What Has Sexuality Got To Do With It? Negotiating a Professional Identity as a Gay Early Career Teacher

"Welcome, today we are going to be talking about gender, sexuality and Queer Criminology"
Muttering, giggles and disruption
"So, we will be talking about the historic criminalisation of gender and sexual minorities, looking at how homosexuality has been constructed as deviant"
Group of male students laugh, collect their belongings, and leave the session

Introduction

Although the experience described above is not an everyday occurrence in my professional life, it is certainly not a unique experience either. In this chapter, I seek to offer personal reflections upon such experiences in my transition from working in industry to teaching in Higher Education (HE) as an openly gay, Early Career Teacher (ECT). This transition is somewhat unique, in that my professional identity outside of HE centred, and depended upon, my personal identity as a gay man. Transitioning into HE, my personal identity was no longer core to my professional identity. It is important to contextualise my experiences as an openly gay ECT in the social setting within which I negotiate my identity. I teach in a large inner city, post-92 University in the West Midlands. The location of the institution is important, as the diversity of the student population is reflective of the wider community population. Although a diverse student population can facilitate co-learning and have a positive effect on educational outcomes (Chang, 1999), it can also create difficulties when teaching culturally sensitive material.

There is currently a surge of queer culture and lifestyles in mainstream consciousness, most notably through the rise in popularity of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and queer (LGBTQ) people within the arts and popular culture (Peele, 2007). This contributes to the possibility of living an authentically queer life within a heteronormative world (Stryker, 2006). Although Stryker was specifically discussing issues of gender identity, the same argument can be made for broader LGBTQ communities who have moved from increased representation to the opportunity to live an authentic reality. It is important to note that w hite, gay men tend to be overrepresented in comparison to more diverse LGBTQ communities, and this

reinforces notions of ‘homonormativity’ (Podmore, 2013). The increased acceptance and assimilation of LGBTQ lives into the mainstream is not universal and sets expectations around what ‘type’ of LGBTQ person is acceptable in particular settings (Brown, 2012). Expectations of the way LGBTQ people should present themselves influenced the way I constructed my professional identity as an ECT. However, alongside the growing visibility of queer culture, we also live in a political climate that legitimises hate speech. With the acceptance of discriminatory language used by those who are most powerful in society, it is unsurprising to see rising levels of hate shown towards minority groups within the UK (Home Office, 2019). This has contributed to minority groups feeling insecure, unsafe and censoring their behaviour in order to conceal their ‘difference’.

It has been over 15 years since ‘Section 28’ prevented the ‘promotion’ of homosexuality by local authorities and schools in Britain, but we are still engaged in the same debates concerning the appropriateness of teaching lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and queer (LGBTQ+) content in schools. Most notably in the protests across the West Midlands, but particularly in Birmingham in response to ‘No Outsiders’ – an educational programme that seeks to address issues of equality, diversity and acceptance in schools (Colliver, 2019). The narratives surrounding the protest mobilize discourses of mental health, religion and nature to delegitimise LGBTQ+ people (Colliver *et al.,* 2019). Although HE has not been the focal point of these protests, the content and geographical proximity of the protests has had an impact on my self-identification as a gay ECT. Negotiating a professional identity, that remains true to my authentic personal identity in a social climate that seeks to silence my voice, to suppress my existence and to position me as the ‘immoral other’, is a complex and difficult task.

In this chapter, I offer a personal reflection on my career transition from industry to HE and the various challenges that I have encountered as an ECT throughout this transition. The chapter begins by offering a contextualisation of my previous work in industry and how my sexual identity was central to my professional identity in this role. I then move on to discuss the changing landscape of HE within a neoliberal context, specifically focusing on the implications that this has for ECTs in relation to ensuring student satisfaction. I highlight the impact that these concerns can have on what content is taught, and how it is taught. I finish the

chapter by offering a more detailed account of issues I faced when teaching gender and sexuality within HE; I reflect upon the additional emotional labour that comes with teaching the personal (Koster, 2011).

Transitioning from Industry

Before beginning a career within academia, I worked for a leading Equality and Diversity organisation as an 'LGBTQ Youth Worker'. My role centred mainly around supporting young LGBTQ people across a number of issues they faced routinely, including hate crime, mental health, substance use and sexual health. My lived experience as a gay man was therefore core to my professional identity and practice in this role. As such, my personal and professional identity were interconnected, interdependent and intertwined. This was not simply a personal sense of affinity between the personal and professional. Under the Equality Act (2010), organisations can stipulate that potential employees must identify as LGBTQ if there is a genuine occupational requirement that justifies this recruitment procedure. Owing to the specific group of young people I intended to work alongside, I gained my employment in this role on the basis of my identification as a gay man (alongside my other experiences and qualifications). Consequently, it became difficult at times for me to distinguish between my personal and professional identity. As a vocal and visible supporter of the LGBTQ+ equality movement, my identity as an activist was nurtured and encouraged throughout my time as a youth worker. Not only did I consider my role as a youth worker to be activist in nature, the organisation I worked in also had an activist agenda. This made it easy to locate my own values and biography within my professional role.

