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Developing an LGBTQIA2+ Affirming Curriculum and Testing its Impact on Allyship

By

Tausif Sanzum Karim

B.A. BRAC University, 2013

A THESIS

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the

Requirements for the Degree of

Master of Arts

(in Communication)

The Graduate School

The University of Maine

December 2022

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DEVELOPING AN LGBTQIA2+ AFFIRMING CURRICULUM AND TESTING ITS IMPACT ON ALLYSHIP

By Tausif Sanzum Karim

Thesis Advisor: Dr. Liliana Herakova

An Abstract of the Thesis Presented
in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the
Degree of Master of Art
(Communication)
December 2022

Why are some conversations considered more difficult in learning spaces than others? What is the potential for educational interventions strengthen our capacities for such challenging conversations and for allyship? Guided by these broad questions, the present thesis focused on LGBTQIA2+ affirming education and sought to specifically test how an intentionally queer online learning experiences impacted the participants' self-perceived allyship efficacies.

In my thesis, I draw on literature exploring how the “civility, teacher immediacy, or teacher credibility” (Chen & Lawless, 2018, p. 376) of Western education has prevented instructors from bringing topics related to race, gender, immigration, sexuality, and others in the classroom and also how these topics impact different students differently (Scharrón-Del Río, 2018). However, despite the challenges faced by both instructors and students, literature also shows how it is more harmful, especially for students, when these topics are not being taught or explored in the classroom (Scharrón-Del Río, 2018). To address this issue, the current thesis implements Queer Communication Pedagogy (Atay & Pensoneau-Conway, 2020), which is a feminist educational approach, to develop learning materials countering the white cis-hetero

dominance of western education. The project offers the LGBTQIA2+ Learning and Affirming Challenge implemented through the Fogler Library at University of Maine.

My interest was to investigate how having an LGBTQIA2+ affirming curriculum impacts allyship towards LGBTQIA2+ population. A survey consisting of demographic questions and an allyship scale (Jones et al., 2014) was used to “assess the skills to support lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender (LGBT) persons, knowledge of the LGBT experience, awareness of LGBT oppression, and engagement in action among heterosexual allies to the LGBT community” (Jones et al., 2014, p. 181). Participants completed the survey before and after engaging in the LGBTQIA2+ Learning and Affirming Library Challenge. The data collected from those participants who completed both the surveys allowed us to conduct a paired samples t-test for each question in the allyship measure.

The results of this survey along with the existing literature available helped us to understand how an educational intervention such as a curriculum developed using QCP can contribute towards positive differences in improving allyship competencies. Practically, this project provides content which can be incorporated in any academic discipline. In terms of research implications, it highlights how queering education is not an additional burden but something which can positively impact learning, respect, and knowledge production in the classroom and beyond. In addition to the positives, the research also poses the questions as to who benefits from a queer affirming curricula and how, especially since Western academia is dominated by white cis-heteronormativity, both in terms of content and in terms of representation among learners and educator.

DEDICATION

How lucky am I that my chosen family of queer and non-queer allies just keeps increasing, so thankful to Rasel, Tanzeel, Schlegel, Mimi, Rishu, Erinn, Molly, Sakib, Jarnigan and all the new additions - Tauseef, Joel, Layne and so many more. Thank you, thank you, thank you!

I would like to dedicate this thesis to the 12-year-old Tausif, who did not know what being gay was and yet had the courage to be himself, to protect himself to the best of his little abilities. You taught the 32-year-old Tausif what strength is - and that it has nothing to do with how strong one is physically but how powerful connecting with your emotions can be.

I want to dedicate this thesis to the 19-year-old Tausif, who despite knowing the challenges of being gay in Bangladesh, came out to his family and faced all the negativity even in his own home without letting it take away his ability to laugh, joke and be himself. You, my friend, taught me how powerful empathy can be, empathy towards yourself and towards others even if they cause you harm, consciously or unconsciously.

Lastly, I want to thank the 26-year-old Tausif, who had the strength to leave behind everything that he considered to be home, and move to a new country, culture, and end up making a home for himself. You taught me the most important lesson that home and love is not one place or one person, but home is in your heart, and you carry it everywhere with you, and love is not one person, but love is all around.

With all the uncertainties in my life as I turn 33 this year, I think I will be just fine, thanks to the lessons I taught myself over the years.

ACKNOWLEDMENT

I want to thank my thesis advisor, Dr. Liliana Herakova for her immense contribution in guiding me and being a pillar of support throughout the process. Jen Bonnet, your contribution in the design of the library Challenge is invaluable. I want to acknowledge the work of Ben McAlexander of TriHydro Corporation for his valuable help with the Quantitative data analysis which played a huge role in the research necessary for this thesis.

