partner” and they were curious, of course. One student, puffed up his chest and said “we really hope you have a great trip with “your partner” (various giggles) - god love him, he was trying to be mature and speak on behalf of the class, and he got a bit cross with his mates and said “no no no, look, Mum says it’s okay”. I must admit I loved that he linked lesbianism and his mum’s approval together in a sincere attempt to discuss something that seemingly has no language. Without flinching, I said “so you think I’m a lesbian, what gave it away”? They all said at various rabble and rambling paces “you never shave your legs, Miss!” They left the party immediately after the bell rang without a care as to whether their assumptions about my sex preference was accurate or not; it did not matter to them and it remained an ambivalence that they did not care to resolve; and there was a sense of accomplishment in this interdiction. The pedagogy was not about Herman Melville or Harper Lee, but about the transformative experiences of going beyond tolerance. This hetero-induced queering of my body was not at the expense of any erasure; the boys broke their own stereotype of being homophobic; somewhere beyond language...

So, the notion of fixed terminology or categorisation becomes undeniably fluid and slippery once a queering process is affected; the complexity is exposed and not at the expense of erasing the dominant past, rather it is a reinterpretation of what has come before. This pedagogic mode therefore must be experiential; it must be encouraged over time so that the queering stance is not some one-off experience but a manifesto. Otherwise the pedagogy remains simply a reactionary disruption and derailment that is anomalous, maligned as “menace” and deviant; it must be a repeatable act affecting change in concert with what has gone before and not maintaining “an opposition to”.

Pedagogy uses desire most ardently to ensure against docile bodies {return to slide}

Paulo Freire reminds us that all pedagogy is a political act as there is a process of inclusion and exclusion at work in terms of content and methods; a queering pedagogy seeks to actively participate in and develop a discourse that can transform thinking and revise the “habitual ways of reading texts and reading the world” (Spurlin 12). But there has to be a spark that arouses this interest; a desire in the teacher who can contagiously affect the desire in students. Raewyn Connell tells us that exploration of desire is commonly excluded from social theory but the practices that shape and realise desire are an aspect of gender order and ordering (25). Perhaps this is because notions of desire, like gender are closely linked to

“identity” and so desire is often worn on the body. Bodies are texts and are laden with messages either intended or imposed and a body in denial of its desire risks becoming what Foucault would call a “docile” body that is without self-critique or awareness of how normalising processes act upon it. Yet desire is another term that has been hijacked to only read as “dangerous” in school situations; desire must relate to the sexualised body of desire and therefore students cannot be put at risk of such things. And so, the discussion of sex and gendered topics remain unspoken – although this does not mean they never constantly communicated. Homi Bhabha might refer to this kind of non-language discourse as interdiction which is at the “crossroads of what is known and permissible and that which... must be kept concealed; a discourse uttered between the lines and as such both against the rules and within them...” (1994, p.86 and 89) Yet he warns that this kind of playing by the rules whilst not playing by the rules is potentially menacing as it no less reveals how dominant ideology works to surveil and curtail. To disclose and speak too passionately about our desires is to be avoided in institutions; in most schools still there is a silent acceptance of teachers/students as asexual or non-gendered, gay teachers and students are certainly encouraged to be invisible within this dictum. In this way the comfortable remain so and the disturbed, well they just become more and more disturbed and maligned as “other”.

Several years ago I taught Drama in an elite all-boys’ school, and I had a bunch of very vocally tough boys in my Year 10 group; most of them played rugby and bullied the kids who did not, they always seemed to be busting out of their uniforms as they were physically growing faster than they could understand. Hairless faces one week would be covered in spots or stubble the next, they were like a morphing group of mini-Incredible Hulks whose hormones literally bounced around the room. I had a double-period with them on Fridays between morning tea and lunch, and I dreaded it every week as I had come to expect their smart-arsery as par for the course. One Friday I was fed up and threw all caution to the wind: “What do you want to create a drama about?” I asked them, and promised also to take on board any topic they threw out. Oh dear, what did I say? “Porno” one kid yelled out, and the class roared with laughter. “Okay, I said, let’s interrogate that topic using drama.” I was on a dangerous roll ... I could hear that intercom going off in my head “Miss McDonald please report to the Deputy Principals office, blah blah blah”, but I persevered because I wanted some kind of desire from them – some kind of acknowledgement that there weren’t all just docile in my classroom. So I they got into small groups and we used some of Augusto Boal techniques for creating three frozen images: the perfect, the worst and one showing the