However, the type of professionalism that is required for teaching in HE is different to the type of professionalism required for youth work (Corney, 2006). Both industries require staff to be relatable, adaptable and able to work under pressure, but the manifestation of these qualities are vastly different. My experience as a youth worker required me to be significantly more informal, in both language and appearance. I was predominantly seen as a mentor, and 'client focused' rather than an educator and 'institutionally focused', despite having an educational role. The focus on education was thus grounded in co-production (Wood *et al.,* 2015). Whilst

the educational elements of youth work were highly structured, they were delivered in a way that appeared much less structured than they actually were. This helped redress the general want and need for young people's informal learning. On the other hand, students within HE position me as an educator first and as a mentor second. Students' expect me to provide structured, coherent and fluid content and this was significantly different to my experience as a youth worker. As an ECT new to academia, this transition period into my new role proved to be a time of uncertainty, rediscovery and reformation of the self (Sinner, 2012). Not only was I adjusting to new institution rules and regulations, I was adapting to a new method of engagement with the young people I worked with. Despite this, I tried to adopt some of my experiences as a youth worker to provide a different learning experience for students that centres on active and problem-based learning (Pedler and Abbott, 2013). As a youth worker, I could only engage students through active, practical forms of learning, and as part of establishing a stable identity as an ECT involved me bringing my understanding and experiences as a youth worker to bear on forging this new professional identity.

However, it was not simply the methods of engagement with young people and students that was reshaped during my career change. I also engaged in a significant shift in the focus and content of my work. My role as an 'LGBTQ+ Youth Worker' saw me engaged primarily with content and issues that relate to gender identity and sexuality. The transition to HE as an ECT involved a reorientation of this focus. Although still the focus of my research, issues of gender identity and sexuality as topics of teaching were located on the periphery of my lecturing role. Although I still have the opportunity to teach and engage students with content that relates to gender identity and sexuality, this is often as a 'guest lecture' within an existing programme. In other words, the content is not embedded throughout the core curriculum. It is important to note the specific discipline that I work within at this point as, Criminology which has been characterised as a 'masculine' discipline (Wilson, 1991). Mainstream, commonly taught Criminology topics are still characterised by heteronormativity and a reliance on a binary understanding of gender and sexuality (Dwyer *et al.,* 2016). Additionally, the institution of HE has also been described as a heteronormative space, which reproduces and reinforces heteronormativity (Matthyse, 2017). As an ECT with an activist life history, I have struggled to centre

issues of gender identity and sexuality within this masculine, heteronormative discipline. This has implications for my own journey in establishing a professional identity within the confines of disciplinary norms and expectations. In this sense, I engaged in a 'double searching' for identity during this transition period; both trying to establish an authentic professional identity as an ECT and developing a professional identity that met the needs of my personal values and my gay identity. It is important to note that this is not a search that is unique to teachers in the discipline of Criminology, as researchers have noted the heteronormativity of the curriculum across HE (Epstein *et al.,* 2003). These issues of heteronormativity are compounded by the institutional culture of universities operating in an increasing neoliberal landscape (Taylor and Lahad, 2018).

The Neoliberal University and Student Comfortability

Following the expansion and reform of HE in the 1960s, many scholars have claimed that access to university was transformed from elite to mass access (Trow, 2010). Prior to, and alongside this transformation, scholars had begun to challenge the purpose of education (Dewey, 1900, 1902). University was being conceptualised as a place of intellectual growth, challenge and stimulation through which social reform should take place (Dewey, 1900). In this sense, it was argued that the purpose of university was to interrogate, displace and shift students' opinions and assumptions. Nevertheless, the university institution has transformed again owing to the growth of a neoliberal society (Decuypere and Simons, 2019). As a result, Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) in the UK are primarily and increasingly concerned with league table positions, their National Student Survey (NSS) results and the so-called 'student experience' (Thiel, 2019).