Although this thesis represents my original work, I could have not done it without the team of collaborators beyond just the individuals mentioned, including community members, students, graduate teaching assistants, professors, librarians and others whose contribution and feedback helped shape the Challenge in its current form and hopefully will keep contributing towards the dynamic nature of the Challenge so that it continues to reaffirm the queering of education.

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INTRODUCTION

Why are discussions on some topics considered to be more “difficult” than others, especially when it comes to gender, race/ethnicity, socioeconomic position, immigration status, or other identities? These conversations can be upsetting and difficult to some not only because of how they represent forms of oppression but, in their own ways, they challenge the social hierarchies - power politics between the privileged and the marginalized. These challenges take several forms, including providing alternatives to the western apolitical approach to education. Because of the discomfort they may produce in the classroom, discussions around difference are often censored or avoided through the discourses of “civility, teacher immediacy, or teacher credibility” (Chen & Lawless, 2018, p. 376). How a teacher conducts themselves in the classroom, both verbally and non-verbally (teacher immediacy), as well as how such behaviors contribute to generating “harmonious” classroom relationships (civility) are often seen as fundamental to establishing how much students can trust the talent and authority of the educator (teacher credibility). Due to these strict invisible and at time glaringly visible guidelines and evaluations, educators can shy away from bringing LGBTQIA2+ considerations into the classroom.

Specifically, the presence of hegemonic masculinity which plagues society at large is also prevalent in classrooms, occurring through a pattern of practice that sustains “men's dominance over women, masculinity over femininity, and heterosexuality over homosexuality” (Cheng & Yang, 2015, p.323). When a society privileges characteristics such as aggression, courage, risk-loving, emotional restraints, boys and men can internalize these characteristics even in their daily interactions which can occur in schools. These characteristics can also be further perpetuated through cultural, economic, and legal processes, including educational materials used in schools.

As such homosexual and effeminate boys and men can run the risk of being socially, culturally, legally, and economically excluded and discriminated against because of hegemonic masculinity (Cheng & Yang, 2015). If the person belongs to the hegemonic class which is in this case takes the form of hegemonic masculinity, then it can be embedded in their habitus. Habitus is not created by the individual but socially. It represents a structure set up the world around us and it plays a big role in shaping up our minds and emotional responses. This pattern of habitus can be created and reproduced unconsciously without the person knowing that it is happening (Hutchinson et al., 2016). Thus, the habitus of a person can prevent them from engaging in topics of difference in the classroom through resistance to the “unfamiliar.”

We also see silencing on a bigger scale through attempts to make education neutral or apolitical in the United States by calling to ban discussions of identities in classrooms and at the institutional level (e.g., ethnic studies ban). Burke and Greenfield (2016) mention that some of the most banned books in education are children picture books which include LGBTQIA2+ characters. These efforts, under the guise of being apolitical, actively limit opportunities for students to learn about identities and experiences beyond those of the dominant white cis-heterosexual normativity. As another illustration of the power of hegemonic masculinity, it is worth noting that such patterns regard not only queer characters; there is even severe imbalance between male and female characters in children’s literature and the selection of school readings is such that it leads to boys rarely be required to cross gender reading boundaries (Sandholtz & Sandholtz, 2010). These absences further the hegemonic masculinity in education and contribute towards the habitus of individuals who primarily can be a part of the dominant group and leads to silencing of individuals who cannot fit into its parameters. Also, it is important to note that queer individuals are not immune to internalization of normative notions of sexuality and gender

(Shelton,2022;2021). As such the selection of what materials to be included in the curriculum plays an important role in making education more queer affirming.

On the other hand, a denial of access to a more inclusive curriculum in classroom settings reinforces hegemonic views and dominant cultural norms (Chen & Lawless, 2018). Education does not happen in a silo and external factors can impact how much queer- and gender-affirming campuses can be. While important discussions around inclusivity, academic freedom, and systemic oppression are taking place within some campuses across the U.S., a lot of times they are overshadowed by “dramatic confrontations” by off-campus actors whose interest in educational discourse is at times led by their non-inclusive beliefs (Fenner, 2018).

