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**"Queering the Conflicts: What LGBT Students Can Teach Us in the Classroom and Online." *Computers and Composition* 21 (2004): 295-313.**

**Brad Peters and Diana L. Swanson**

**I. Framing Webbed Discussions About Sexuality**

When instructors design courses, we usually bring to the classroom our own knowledge of a topic, a set of relevant problems to work through, and an understanding of the problem-solving skills that we think our students must learn. Students, in turn, have their own agendas for what they want to get out of a course. If we assume that students will (and should) defer their agendas to ours, they may very well reassert their personal interests—from our perspective—more counterproductively than productively. This dilemma is always salient, especially in courses that contain a significant writing component that aims for growth through critical thought, where students may privilege personal experience above all other rhetorical proofs, thereby disregarding our attempts to get them to develop and practice a repertoire of other *techne* as well. But the dilemma becomes even more salient for instructors who, in our fast-changing, cultural and technological moment, are integrating LGBT issues into the curriculum. After all, for LGBT people of all ages, the personal is always urgently political.

Many LGBT instructors have arrived at a transitional point, as Toni McNaron (1997) puts it, where we are “celebrating sexual orientation as a fact of our intellectual, pedagogical, and professional lives as much as it is of our home lives,” but we dare not forget that such “progress could be rescinded by the same liberal bodies that have allowed it to occur” (p. 86). Accordingly, we know that our students (and we) need a

fully developed repertoire of rhetorical tools to deal with powerful political and religious adversaries who have few scruples in attacking the so-called “homosexual agenda” by whatever means necessary. At the same time, we dare not ignore evidence that the world of LGBT students today is drastically different from, while still similar to, that of our own generation. As one student declared to the authors of this essay, she wanted a course that would help her understand why

the LGBT community only comes together for political purposes and therefore achieves half as much as it could; how to achieve rights in this society; how to deal with your and your partner’s parents. People like [the anti-LGBT pastor, Fred] Phelps... are irrelevant to my life because they don’t wish, nor do they require a dialogue.... I see that as wasting valuable time I could be using to get insurance companies to change their guidelines or my parents or setting up an LGBT studies program at the university.

Because LGBT people so rarely see, let alone have a say about their own issues in the academic curriculum, they may resist the design of any LGBT course that fails to address such issues in the way they prefer. Their reaction surely is a function of being deprived of curricula that recognize LGBT existence and personal existence.

Hawisher and Selfe (1999) reflect on the implications of Margaret Mead’s (1978) notion of “prefigurative culture” for teaching in a time of cultural and technological transition; they suggest that “In the prefigurative society... students must—at least to some extent—learn important lessons from each other, helping each other find their way through an unfamiliar thicket of issues and situations about which the elder members of society are uncertain” (p. 4). This concept of a prefigurative society is particularly relevant when dealing with issues of sexuality, sexual identity, and gender identity. Striking a balance among generations needs to occur in LGBT courses, because even while students can learn from each other, we elders also have much to teach (and learn).

So we must create learning spaces on-line and face-to-face that recognize and make use of the knowledge that several LGBT generations have struggled to acquire.

Consequently, we might anticipate that electronic writing environments, e.g., BlackBoard, WebBoard, WebCT, and others invite students and us to develop the rhetorical skills that enhance effective interaction. However, even in the most congenial situations, writers of varying competencies and backgrounds will have to meet the challenge of negotiating conflicts of interest because ongoing differences exist between what instructors “know” students need and what students “know” they need (and we must also note that differences exist among students’ agendas). Composing on the web can exacerbate such conflicts as readily as it can facilitate their resolution.

The foregoing problems frame our analysis of a course we offered on the topic of “LGBT Communities: Images and Debates.” We had participated in a cross-disciplinary committee that sought to initiate both an undergraduate and graduate certificate program in LGBT studies at our university—a large, Midwest research institution that draws a diverse student body from urban, suburban, and rural areas. We agreed to pilot the course as team teachers, because we wanted two instructors’ perspectives of the students’ response to it. We opened enrollment in the course to all levels, freshman through graduate, because we wanted a strong enrollment and we wanted to encourage an intergenerational dialogue that would help us develop a better grasp on how to design core courses for the undergraduate and graduate levels, so as to refine each certificate’s requirements. We also wanted to see how students from different backgrounds and age groups would affect the online and face-to-face interaction.

The course attracted 12 undergraduates and five graduates (ten women and seven men). The oldest student was in her 40s, and the youngest two were 18. Two students—an undergraduate and a graduate, both women—identified themselves as “straight allies.” One woman, a graduate, remained discreet about her sexual orientation. The others identified themselves as lesbian, gay, or transgendered, but we put no pressure on anyone to do so. As the course instructors, though, we identified ourselves as same-sex oriented because we felt that such disclosure would play a large part in establishing our *ethoi*. Moreover, nearly half of our students were going to enter the teaching profession, and we felt that our self-disclosure might at some stage lead to a discussion about educational circumstances and contexts where instructors might choose to “come out.”

The course emphasized the interdisciplinary nature of LGBT studies, with a reading list that included LGBT issues in religion, history, film, literature, medicine, law, and education. We decided to use Judith Butler’s (1997) *Excitable Speech* as the text that would anchor our rhetorical approach to the course material. Though we knew that Butler has been much contested and criticized for her dense and obscure style, we felt that *Excitable Speech* promised to raise a great many provocative questions about the rhetorical dynamics of the language surrounding the LGBT issues that we wanted our students to examine. In addition, we expected our course WebBoard to provide a site for a written discussion that would supplement in-class interaction. Both of us regularly integrate a substantial amount of writing in our courses (Diana—an associate professor in English and Women’s Studies—teaches literature in the English Department and interdisciplinary courses in the Women’s Studies Program, and Brad—coordinator of writing across the curriculum and the director of the University Writing Center—teaches

writing in the rhetoric and composition program). In particular, we looked to the WebBoard as a means of building a sense of sustained community for the students.