As an ECT, I bring my own biography and history with me to the learning environment. I have expectations and assumptions regarding what creates an effective teaching experience. At the same time, I have to create this environment whilst meeting the expectations of the institution and students (Flores and Day, 2006). Additionally, as an ECT on probation, my fear of complaints and of student dissatisfaction caused by my challenging their assumptions limits how free I am to engage in transformative education (Taylor and Lahad, 2018). The neoliberal

institution can therefore actually prohibit transformative learning - that is, learning which contradicts and contests students' assumption, prejudices and oppressive thinking (O'Sullivan *et al.,* 2002). This has been a particularly difficult experience for me as an ECT who tries explicitly to engage students in critical thinking around the gender binary and non-normative sexualities, especially when my discussions and suggestions are met with resistance from students who may hold very fixed, binary understandings of the world. As an ECT, these experiences make me apprehensive about continuing to address these issues for fear of student disengagement and dissatisfaction.

Extended probation periods, continual student evaluations and a strong focus on NSS results may also prohibit ECTs from engaging in teaching that disrupts students' comfort zone. Given that ECTs are especially vulnerable to student satisfaction metrics, the pressure of conformity to student expectations, may be overwhelming to the point where challenging content is avoided. This is situated in the wider landscape of HE in which job security is increasingly difficult to establish and fixed-term contracts are commonplace, with an estimated 33% of academic staff in the United Kingdom on fixed-term contracts (Higher Education Statistics Agency, 2019). As an ECT who is motivated by a commitment to disrupt oppressive understandings of sexuality and gender identity, navigating this neoliberal institutional landscape is extremely complex. In the next section of this chapter, I will provide some examples of difficulties that I have faced when engaging students in this content and the impact this has on me as an ECT .

Professional Teaching of Personal Issues

It has been noted that students believe the most effective teachers are those who convey an 'authentic' identity (Wright, 2013). Although the definition and meaning of 'authenticity' is contested (Kreber, 2007), it arguably denotes a teacher who fuses both their personal and professional identity (Cranton, 2001). Being an openly gay lecturer in Criminology is an important personal choice. Given my experience within industry where my personal identity played such a pivotal role in my professional identity, it was important for me to not lose a sense of self when establishing a new professional identity within a heteronormative institution

(Matthyse, 2017). The perceived benefits of teachers within HE ‘coming out’ have been documented (Clarke & Braun, 2009). It has been argued that being openly LGBTQ+ within the classroom can be empowering for the teacher and contributes to an authentic learning environment (Orlov & Allen, 2014).

However, being an openly gay ECT within a heteronormative discipline is not without challenges. As an ECT who strongly believes in challenging heteronormative assumptions, I feel a strong commitment to integrating issues of gender and sexuality into the Criminology curriculum. I believe that doing this will help to avoid situations such as those described above, as LGBTQ+ content will become less remarkable as it is more fully integrated across the curriculum. Although a need to challenge heteronormative assumptions is not specifically related to my identity as an ECT, the resources available to me in order to achieve this are affected by my early career position. I have experienced apathy from some colleagues when designing new modules which centre around the lives and experiences of queer people. On the other hand, some colleagues are extremely supportive, but institutional restrictions and policy can prevent the ease of integration of new modules and content. As an ECT, I feel a need to assimilate into existing institutional culture, rather than to challenge, or disrupt the status-quo. As a result, I am apprehensive about pushing an agenda that centres queer lives when I sense resistance. Additionally, as an ECT, I do not feel authoritative enough to be able to interrogate institutional policies or practices that hinder the integration of more critical forms of Criminology into the curriculum. Interestingly, colleagues demonstrate support for teaching issues of gender and sexuality when it fits within the broader needs of the institution, in relation to its responsibility to equality and diversity. In this sense, issues of gender and sexuality are welcomed when they coincide with wider institutional processes that may be more about appearance, rather than a desire to critically engage students with content.

As a staff member new to teaching and new to the institution, I often feel powerless in relation to what I teach. This can cause issues, particularly when teaching on modules in which the content I am expected to deliver feeds in to heteronormative assumptions. As an ECT I feel a lack of authority and experience that renders me less able to question the content provided by a more experienced colleague. I often feel a sense of frustration when expected to deliver content that

fails to acknowledge an issue through the lens of gender and sexuality, particularly when adopting this stance would offer a more insightful, critical perspective. I often find myself moving away from provided content, and engaging in a more critical form of activist-focused teaching. However, this is inconsistent, as I am critically aware of my position as an ECT and the precariousness of my position. This is not always the case and I do have relative freedom in terms of content that is provided within modules that I coordinate. Nevertheless, I often still feel restricted in introducing LGBTQ+ content into the curriculum as a result of student responses and perceptions.