transformation between the two (Cite Boal here). I can tell you that my definition of “porn” was far darker and dangerous than anything these boys produced which tended to mostly be of them pretending to be “page 3 girls” with puffed out chests and pouting lips. There was one image of a dominatrix which was almost camp and very humorous. Their construction of their “worst” images hardly changed, until I explained that they needed to think of why people choose to be porn stars in the first place, even then, they still had trouble empathising with the images they were creating. What began as titillation and mockery began to become more inquisitive, not so much about their images, but about themselves; this interdiction was palpable, a mixture of embarrassment and revelation (this was the quietest class I had ever had with these students). After we argued as to which images were the most revealing, we sat on the floor in the circle to “debrief” the experience. I began by asking them to describe what they now felt and thought about “porn”, after some chatty responses, one boy said that he felt weird because he kept thinking about his mother and his sister; he disclosed to the class that since his Dad left, he was expected to be the “man” of the house, although this was never stated by his Mum. He then told us that he had been upset that his mother did not cuddle him anymore; somehow in a lesson that was about “porn” he had understood that his mother’s lack of cuddles was connected to his increased bodily changes in becoming a man. He assumed it was because he looked like his father, rather than his mother’s own sense of what was appropriate touch between herself and her son who is no longer a boy. It was an astonishing revelation with no giggles from the class, the only noise a knock on the door to tell me that it was now period six (we had not heard the bell and worked through lunch without noticing), and I was in trouble from the boarding house because the boarders in my class had not picked up their lunches.

These smelly boys taught me that day that they were connected to the world around them in mysterious and interdictive ways, and rather than simply pissing me off, they were truly disturbing my comfort and comforting themselves in the process. What they thought was a desire for “porn” masked a far more complex messiness about their bodies, their gender, and their awkward self-awareness. The term “porn” was “queered” for them as their attempts at female imagery only served to place the focus more on their *own* bodies which played with their notions of “man” as a stable category. I think that the interdiction between the boys that occurred as the boy was disclosing his experiences to the class were also beyond language. The boys all seemed to nod in recognition of similarities, as if they could see clearly for the first time.

Without me ever using the terms “critical pedagogy” or “queer”, they experienced the location of themselves in the realm of gender performance, transcending their own belief systems for a moment, opening an aperture on what may lie beyond conventional thinking, not unlike the first time one realises the affect of whiteness upon the body; it is a process of gradual revelation rather than an epiphany of immediacy. We must not ever confuse quiet, contemplative bodies with docile bodies.

The desire illustrated here has slippage, and bell hooks’ work is so vital here because she states that desire is central in learning because most personal interaction is about engaging in lived experiences and how they are constructed in our lives (1994). For her, pedagogy is not extra-to the ordinary surrounds, but is constantly working upon us; inscribing upon us and healing our wounds (quote hooks). Hooks talks of her own experience in the exploration of feminist and critical theory being a place of healing for her where her comfort was simultaneously disturbed and liberated.

Pedagogy is not a knowledge but a process, a practice, sometimes **beyond language and beyond a set time frame [slide]**

Sometimes knowledge and understanding is gained beyond language and over time in a way that outcomes-based education may never be able to genuinely measure; it exists beyond assessment. I can never know the affect that this – shall I call it “the porn lesson” had on these boys over time, now that they are men of 26, but I bet they remember the “queer-ness” about that day, even if it was because we worked through several bells and lunch. All I can tell you is that when I run into past students, they always remember the funny or the odd things that happened and this is our point of coming together, almost a point of interdiction that we viscerally know what happened on these occasions and so we dispense with having to decompose it by describing the event; we remember how it in terms of its affect on our bodies, how it made us feel.