To illustrate how we saw the WebBoard playing a key role in creating what Harriet Malinowitz (1995) calls “an identity-based community” of writers, we will first amplify why we believed *Excitable Speech* would offer an apparatus for teaching the repertoire of rhetorical skills that we felt were a major aim of the course (262). This illustration will also indicate some of what the students already knew and were confronting, as regards the complex problems we were taking up together.

We anticipated that students could speculate how *ethos* may derive from interpellation “within the terms of language” to bring about “a certain social existence of the body,” based on Butler’s treatment of the concept of censorship in the “Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell” policy for LGBT people in the US military. Butler argues that certain bodies and certain existences, can be unspoken, disallowed, and thus “not accessible to us,” while others can be constituted for us “on the occasion of an address, a call, an interpellation” (5). She says the “Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell” policy erases the homosexual body which is then, on the occasion of implementing the policy, constituted only by the authority who condemns it. The effect of the policy is to make any statement of identity as homosexual an act of solicitation and seduction. This rhetorical situation disallows the homosexual body as the source of meaning and subjectivity and imposes on it the meaning of the military authorities who have defined homosexuality as sexual harassment, violence, and disorder. Similarly, a curriculum that does not recognize the existence of LGBT people erases their bodies. We felt students would be able to write about how “One comes to ‘exist’ by virtue of this fundamental dependency on the

address of the Other” (p. 5). We hoped that on the WebBoard students could practice language that explored, among themselves, other ways of—and other words for—becoming socially recognizable as good people speaking well in a society that has constructed LGBT people as objects of derision, criminals, sexual predators, or deserving victims. For example, early in the semester, Jenni<sup>1</sup>—a sophomore who had had a commitment ceremony with her partner—wrote:

Last year, my sister and her husband switched churches. This church is FAR from liberal. Now my sister tells me that although she doesn't approve of my homosexual actions (yeah, you are reading that correctly), she loves me despite them.

Darryl, a junior who identified as transgendered, replied:

Ah, that old 'love the sinner, hate the sin' thing. Do heterosexuals think that their heterosexuality is a 'part' of them? Probably not. My sexual orientation (and my gender identity, for that matter) is not some part of me that can be ignored... it also cannot be thought of as 'acts.' I'm queer when I wake up; I'm queer when I sleep; I grocery shop and I'm queer; I'm queer when I study. I am queer every second of every day and my queerness is in every cell of my body. It's not just my brain and uh, other parts that are queer... I even have queer elbows! And queer big toes!... So... I probably wouldn't want her 'love' anyway.

We sensed that such an ongoing exercise in constructing *ethos* might heighten the students' awareness of agency as they wrote about Russo's (1987) critique of gay and lesbian stereotypes in *Celluloid Closet*; Thompson's (1988) deep commitment to her disabled lover in *Why Can't Sharon Kowalski Come Home?*; and Allison's (1994) playful description of taboo sexual practices that rescues them from the realm of pornography in *Skin: Talking About Race, Class, and Literature*.

Furthermore, we felt students could practice deconstructing hate speech, based on Butler's treatment of how language accrues a history of being injurious and must be re-

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<sup>1</sup> All names have been changed to protect confidentiality; students granted written permission to cite.

cited in order to be redefined and reclaimed.<sup>2</sup> That is, in their WebBoard interaction, students could re-cite and respond to hate speech in such a way as to “talk back” and make hateful discourse “signify what it never signified before, ...embrace interests and subjects who have been excluded,” and even “configure a different future” than what heterosexist society prognosticates for LGBT people (p. 160). For example, Mark—a graduate student who had taught first-year composition—wrote:

It’s more interesting to see what we can \*do\* with hate speech, or for that matter any kind of speech (heck, I’m infinitely more worried about—say—GAP ads than I am about some illiterate calling me a name). How can we subvert it? Twist it around? Darryl brought up an excellent example in class, a brilliant bit of ‘poetic terrorism,’ in which Phelps’ hate speech was transmuted into money for a cause diametrically opposed to him [LGBT people collected funds from bystanders to support the very cause Phelps was at that moment defaming]. All language can be used.

We thought questioning the authority of injurious speech and its speakers (especially when such authority can be so engrained in academic and institutional practices) might open the way for studying and inventing what Butler calls “insurrectionary speech,” preparing the students to see why biblical scholars reinvent demeaning theological discourse in Gramick’s and Furey’s (1988) *The Vatican and Homosexuality: Reactions to the ‘Letter to the Bishops of the Catholic Church on the Pastoral Care of Homosexual Persons’*; why a lesbian feminism provides new historical interpretations of public action

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<sup>2</sup> For the sake of clarity, the class drew the following definitions from Butler as guidelines: (1) hate speech is that which “is not the mere causal effect of an inflicted blow, but works in part through an encoded memory or a trauma, one that lives in language and is carried in language. The force... depends not only on its iterability, but on a form of repetition that is linked to trauma, on what is, strictly speaking, not remembered but relived, and relived in and through the linguistic substitution for the traumatic event” (36); (2) excitable speech is utterance “made under duress”—speech that does “not reflect the balanced mental state of the utterer” because it is a response to language that threatens or is intended to injure and is “out of our control,” even though it “founds an alternative notion of agency and, ultimately, of responsibility, one that more fully acknowledges the way in which the subject is constituted in language... and hence, operating within a linguistic field of enabling constraints” (15-16).



in Gage's (1994) *Second Coming of Joan of Arc*; or why the language of blame is challenged in Sontag's (1990) in *Illness As Metaphor and AIDS and Its Metaphors*.<sup>3</sup>