Experiences of discrimination and the negative perceptions of teachers who are openly LGBTQ+ within the classroom have been documented, with some students perceiving visible LGBTQ+ messages as a cry for help, or revealing an unhealthy obsession with sexuality (Clarke, 2019). For me, these kinds of issues ring true and match up with some of my own experiences. I have been asked by students why I paid so much attention to LGBTQ+ issues. Research has pointed to problematic student perceptions of LGBTQ+ lives when they are used as examples within teaching (Ripley *et al.,* 2012). In my teaching, the use of around three examples of research exploring LGBTQ+ issues within a 12-week module was perceived by some students to be a significant amount of attention. This experience reinforces the unremarkable nature of heterosexuality, and that this provides a lens through which students conceptualise LGBTQ+ content as remarkable and more noticeable when discussed.

As an ECT who is establishing a professional identity that centres around issues of gender and sexuality, significant tension between students expectations of taught content and my desire to address heteronormative assumptions arise. Given my relatively recent transition into HE, I often question the content of my sessions due to experiences described above. Whilst I still seek to raise greater awareness of heteronormativity and give an increased level of visibility to non-normative gender and sexual identities, I lack a certain level of confidence that may be gained with experience. I also find that in sessions which have examples that relate to LGBTQ+ issues, students challenge and questione me around broader Criminological issues that are not specifically related to the content being engaged with. As an openly gay ECT, I perceive these challenges to be directly related to

my identity as an ECT and as a gay man. It feels as though students impose my gay identity on me as a master status, and see me as an educator second. As such, as an ECT, they interrogate and question in order to establish how knowledgeable I am on wider Criminological issues that do not centre on gender and sexuality. This directly links to my status as an ECT, in that students may perceive me to be less experienced, less knowledgeable and therefore less appropriate as a teacher. If my personal identity did not influence my professional identity, and I engaged students with content and material that was more readily associated with Criminology, I may be perceived as being more authoritative in the discipline.

As a result of experiencing these barriers to integrating LGBTQ content across the curriculum, I adopted new methods and approaches to expose students to non-heteronormative content. I now adopt a performative element in my teaching. For me, it is a conscious decision to be an openly gay teacher, and in establishing an identity as an ECT, I have decided to engage in a performance of 'high camp', that is, an intentionally exaggerated and artificial 'campness' (Macwilliam, 2014). As an ECT, adopting a performative element to teaching eases the tension between my personal identity, and expected professional identity. This approach perceives the teaching space as a performance space, one that can inherently disrupt heteronormative assumptions in the delivery of teaching. As argued by Denzin (2009) performance can be understood to be activist in nature; it aims to interrupt and resist dominant narratives about particular social issues. I therefore engage in a 'camp' performance in my teaching practice as a form of activism, to unsettle students' expectations about who teaches Criminology and to expose students to issues of sexuality and gender performance throughout the curriculum, even if it is not directly related to the specific content taught.

Consequently, students' assumptions about masculinity and heterosexuality are challenged by my performance, even when they engage with heteronormative Criminology content. Being 'camp' may be assumed to be an expected way for a gay man to present themselves, often reinforced by media representations which commonly draw upon stereotypes in an attempt to ridicule LGBTQ+ people (Raley and Lucas, 2006). However, given the heteronormativity of the discipline, it challenges students' expectations around who engages with, and teaches Criminology. Whilst this approach does challenge student assumptions, it can also

create issues when engaging in teaching. Engaging in a ‘high camp’ performance has enabled me to engage a number of students with the content being taught. However, there are some instances where I feel that this style of performance, alongside my status as an ECT undermines my authority in the learning space. In some instances, students may take me less seriously when they are asked to complete a task, or refrain from talking. Adopting a performative style when teaching can also contribute to making classroom management problematic, as there are times in which an apparent division manifests between the ‘performer’ and the ‘spectators’. Resultantly, students are expecting to observe, and to view, rather than engage and take direction. As such, classroom management can become difficult, as students have come to expect a performative experience, rather than a traditional authoritative, teach-student experience.

Nonetheless, despite the setbacks mentioned, I have found opportunities to engage students explicitly with LGBTQ content. I teach on a module that explores the way a number of issues are socially constructed including gender and sexuality. Originating from women’s and LGBTQ movements throughout the 1970’s, the concept of ‘safe spaces’ within an educational setting has received numerous critiques (Flensner and Von der Lippe, 2019). Whilst I agree with Boostrom (1998) that education should at times be disruptive and uncomfortable, I try to create this in relation to challenging oppressive and problematic beliefs. I attempt to prevent already marginalised students experiencing discomfort through interrogating and deconstructing prejudicial, delegitimising and discriminatory language. I therefore operate within a framework of “respectfulness”. Within this context, students are required to be considerate of others within the learning space when choosing what language to use.