Such experiences and public narratives also contribute to hesitance of meaningfully engaging difference. Teachers who offer critical considerations of the relationships of oppression, exploitation, and domination in society into the classroom are a lot of times confronted by students who resist these topics. They go to the extent of challenging the knowledge of the teachers and the materials which they are teaching, morally delegitimizing alternatives to the current system of power structures (Markowitz & Hedley, 2001). It is especially difficult for queer teachers as they join the field of education. The school administration, parents, students, colleagues, and external factors such as media assert upon them to distinguish their private identities from their professional teacher identity. In many ways, what the teacher decides (based on various factors such as risk of offending others, being a role model, fear of job discrimination, and choosing if they would ultimately reveal their queer identity and in what manner in the classroom) impacts students’ perspective on these issues (Bridgman, 2012). Even for the queer teachers who chose not to divulge in their queer identities in the classroom, it can have different consequences. They may experience distress or anxiety and a

pressure from splitting up the private and professional selves. It can also impact their ability to communicate between with their students and colleagues (Lin et al., 2020).

Communication scholars have examined how both dismissive and effective discourses function in the classroom and in social life in relation to race (e.g., Hytten & Warren, 2003; Nakayama & Krizek, 1995), but more work is needed in relation to LGBTQIA2+ topics. For example, with regards to race, through conversations with white students, researchers have identified the presence of whiteness informed civility (WIC) in the classroom (Rudick & Golsan, 2017). The conversation around race being termed as uncivil and an assertion of space denying marginalized students to be part of the spaces dominated by white individuals (Chen & Lawless, 2018; Rudick & Golsan, 2017). In a similar manner, the racialized and gendered structures present in educational organizations tend to reinforce complex inequalities especially when it comes to acknowledging emotional labor. Research is limited on how race, gender, and sexual orientation together and/or distinctly contribute to emotional labor. Based on their interviews with staff at university LGBTQ resource centers, Ortiz and Mandala (2021) suggest that sexual orientation-based dimension of emotional labor is enforced differently based on race. They talk about how white LGBTQ staff at times do not confront racism in their work in the fear of alienating other white individuals. However, LGBTQ staff of color may experience organizational reprimand if they express their feelings especially that of anger directed towards racism which they or others of color might experience at the university. As they do not have the credential of whiteness which their white colleagues have, the emotional labor which they carry, is not given the same level of importance (Ortiz & Mandala, 2021). In such a scenario, it is necessary to turn to intersectionality as a theoretical framework that considers the different social categories which intersect at both micro level of an individual and how it comments to systems

of privilege and oppression at a more macro, social-structural level (Bowleg, 2012). There is multiple intersectionality of identities that both students and faculty live with and incorporating them into the classroom can contribute towards making it more inclusive and affirming.

In terms of practice, Betina Hsieh (2017) offers a narrative of a teacher educator for a secondary literacy course, where she highlights that frequently educators do not feel prepared to conduct conversations around “difficult” topics. She suggests that there should be room made for uncomfortable dialogues in preservice teacher education classrooms and that it can transform how teachers and their future students engage with a wide range of topics (Hsieh, 2017). Similar considerations of ways in which hetero and cis-dominant discourses work to other LGBTQIA2+ folx and issues in the classroom are needed and motivated the present project. One of the manners that hegemonic heteromascularity in the classroom could be addressed is by incorporating Queer Communication Pedagogy (QCP; Atay & Pensoneau-Conway, 2020) in some form into the curriculum.

Addressing gaps in understanding both what LGBTQIA2+ affirming education involves and what are its applied impacts on learning, the thesis presented here involved both a practical and a research component. In terms of praxis, through a critical collaborative effort informed by Queer Communication Pedagogy (Atay & Pensoneau-Conway, 2020), we¹ developed an online, publicly accessible LGBTQIA2+ Learning and Affirming Challenge, administered by the University of Maine Fogler Library², whose life and impact continues. Additionally, we assessed the effectiveness of this challenge in growing LGBTQIA2+ allyship, with particular focus on its

¹ We refers to the both the main designers of the project, who are introduced in more detail later, and also all individuals who contributed towards making it more LGBTQIA2+ affirming and those who continue to contribute towards it. I, Tausif, am merely a learner drawing from the knowledge produced and commenting on the gaps in education which this knowledge can fill and making suggestions on how it can be done.

² <https://libguides.library.umaine.edu/lgbtq>

impact in terms of advocacy knowledge and skills, openness and support for queer individual and communities, and oppression awareness. This thesis discusses the Challenge development philosophy and process, describes the ever-evolving product, and reports on some of the research results as related to allyship in particular. Future work, beyond the scope of the thesis, would involve analyzing already-collected qualitative data to explore meanings and practices of LGBTQIA2+ affirmation and relevant learning.