Finally, we hoped that students would see how Butler's advocacy of insurrectionary speech carefully avoids a retreat to the kinds of personal, emotive language where "a more insidious form of censorship operates at the site of production": anti-intellectualism (p. 144). That is, we did not intend to dismiss forms of personal discourse—especially given the importance that "telling our stories" plays in establishing a sense of community—but neither did we want students to personalize their approach to LGBT issues so exclusively that they would devalue the power of "non-personal" language to critique, theorize, or extrapolate. In lieu of such personalization, we felt students could find the WebBoard a place to strategize solutions to problems by engaging in what Butler calls the reflective "'break' with ordinary discourse that intellectual language performs" (p. 144). For example, in her response to a class discussion of the Vatican's "Letter on the Pastoral Care of Homosexual Persons," Sally—a freshman—posted a very extemporaneous sample of freewriting that she entitled, "Jesus was a Homo." She elicited a quick objection from Mark, to whom she then wrote: "I normally don't think out what I am writing when I write or it loses some of the meaning and emotions that I have for what I am saying." Mark reiterated his understanding of the rhetorical aims of the course and referenced phrases from Sally's post:

I think the following things are at least excitable, if not hate, speech:

- 'Jesus was a homo'
- 'Religion is a cult'
- 'Catholic priests are married to God'

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<sup>3</sup> The class examined the definition of insurrectionary speech as "The word that wounds [which] becomes an instrument of resistance in the redeployment that destroys the prior territory of its operation... the necessary response to injurious language, a risk taken in response to being put at risk, a repetition in language that forces change" (163).

- ‘God is a polygamist’ ...

There is no way to respond to ‘Jesus was a homo.’ One can only challenge the speech itself, because it contains no actual point to argue.... How would I transform my anti-religious hate speech...?

- ‘I can find several verses where Jesus seems to relate to men in a very intimate, although not sexual, way’
- ‘The difference between the terms ‘religion’ and ‘cult’ seems to hinge on the amount of political power the members have’
- ‘Are Catholic priests also considered married to God?’
- ‘The marriage of nuns to God en masse seems to indicate that cloistered life unites the different individuals into a single corpus, which is interesting in that it devalues individuality and puts value on community’

Such reflective interaction, we hoped, might enable students to see how to participate more effectively in the debates that occur regularly when writers such as George Will and Laura Slessinger misrepresent the fight for LGBT civil rights in the media, or Gerald Unks’ (1995) describes ways to institute educational reforms in *Gay Teen: Educational Practice and Theory for Lesbian, Gay, and Bisexual Adolescents*.

We preface the pages that follow with a claim that the majority of the students met the aims of the course, notwithstanding one young man—a sophomore—who dropped out early because he felt intimidated by the material, and one young woman—a junior—who withdrew because she was in ROTC and was called up for military service when the Bush administration declared war on Iraq. That is, the rest finished the semester with ample written evidence, online and off, that they had achieved an improved understanding and application of rhetorical techniques that would help them more effectively meet the challenges of publicly advocating their interests as LGBT people or allies. They also gained a more informed historical perspective of how LGBT writers in different disciplinary areas had broken important ground in the slow process of effecting social change. However, we also encountered a strain of resistance that at times nearly

eclipsed many students' and our view of the very real, positive progress they were making individually and as a webbed group. As we develop our analysis of the students' work, this essay will address that resistance as well, because we feel it may be a common phenomenon in other LGBT courses and tells us much about students' own agendas.

We will begin with a focus on two approaches students took to the online discussion that occurred within our 15 weeks of webbed writing—one we will term “agonistic,” and one we will term (loosely) “Rogerian.” Next, we will examine how the students used online discussion to hinder or facilitate our/their pedagogical aims. We'll conclude with implications that our experience with online discussion have for the teaching of electronic literacies in the context of LGBT studies.

## **II. Two Approaches to Online Rhetoric**

In order to do a preliminary analysis of the WebBoard postings, we developed categories to track the ways that the students used the board. We identified six categories of critical thinking online—postings that dealt with: (1) class session content, (2) reading content, (3) response to another person's posting, (4) dialogue (reply to a response), (5) response to prompts that we, as instructors, assigned, and (6) personal relevance of course material. We identified three categories of discussion for postings that were “meta-comments” that went beyond direct engagement with the material but did not necessarily preclude critical thought: (1) personal information and social bonding, (2) class process, and (3) complaining about the course workload and assignments. Students also provided information and links; the most prolific undergraduate did the great majority of these postings. By a simple count of numbers of postings by type and student (i.e., not taking note of the length of the postings), we discovered that a few students—mostly graduate

students—engaged in discussion of course content on the WebBoard at roughly twice the rate of the others.<sup>4</sup>

Students' experimentation with online *ethos* began immediately, e.g., “every person in this course is a pioneer...we are some of the greatest minds of our generation, regardless of sexuality”; “I’ve never been part of what one might consider a ‘gay community’ ...[so] I am... lucky to be surrounded by very open and sexually comfortable people in this class”; “I am one of maybe a few straight people in this class, so I can’t call myself a Lesbigraytr [an LGBT neologism we’d joked about]... since I consider myself a lesbigraytr ally... I am an *allygraytr*.”

Equally important, intellectual leadership also emerged quickly. As Marilyn Cooper points out (invoking Michele Foucault 1991), the restructuring of power relations online is not merely a matter of students forming individual or collective learning partnerships; “The exercise of power... is a way in which certain actions modify others,” never static, but ongoing and unpredictable in terms of what kinds of intellectual leadership may evolve and what its shifting agenda may become vis-à-vis the course plan (p. 145). That is to say, electronic discussion can excite a more critical pedagogy, offering a context for negotiating conflict that can considerably improve a course, or it may incite a counter-productive rebellion that merely devolves into anti-authoritarian invective. How do instructors promote the former and discourage the latter, to help students work toward an ethics of resistance that is not self-serving, yet self-affirming, in

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<sup>4</sup> Seven undergraduate students averaged less than one “critical thinking” post a week, two averaged one per week, and one averaged two per week (we did not count the two undergraduates who dropped the course). Of the five graduate students, one averaged less than one per week, two averaged about 1.5 per week, one averaged almost two per week, and one averaged almost three per week.

a socially responsible way? We decided initially that we could do so by letting the students handle the online discussion themselves, without our participation.