However, as I simultaneously require students to be open and honest about their perceptions, it is difficult to challenge oppressive perspectives if they cannot be voiced within the classroom. It is also important for me in establishing my identity as an ECT to balance my activist values and my role as an impartial facilitator of learning. For instance, I am acutely aware of the negative impact exposure to discriminatory language can have on minority groups. Navigating this requires significant personal negotiation between addressing ‘problematic’ viewpoints and acknowledging that my interpretation of ‘problematic’ is subjective. My status as an

ECT also compounds these tensions in a number of ways. Some students may perceive me to be less experienced, less authoritative and less likely to challenge problematic language than more experienced staff. On the other hand, some students may not always feel comfortable disclosing opinions around gender and sexuality that they feel may be in contradiction with my own personal beliefs. This might be due to me being a 'teacher' figure and/or a young ECT who is relatively close in age to a number of students. As a result, students may also perceive me to be more of a role model or mentor (without the paternal connotations). This comes with a huge pressure and sense of responsibility in relation to continually challenging oppressive or problematic perspectives, as I have to take on the personal responsibility of embodying activism.

The content of student assessments contained varying levels of homophobia, transphobia and elements of heteronormativity underpinning the critical discussion, sometimes explicitly, and sometimes implicitly. This was a particularly challenging time for me as I entered HE and had to begin to distinguish between my personal and professional identity as an ECT. My professional identity required me to engage with student assessments in an objective, fair and transparent way. On the other hand, my personal identity urged me to challenge students more directly. Establishing a balance between the professional and the personal proved to be a complex task. Certainly, the impact on my professional identity was notable, as I had begun to question how effective I had been in facilitating a transformative educational experience. Simultaneously, I found that I began to experience significantly more turmoil in my personal life as well, because of my exposure to such discriminatory and prejudice language. It is therefore important to acknowledge the additional emotional labour that teaching the personal can bring. It is important to acknowledge that t his additional emotional labour resulting from teaching the personal is not necessarily unique to ECTs.

However, teachers who are early in their careers may not have the experience or expertise to manage the impact of this emotional labour effectively (Lindqvist, 2019). This was particularly challenging for me within a professional context, given my professional identity before teaching was always centred around uplifting, and positive messages of sexual liberation and diversity. I have noted that being an openly gay early career teacher, I am often called upon to engage students

in issues of sexuality. This contributes to the additional emotional labour I experience, as the responsibility for challenging heteronormativity tends to only fall upon a few members of staff, often early career, rather than being an overarching, institutional goal. As an ECT, when I am 'called upon' to engage in issues of gender and sexuality, I often feel pressured to agree because of my status as an ECT. This is because it is important for me to establish myself as a 'team player', and part of this involves participating in activities and initiatives that may increase the emotional labour I experience. Although all ECTs may be 'called upon' within different contexts, not all tasks will bear an additional emotional labour for the ECT, in the way that engaging in the personal does.

Conclusion

In this chapter I have reflected upon my transition from industry to HE as an openly gay, ECT . I have contextualised my experiences within the transformed landscape of my institution that operates in a British HE sector that is underpinned by neoliberal values and that positions students as consumers. The current landscape of HE within the UK can create difficulties for ECT s to engage students in critical thought and to challenge problematic perspectives that contribute to the oppression of others. Moreover, I experience additional emotional labour as an openly gay teacher who engages students with LGBTQ+ content and sometimes feel additional pressure as one of the only people responsible for delivering this content.

Emotional labour cannot be quantified or documented in relation to workload. As an ECT, the emotional labour that I experience in my teaching role, as a result of openly identifying as a gay man significantly impacts upon my understanding of my professional identity, especially in relation to my effectiveness. However, despite the additional emotional labour I experience, I continue to disclose my sexuality publicly in order to provide oppressed and/or minority students with a role model within a largely heteronormative discipline. Despite some challenging encounters with students, I continue to engage in a performative style of teaching, to continually destabilise and disrupt students expectations and perceptions of masculinity and heteronormativity. The performative element to my teaching has been crucial in me building and developing a professional identity as an ECT that eases the tensions

between my personal and professional values and expectations. However, as outlined in this chapter, a performative style of teaching can result in a perceived sense of undermined authority, which can create difficulties in effective classroom management, especially when you are relatively new to teaching. Being an openly gay ECT, who professionally teaches the "personal", has been particularly challenging for me.

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