One of my all-time favourite teacher stories come from a friend who worked as a drama teacher, cricket coach and boarding master at a fairly prestigious boys’ school in Brisbane who recounted his first night on duty in the boarding house:

I walked into the place, with grade 12 kids sitting down and they knew I was the drama teacher but I hadn't really met anybody yet—I'm walking down the hall and they're in corridors and—total silence—and I hear this “Drrrraaaama Faggot!!” (he laughs) down the hallway, and I walked along and I went “Yeeaaaah, that's right, who wants a bit?” - and the whole hallway just pissed themselves laughing...

His answer instantly and comically summed-up the boys' fear-of-the-fag context; he verbally queered himself in order to counter their queering of him, which simultaneously aroused and disappointed their expectations. He confessed to never having any problem in the dorm after this and it was never spoken of again, unless it was recounted humorously by him or the students. Moments of ambivalence such as this are quite often the most intense instances of experiential knowing because all of the sudden the irony, paradox, intersection, margin is exposed and liberated. The teacher's response asked them to consider what could be, to weigh up whether “he was” or “wasn't” gay; the humour placed is answer somewhere beyond language into the realm of complex understanding of gender construction and labelling. For me, it is often these points of interdiction where pedagogy makes the most sense to me as wreaks havoc with normalised expectations; it comforts the disturbed and disturbs the comfortable and the benefactors enter into a place where they are no longer docile bodies to be imposed upon by “knowledge” but become active in meaning making

My final point for this keynote is designed to wrap it all together, and reiterate my first point about the process of queering being a vital pedagogic method that aims for transformation of knowledge rather than the transmission of knowledge. Under this paradigm, the term knowledge like many other terms unpacked here becomes released from its dominant positions as an iron-clad, often exclusive/exclusory notion, rather, it is a lived thing and always open to new interpretation and change (hooks, 65). As illustrated in my anecdotes, the “getting of wisdom” undertaken was not in regard to *what was known* by the end of the lesson, but how knowing is discovered and explored (Kopelson 25). Therefore, it is pertinent to critique this paper, to queer it a little by asking: Who or what is disturbed, is it always the marginalised? Who or what is comfortable, and are they always dominant? We must resist quick answers to this, because to name either is to speak from a position of dominance that can condense complexity. A queering and critical pedagogy makes both terms a process by which the comfortable recognise they are also disturbed and vice versa. Their binary

opposition becomes blurred and messy when one interrogates the material reasons that construct the experiences of being comfortable or disturbed.

Recently (7 August 2007) two students of mine were featured on page 4 of the local rag asserting their protest against a federal government bill which proposes that overseas adoptions by same-sex couples will not be recognised in Australia.

“David Burton, 19, and Kristin Weir, 20, are both homosexual and hope to one day be parents. They strongly believe it is not the matter of "gay rights" but it is a "child's rights" issue where they could have the opportunity to grow up in a loving environment.

"I want to be a dad. I like Australia and I call it my home.”

"I would like the Government to tell me what is it about me that would make me seem unfit to raise a child. It is foreseeable that there could be a time where it would be detrimental to me living here," Mr Burton said.

"It's unfounded that a child raised by a same-sex couple would turn out gay, because if that was the case then everyone would be heterosexual," Mr Burton.

These young people not only “came out” publicly in their city of residence, but also “queered” the tired expectation of “gay” people as anti-children or anti-family; for me, they transmuted the terms and mixed them up so that the comfortable reading the story would not know what to be enraged about first! What is it to be a gay parent? The blurring and making-messy of terminology is, I believe, a key to going beyond tolerance toward genuine inclusivity. Terminology ultimately lets us down by imposing boundaries on words and ideas that are in the image of the dominant voice. Yet, to seek to recover terms so that we engage in the complexity of life around us, we require a pedagogy that queers and critically disrupts the ideology behind terminology. This takes great courage, and I would suggest to you all to ask yourselves where the edges of your comfort zones are; are you prepared to become uncomfortable in order to have greater access to deeper understandings that exist beyond terminology? Discomfort is an indication that something needs changing and it signifies that you are probably already on a journey of opening the apertures on learning. It’s when the terminology can be liberated, transcended and transgressed through a queering process that take them beyond their original “tolerances” to a place where they no longer have the power

to be oppressive. I advocate that queering and critical pedagogy is about creating platforms for individuals to they are ordinary people living extra-ordinary lives because of how they read the world.