For instance, Mark came forward with a tentative critique of Butler, engaging with another graduate student, Carole:

**Mark:** What Butler (so far) seems to have missed is that our instructions [i.e., our social enculturation through language] teach us a \*lot\* more than where \*we\*, the hearers, belong. They also tell us where to put the speaker.... Speaking hate speech interpellates \*both\* the speaker and the hearer.

**Carole:** Ahhhh Mark, you rogue who attempts to decode the mystifying.... I think that Butler has a handle on this issue within the frame of the illocutionary act.... The individual in social power says you are a dweeb, therefore, because that act is agentive, you become a dweeb.... However, these names... can only be applied within a clear social construct (where a dweeb has certain attributes).

**Mark:** I'm still dubious. Granted, the speaker has the agentive power to call me a dweeb... but communication is a reciprocal act, and I have to participate in the dweebification for it to stick.

Marks' critique parallels Seyla Benhabib's (1999), who observes that Butler's "account still offers no explication of how regimes of discourse/power or normative regimes of language and sexuality both circumscribe and enable the subject" (340). But we also saw incipient discontent, expressed in a supportive "call and response" fashion:

**Theresa:** I have to say that I'm having EXTREME problems with Butler.... This class... needs to be structured... having books that at least a majority of the class understands. The troubles I had with the book significantly undermined any helpfulness I would have found in it.

**Darryl:** I read through the section of *Excitable Speech* that was assigned. That is, I read every word and tried to process it, but wouldn't let myself go back and re-read each sentence ten times. The reason I did the first read-through this way was so I could feel some sense of accomplishment upon reaching the end of the section. Today... I'm going to... have a pen in my left hand and have the American Heritage Dictionary open and ready next to me. Here's a link to an interesting essay on Butler

(especially the section under II). I don't necessarily agree with what's being said... just that it's something else to check out.

Consonant with Cooper's claims, we found that the WebBoard exchanges suggested multiple roles that the writers could play with, depending on, and in reply to, what other writers posted. Yet we also saw rudimentary attempts either to name oneself (e.g., "allygator") or to set out "discursive territory," e.g., theory critic (Mark), course critic (Theresa), responsible citizen and engaged learner/ tutor (Darryl). These latter tendencies became more apparent as we worked through a series of in-class writing activities centered on *Excitable Speech*—translating into ordinary language what students felt were significant passages. This preliminary work led next to drafting and redrafting critical papers on how Butler's ideas might be applicable in rhetorically volatile situations. As instructors, we noted in the online Butler discussions that the students favored a great deal of interaction and referencing one another's points, as Mark and Carole's exchange has already illustrated. Although capacity to articulate the highly abstract ideas in *Excitable Speech* varied in substance, students were clearly reading and engaging in what they collaboratively had to say, and subsequently, teaching each other as they wrote.

With these auspicious beginnings, we moved on to Gramick's and Furey's *Vatican and Homosexuality*, asking students to read the Vatican's "Letter to the Bishops" first. Serendipitously, our campus's LGBT support organization had invited Greg Dell—a prominent Methodist pastor nearly divested by his church for performing same-sex commitment ceremonies—to come and speak. Our plan was to discuss the "Letter" and then hear Dell, so the students could debate whether the "Letter" approached hate speech or whether Dell exemplified insurrectionary speech. Then we would read and discuss how biblical scholars refuted the "Letter" in Gramick's and Furey's collection. This

preparation would enable students to do a writing assignment in which they could exercise their own understanding of how to respond to anti-LGBT speech that drew its authority from religious discourse—a problem that we knew would be reflected in nearly all of the other texts on the course reading list.

However, the “Letter to the Bishops” incited students either to ridicule its portrayal of homosexual persons as “intrinsically disordered,” or direct *ad hominem* remarks at the writers of the “Letter,” or attack Christianity (and, to some extent, Christians—especially Catholics). During much of the class, we—as instructors—tried to help students clarify their understanding of the way that the “Letter” rhetorically constructed its message of “pastoral care” and its definition of what such care meant, but it was clear that we as instructors had not fully anticipated how the students’ embodied connections to the topic and the text would lead to a queer revolt of excitable speech against the ways that the “Letter” resignified their bodies, their identities, their *ethoi*. As a result, the class turned to the WebBoard to continue discussion. Many of them did not even bother to go on to read the responses that queer and LGBT-friendly ecclesial scholars had written to the “Letter” in a more controlled, insurrectionary vein.

Nonetheless, Mark and Darryl had a particularly intense WebBoard exchange that provides a fine example of what we later called “agonistic rhetoric,” to critique and analyze the in-class discussion:

**Mark:** I’m a member of a fringe religion.... I have never been Christian.... I found myself growing quite uncomfortable last class, not that we were analyzing the rhetoric of the ‘Letter to the Bishops,’ ... a fair pedagogical exercise, but that inflammatory and insulting comments about Christianity in general and Catholicism in particular were condoned.... When someone made an ignorant comment, and a person with sufficient knowledge tried to counter it, that person was shouted down.

**Darryl:** My family's religious roots are half Christian and half Jewish.... In the past year [I] have identified as an atheist.... It's always open season on atheists because we're all going to hell, right? ...Last class made me uncomfortable, too, but for vastly different reasons.... I think that any conversation about religion (particularly Catholicism) in a class like this... is likely to inflame.... Think about the inflammatory and insulting stuff we were reading in the letter to the bishops. I would never want to insult anyone \*personally\*, but do not find an inflammatory remark about religion (even if it's someone present's religion) to be a personal insult.

**Mark:** It is, in fact, a personal insult. In fact, it is hate speech.

**Darryl:** When someone disrespects atheism, I don't feel personally attacked.... I'm not trying to 'convert' people to atheism.

**Mark:** I'm not a big fan of attempts to be converted, either, but that's not what \*anyone\* is doing here. We're looking at the 'Letter to the Bishops' as a historical document.

**Darryl:** Yes, but a highly charged religious historical document which still seems to quite accurately describe how mainstream Christian religions 'treat' LGBT people. I'm not saying you are asking me to, but it would be silly (and impossible) for me to leave my emotions... at our classroom door.

**Mark:** I fully expect people to have emotions. I do not expect a Catholic member of any class to be silenced by the debate. I'm afraid my commitment to education is just too high to say that any student should be made to feel excluded from the discussion.

The above excerpts come from the semester's most sustained WebBoard dialogue between two writers—a total of 23 asynchronous, linguistic turns in which Mark and Darryl each carefully reproduced the exact words that the other had written, to contextualize their replies. The exchange also produced 18 references to it from all but three class members, giving rise to one other extended dialogue of eight turns between Mark and Sally. Although intense, Mark and Darryl's exchange never became uncivil or offensive, and each writer took pains to establish position and *ethos*, qualify remarks, demonstrate respect (if not agreement), allow concessions to the other, and pursue as



fully as possible germane points. They responded rigorously to any fallacious reasoning that appeared (e.g., Darryl later pointed out where Mark had used a faulty analogy, comparing racist and anti-religious language; Mark indicated where Darryl begged the question by telling him he should identify the speakers who had so offended him). Both defined the terms they used and identified examples of those terms (e.g., “personal insults,” “hate speech”). The exchange focused as much on how to debate productively as it did on the question of how religious discourse is used in hate speech, and the writers seemed to model what could—or should have—happened the previous class.

Only Sally directly entered the dialogue between Mark and Darryl. After writing a very disjointed, stream-of-consciousness freewrite on religious domination, name-calling, political hypocrisy, and nuclear threat, which she titled “Jesus was a homo,” she said, “and for Mark, who is all about hate speech, everything in some way can be considered hate speech.” After more interchange with Mark and Darryl, and an intervention from Brad introducing the concepts of agonistic rhetoric (aggressive, assertive, confrontational) and Rogerian rhetoric (supportive, questioning, nonconfrontational—see Teich, pp. 635-636), Sally still seemed unable or unwilling to assume full rhetorical responsibility for her freewrite. She wrote:

If I have offended any of you I apologize.... I was just writing whatever was in my head. I thought we were all at a place where we can read things and not take anything to heart. But I was wrong.... But I am not going to censor what I say for other people, so if you don't want to read what I am saying, don't read my reflections.

Many of the students declined to get involved with the participants in this particular on-line discussion (one called it a “cat fight”). A consequent shift on the WebBoard away from agonistic rhetoric came in part from Brad’s unintended implication

that agonistic rhetoric was excitable speech. Rather, he had intended to respond to Sally's rhetoric, not the intellectual debate that Mark and Darryl were having. However, in context, the students took Brad's intervention as a response to Mark's and Darryl's exchange as well as Sally's inflammatory statements. But this was only part of what was going on. Most students were already avoiding agonistic rhetoric before Brad posted.

For Sally, understanding the function of intellectual debate (whether agonistic or Rogerian) and the importance of rhetorical responsibility took a class session much later in the semester when we had the students reflect on their own experiences of high school during a discussion of Unk's *Gay Teen*. After this session, Sally sent the following confession to the WebBoard:

Last Thursday's class opened me up to myself to do some real soul searching and analyzing of why I do what I do and prejudge people on the basis of what I still can't figure out.... That class helped me learn so much about people and so much about myself. Everyone in class is not the way I had you guys pegged. You are not cliquy, bitchy people who feel that you are better than everyone. By the way you all engage in conversations and the eye contact and passion that everyone has I realized I was wrong.... What I was seeing isn't who you are, it is a fraction, and after that day I took home a fraction of each of you and learned more about myself and about all of you and... honestly I just want to thank you all for that experience.

Hearing the tones of people's voices, making eye contact, and seeing their body language while they told parts of their own stories made it possible for Sally to connect to people and to understand intellectual debate, so she could carefully consider how to use rhetoric as sincere and useful, not as one-upmanship or pedantry. After this incident Sally wrote, "I can't really explain it, but [this class] has helped me to better myself and look more logically at things, and be able to better support my ideas," and "As for Butler, it is a hard

read but it can be used in everyday life, the struggles we are in, and it gives solutions to the problems that sometimes we don't find right away."

Sally's experience demonstrates that the WebBoard could not replace face-to-face discussion in which students could hear each other's voices and look each other in the eye. Especially for less articulate students at an earlier stage of intellectual development, this in-person interaction seems crucial to their ability to learn. The WebBoard, however, as in the case of Sally, can also be a crucial part of the learning process, providing a challenge that she was able to reinterpret in light of face-to-face discussion, thereby coming to a new understanding of debate and rhetoric.

Several repercussions emerged from this complicated, formative incident. The class session after the postings on the Vatican "Letter" included a very emotional discussion of how to present one's points on the WebBoard. We suspect the agonistic rhetoric threatened students' nascent community building and the *ethoi* they were developing. Most of these were students who had little other opportunity to be out, acknowledged, and accepted as the LGBT people they were. The intellectual interaction and debate of course topics that Mark and Darryl had modeled so well and that Brad termed agonistic rhetoric never occurred again to the same degree on the WebBoard. Instead, the students tended to post in a rhetoric that was more supportive, more questioning, and nonconfrontational, but less engaged with course material. As a result, we tried to encourage more substantive commentary by occasionally asking everyone to respond to prompts on the reading. In reply, the undergraduates asked to have a separate discussion site set up for them that they wanted to call the "Personal Venting Area." But on it, they only arranged times to socialize. The WebBoard thus became a site on which

our roles as instructors had—as Butler might phrase it—brought the students (particularly the undergraduates) into the linguistic life of the course “through the language given by the Other”—us—and not in the terms that the students would have chosen (p. 38).

However, the students went on to develop *ethoi* that gave them license to determine their own aims, e.g., Luke, a graduate student, emerged as a pithy humorist who avoided in-depth treatment of course material in empathy with the undergraduates; Theresa and Jenni became spokespeople against the course workload, even while they served as commentators on the aspects of the course material that they *did* find useful; Jill and Benjamin, a graduate student and an undergraduate, served as advocates of the course and its pedagogy, modeling attempts to analyze the material rhetorically (an aspect of the course that genuinely interested them) and coaxing the undergraduates to engage with them; Arthur, Tim, and Nicki—all undergraduates (Nicki was another “*allygatr*”)—composed brief posts whose predominately personal content tended to portray them as spectators.

Yet again, highly interactive exchanges about the course texts still appeared in what the students perceived as “Rogerian” rhetoric, especially at times when agonistic rhetoric had occurred in unresolved, face-to-face class discussion. For example, in a class session later in the semester, Theresa and Darryl criticized Sontag’s *Illness as Metaphor and Aids and Its Metaphors* for being out of date in its references to medical knowledge, and even irrelevant to segments of the LGBT community, i.e., lesbians. Jill, a graduate student, responded on line:

I am sorry our discussion in class last week seemed to take a historical turn in relation to getting caught up on the ‘facts’ of AIDS and whose problem it is anyway. It seems to me that Sontag never intended for her book to be a scientific journal or a medical reference, but instead wanted

to bring attention to how we ‘speak’ of AIDS and how that language has served to separate and alienate those infected AND those who are not.... I found some of Sontag’s thoughts very powerful regarding what can be done and how we get ‘boxed-in’ with words... Butler anyone?! Both authors relay the ‘power’ of language and how others use it to advocate and discriminate, just in different contexts or subjects, but with similar effects.... Do you feel the public discourse has changed much from 1989 (or earlier) when Sontag wrote this book? What are some of your thoughts regarding the current discourse and how Sontag’s book would be different if she were to rewrite it today?

Clarissa, a graduate student, replied, “There was MORE discourse, albeit inaccurate at times by today’s standards, than today.... The most recent *Reader’s Guide* has only a few entries and 90% were from *The Advocate*.... We’ve gone from a plague metaphor to invisibility.” Darryl also responded to Jill, saying,

I wonder if I was misunderstood in class, a little. I had a chance to reread parts of the book over the weekend, and was again impressed with some of the points Sontag makes... [but her medical inaccuracies] made me question her credibility and *ethos*. Sontag was writing with the medical knowledge current at the time, so why did these things bother me so much? ...Maybe because she bases part of her argument on these ideas, so when it turns out she had nonfactual info it weakens the rest of the book.

This dialogue prompted Tim, an undergrad who tended to struggle comprehending the course material, to respond:

AIDS books of the past and present are needed in today’s culture.... Sontag was just showing us how people used to make cancer a death sentence and now AIDS has taken its place. I mean, she talks of how cancer was once a dirty little secret that was in some cases even kept from the patient. Today AIDS is seen sometimes as a dirty little secret, and Sontag is just trying to show us how AIDS has gotten that way in a metaphoric sense.

Mark replied, “I think you’re right, Tim. But I wonder if that’s all Sontag is up to. I suspect she’s just using disease in general and AIDS in particular as a springboard to a broader discussion of what metaphorical language does to our thinking. Do you think that’s a possibility?” This online interaction among graduate and undergraduate students

shows how the students successfully used the WebBoard to share ideas and to critique and discuss texts and their rhetorical strategies and meanings. For Tim, a less advanced student, this particular WebBoard discussion gave him a less intimidating venue in which to participate in discussion and try out ideas. He was usually silent in class.

In this second example of online discussion, where students used what they understood as Rogerian rhetoric, we also noted that students did not seem to feel that anyone was being called upon to censor the commentary that she or he posted, as Sally had felt in the first example. The foregoing analysis relates to Butler's claim that "It is important to know what one means by 'censorship' (indeed what has become 'censored' in the definition of censorship) in order to understand the limits of its eradicability as well as the bounds within which such normative appeals might plausibly be made" (140).

But did censorship—or more precisely, what Butler calls "implicit censorship"—take place within the parameters of the "normative appeals" that we, the instructors, had made when the students perceived us as endorsing Rogerian rhetoric over agonistic? During the online time when other students were digesting Sontag, Theresa—who had initiated the in-class protest against Sontag's irrelevance to current LGBT issues—posted this apparent *non sequitur*:

I guess in the last few weeks, I've become much more preoccupied with world events, rather than classes. I've been thinking about the Mohammed Ali quotation: 'No Vietnamese man ever called me a nigger.' This was part of a press conference he gave on the reason he wasn't going to war.... I have to say that, by protesting this war, I don't think this moronic frat boy who stole the [Presidential] office... is going to change his mind; but I do think it's going to show the world that we are not all the same.... Be safe, Kathy.

Kathy was the student in ROTC who withdrew from class because she was called up for service. Was Theresa, through her use of both agonistic rhetoric and excitable speech in

this posting, subtly protesting our effort to contain excitable speech on the WebBoard by raising a real-life issue that we were failing to address? Had we quashed possible discussions that might follow from this kind of WebBoard posting—a posting out of sequence with our course’s reading schedule, but very relevant to our earlier discussion of Butler’s analysis of the “Don’t ask, don’t tell” policy? And was this why agonistic rhetoric emerged in a “campaign” that Theresa and others launched against the course’s workload? In the final section of this essay, we take up these questions in context of the *students’* agendas.

### **III. What LGBT Students Want**

Earlier in the semester, when we were leading students through an in-class exercise in the rhetorical analysis of writers who had responded in protest of the Vatican’s “Letter on Pastoral Care,” Theresa had burst out crying and left the classroom, saying that this activity was not what she’d expected from our course. Although she later returned to that class session and apologized—saying that she was feeling overwhelmed by coursework and a job that took up 30 hours every week—a few days afterward, she posted a further explanation of her outburst on the WebBoard:

I would like to clarify my breakdown.... Religion doesn’t seem to be my problem. I think it very valid and relevant and actually most important in the LGBT course.... The most important thing... is that... each of us should be able to relate to the subject in our own terms. For example, I study [political science], and in my art history class, I was able to put my poli sci spin on my project. Yet, in this class, I don’t feel that we the students have a say in any way it goes. I think most notably there is the generational conflict.

Then Theresa went on to suggest the sample issues she felt the class could better relate to, which appear in the prefacing commentary at the beginning of this essay (e.g., “...get

insurance companies to change their guidelines or my parents or setting up an LGBT studies program at the university.. .”).

Marilyn Cooper notes that in such virtual writing situations, the traditional notion of power relations—knowledge passed on by an authority, “the hierarchical underpinning of education”—might best be restructured, because, if we assume that “knowledge is socially constructed, students need to be able to engage in the process” (p. 144). In direct response to Theresa’s protest, we therefore announced a shift of format in our shorter, non-WebBoard assignments. Instead of asking for book reviews of selected course texts throughout the semester, we asked students to write in genres that dealt more immediately with problematic scenarios that they would very likely find in their own lives, i.e., (1) a letter to the university Board of Trustees and president, defending our course’s approach to religious issues, in light of a fundamentalist donor’s threat to rescind scholarship funds to the university; (2) a letter responding to a local, conservative radio announcer who denigrates liberal media coverage of LGBT issues; (3) a proposal to the university’s student activities association, suggesting an LGBT film that should be included in a “diversity” film festival; (4) a letter to the editor responding to a neoconservative, anti-LGBT studies column, such as George Will might write. Students were to reference course texts to make their assignments rhetorically stronger, but we asked them to work more with textual analysis in online and face-to-face discussion.

Students responded enthusiastically to the new assignment formats. For instance,

Theresa’s partner Helen commented on the letter to the Trustees and university president:

I think that it would be very easy for... the university... at the very mention of money being taken away, to drop the class.... We should explain that we look at issues with the church and discuss them and do not just disregard them because they are offensive to us.... [The



fundamentalist donor] is also, like we discussed in class, very threatening, and we should not even come close to that in our responses.

Helen's increased rhetorical sensitivity was not the only noteworthy element in her response. Keeping in mind the students' keen awareness that the WebBoard was a very public place to write, was Helen also endorsing a change of direction in the course and acknowledging the fact that we instructors had replied to Theresa's complaint by doing so? Helen provided later comments on her movie proposal that seem to indicate as much: "I wasn't sure how to format this film [proposal], so I made it as a pseudo memo.... But it was fun writing this and the letter to the board. I almost felt like I had a voice and that someone, high up there, cared about what I thought."

This change of focus moved us more in the direction of integrating personal approaches—and to supplement, we made time in class for students to bring up and work through issues that affected them directly throughout the semester. Their issues were compelling. For instance, Jenni described an incident in her sociology class, where the professor made a reference to LGBT people while discussing conventional and alternative families, and her classmates responded in such an uninformed manner that Jenni came out to them as a lesbian in a committed relationship, offering to answer any questions they had. One religious student then launched into a Fred Phelps-like tirade against her for nearly ten minutes, and the professor did nothing to intervene. Benjamin recounted his experience of being turned away in a campus blood-donor drive, because he truthfully admitted he'd had sexual contact with another man (his long-term partner, with whom he had a monogamous relationship). Luke brought up the problem of an older, more powerful gay man at his corporate workplace, who was sexually harassing Luke despite Luke's constant reiterations that he had a partner. Theresa and Helen

brought up a very contentious weekend they'd spent with Helen's parents, talking about their relationship and plans to marry, even though Helen's parents strongly disapproved; their debate later came to an uneasy hiatus when Theresa joined Helen's family for Seder.

Such forays into the *immediate* personal led many students to topics they wanted to explore more in their final, longer essay, which we stipulated, they might try to develop along the lines of academic writing in their own disciplinary majors. To illustrate: Benjamin's blood-donor experience made him rethink gay men's sexual practices in light of "bug chasing," and he did a sociologically oriented study of why some men in his generation actually seek HIV infection. Luke did an analysis of published corporate policies toward LGBT people and then conducted interviews, to see if companies actually practiced what they claimed, to the extent that they might—for example—protect LGBT employees against all kinds of harassment. Jenni did an "I-search" essay on her commitment ceremony, in light of how American society constructs same-sex marriage.

Moreover, particularly felicitous connections between personal experience and the texts sometimes occurred—above all, when we worked with Sharon Kowalski's story and with Unk's collection on educational practices with LGBT teens. Both Carole and Jill posted WebBoard accounts, respectively about emailing Karen Thompson and meeting her at a conference, for instance, giving us a fascinating update on Kowalski's living situation (Thompson has a new partner, a nurse, who helps her take care of Kowalski, and she's writing a book about it). And the class session where everyone shared accounts of their own high school experiences—to compare or contrast them to those depicted in the Unks text—was easily one of the most memorable ones for all of us. However, at that

time, Roger (an undergraduate) posted a commentary that also taught us an important lesson about the intersection of the personal and the academic:

It occurred to me recently that, in regard to the issues we discuss in this class, I was unprepared to think ‘academically’ about many of them. By academically, I mean what you describe as the ‘norms, clear cut facts, and generalization.’ The fact of the matter is, the topics here are far too close to home, and I’ve had a hard time trying to generalize (get the big picture) when it’s all so personal. What’s worse is that I have long ignored many of the issues we’ve covered (especially teenage experiences) and haven’t gotten beyond the barriers that I set up a long time ago to protect myself.... I think part of what became overwhelming for me in this class is that we were very busy looking at the rhetorical and practical means of spreading our stories and were very rarely discussing exactly what those stories are. This is partially my shortcoming. The purpose for the class is very well defined, and so naturally we’d be learning to practice using our rhetorical tools. I just think that it is appropriate and valuable to reflect back occasionally on why this is necessary.... because we have all been affected personally and need not speak in generalities.

It takes so much time and a feeling of security in order to break down those defense mechanisms and allow yourself to tell your story and process those of others. It takes more than a semester, frankly. So, there’s another reason for why we need an LGBT Studies program.

Roger’s insights about how personal dynamics affect the learning process show us that we could have been more mindful of the emotional and cognitive development of our students. For many of them, both their survival strategies and their (lack of) prior learning opportunities in a homophobic society have impeded their intellectual growth with regard to LGBT issues. Actually, for most people—queer or straight—what Lev Vygotsky (1962) calls our zones of proximal development with regard to LGBT issues are perhaps at a less advanced level than development in other content areas that are *not* silenced or surrounded with taboos.

Could we have combined intellectual work and this personal development more effectively by doing as Cooper recommends, having them discuss face-to-face some of the particularly strong WebBoard postings that the students wrote (p. 168)? This would

have created more discursive space for telling pertinent stories and then analyzing them rhetorically. In retrospect, we now think this was a crucially missing piece in our pedagogy that could have bridged the differentiation we inadvertently constructed between the “intellectual” and the “personal.” Although we had students doing a lot of informal writing in-class, this practice is not the same as making the students’ WebBoard texts legitimate objects of study in a face-to-face setting. Doing so would also have brought to the fore Cooper’s assertion that online discussion offers students “the chance to consciously consider and take responsibility for the effects their actions have on others” (p.157). LGBT students—and *all* students dealing with LGBT issues—may have a particular need to develop concretely these skills in working out their own ideas, ethics, and sense of self, since public rhetoric and forums are generally nonexistent or polarized. Making time to study their own virtual texts would have positively reinforced the relationships the students were forming with one another, too—relationships that were indeed embedded in much of their webbed writing and immensely important to them because they are so rare in a heterocentric society.

Moreover, analyzing their own web postings in class would have helped them see that in fact they were (1) using some of the rhetorical techniques we’d pointed out to them and (2) dealing with Butler’s ideas about hate speech, excitable speech, and insurrectionary speech as germane in their critical thought about issues and efforts to create community. This use of the WebBoard would then have addressed our concern that the students not only *perform* certain rhetorical and analytic strategies, but that they consciously *reflect upon* and *articulate* them, putting them in sociohistorical context. That seems to be the crucial step that the scenario writing assignments did not address—

that the students not only know *how* to do something, but as Roger put it, know *why*. This approach might have made the course's design and goals clearer and more persuasive to some of the undergraduates. These ruminations recall Ira Shor's (1992) observation that "education is experienced by students as something done to them, not something they do. They see it as alien and controlling"; we did not push ourselves far enough to enact the "affective value of empowerment," to help students see themselves as "responsible, capable human beings who should expect to do a lot and do it well" (pp. 20-21).

The students gave us a taste of how they might have begun critiquing and rhetorically analyzing theirs—and maybe each other's—WebBoard postings when, as a final exercise, they looked through class assignments in their portfolios and identified where they felt they'd used rhetorical *techne* effectively or resorted to fallacious reasoning. They then posted their findings. Here are some samples:

**Roger:** Weighing criteria—in my letter to the Board of Trustees, I gave a count of all of the courses [described in our university's course catalog] that discuss religion and compared it to the number of courses that discuss LGBT issues. I used the standard of religious education in a public university to weight the criteria for a decent standard for LGBT studies.

**Darryl:** Claim and support—in my film review I point out that showing the movie "Cruising" would not make the climate for LGBT people better here on campus because "Cruising" links homosexuality with violence.

**Jill:** General and particular—in my final paper... I state how when one is made to feel different for any reason (physicality, sexual orientation, etc.), it can be isolating and lonely (my generalization), and then I provide my personal example in the opening of my paper when I was teased as a youth for being muscular.

**Theresa:** Pandering—I used this [in my last WebBoard entry]... to appeal to the general stress that is prevalent in all students at this time of the year, as well as general sentiment of professors who don't teach the way we would like to be taught. 'Did I not inform all about the hubris of all professors? Walking around in their ivory towers, not giving a rat's ass about the amount of work that they give out or the fact that they assign so

much work that it undermines the potential practical use in the REAL WORLD.’

We thus agree with Cooper that an interface of students’ classroom and webbed writing must be consciously established, maintained, and made an ongoing part of any LGBT course objectives, so that authority and knowledge-making are more evenly shared and the likelihood of implicit censorship reduced. We reiterate Malinowitz’s argument that instructors of LGBT courses must set up the opportunity for LGBT students and their allies to become insiders in an identity-based discourse community where they can consistently “be propelled by some concept of personal relationship to the material,” even though the public nature of online discussion inevitably complicates the ethics of using “the queered personal” for students who are still trying to become comfortable with writing intellectually to and for each other (263). We have also learned that instructors need to help LGBT students understand the relevance of online tasks they ask students to do, as well as to clarify the different but equally important relationships the students and instructors have to the course material, the course activities, and to one another, because in other areas of the curriculum, LGBT students have seldom (or more likely, never) had these relevancies and relationships made transparent vis-à-vis their own subject positions.

In sum, then, we are humbled by how *queerly* we may need to reinvent the wheel, so as to learn about how online writing can facilitate LGBT empowerment in the classroom and the academy.

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