To begin with, the next chapter offers a literature review that explores what makes LGBTQIA2+ experiences and identities “difficult” topics in the classroom. Further, the literature review summarizes scholarship on the challenges which educators and students, especially people belonging to marginalized groups, face when identity topics are brought into the classroom. The chapter also introduces QCP and its unique communication-centering contributions to queering education and allyship. Following the literature review, the methods chapter (chapter 2) considers the lead researcher’s positionality and describes the Challenge itself and how we envisioned it as an educational intervention. The methods also address the approaches to data collection and analysis with focus on the quantitative arm of the research. The results and discussion chapter (chapter 3) summarizes the positive impact of the Challenge on allyship self-assessment and puts those findings in the context of QCP and current higher education trends. Finally, the thesis offers further implications and suggestions for research in terms of developing and implementing LGBTQIA2+ affirming curricula. The thesis hopes to offer both a finished resource and a replicable process for other educators who may find it challenging to communicatively include LGBTQIA2+ considerations as a meaningful part of learning.

CHAPTER 1

LITERATURE REVIEW

The aim of this literature review is to situate the presented research within U.S. higher education and to introduce Queer Communication Pedagogy (QCP) as a transformative framework within that context. As explained further below, queering education is an ongoing process that holds the potential for positively impacting all learners by reshaping our relationship to knowledge-reception and knowledge-production. As such, implementing QCP is a critical intervention into the legacy of inequitable educational structures (Atay & Pensoneau-Conway, 2020; Fassett & Warren, 2007). To better understand what constitutes such inequities, the table below introduces some key concepts which orient the thesis and will be further expanded in the literature review³:

Table 1: Key concepts

| Concept | Description | Sources |
|----------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------|
| Cisheteronormativity | Structural systems of oppression that reinforces and perpetuates the dominant status quo of cisgender and heterosexual norms | Kinitz and Salway (2022) |
| Critical | Viewing from a position of power relations | Fassett & Warren, 2007 |
| Critical hope | Action-oriented analysis of oppressive power relations | Fassett & Warren, 2007 |

³ Of note is that these concepts fit within a critical paradigm in the social sciences and humanities. As such, scholars agree that they are relevant to addressing and studying power relations in society. However, the concepts themselves are theorized in various ways, their definitions are fluid and contextual, with on-going developments. The table included here presents the operationalizations which were utilized in the present study.

Table 1 continued

| | | |
|----------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Embodied Vulnerability | The interplay of various social identities within one’s self-presentation, including making manifest the presence of marginalized identities, which both represents existing and opens to new vulnerabilities and connections | Hill (2017) |
| Hidden curriculum | The messages, prevalent norms, values, and assumptions that are often so unquestioned that they have become invisible in education | Koutsouris et al.(2021) |
| Intersectionality | A theoretical framework that recognizes that multiple social categories intersect at the micro level of individual experience and at the same time reflect multiple interlocking systems of privilege and oppression at the macro, social-structural levels | Bowleg (2012) |
| Neutral/Apolitical Education | A way to protect the status quo political and social ideologies at the expense of others in education under the guise of objectivity. | Kaufman (2012) |
| Predominantly White Institutions | Colleges or universities in which the majority of enrolled students are non-Hispanic White | Mills (2020) |
| Queering education | Queering pedagogy is one that recognizes relationality and coalition building as part of learning by connecting the dots of the intersectionality of race, gender, nationality, ethnicity, ability, and religion | Calafell and Pattisapu (2012); Scharrón-Del Río (2020); Young (2019) |

Table 1 continued

| | | |
|------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------|
| <p>Queer Communication Pedagogy</p> | <p>An educational approach which can be used for “disrupting the taken-for-granted omnipresence of heteronormativity” (Manning, 2020, p. 427) by focusing on centering queer voices, meanings, and relationalities.</p> | <p>Atay & Pensoneau-Conway (2020); Manning (2020)</p> |
| <p>Whiteness</p> | <p>A system of organizing power relation rather than just a social identity; manifests itself using a systemic and racialized process, privileging West-centric and colonial ways of being and knowing.</p> | <p>Kil (2010)</p> |
| <p>Whiteness Informed Civility in the classroom.</p> | <p>Setting racialized standards for conducting oneself in the classroom informed by whiteness and attaching a high moral value to them.</p> | <p>Rudick and Golsan (2017)</p> |

Identities and/as “Difficult” Topics in the Classroom

Scholarship on difficult dialogues in the classroom suggests that “difference” topics produce discomfort, and one may feel “defensive, fearful, and attacked” when a narrative challenges dominant identity status both among students and faculty (Gayles et al., 2015, p. 309). However, these conversations are important to further knowledge, awareness, and skills about oppression, privilege, and power. They act as valuable tools which can be used by educators to foster student engagement in classroom settings and help students to learn how to personalize diversity content into their own lives. For the instructors, exploring these topics in the classroom would allow them to understand “how such discussions facilitate student learning” (Gayles et al., 2015, p. 309). With regards to discussions around “issues of identity, marginalization, and

representation” (Crocco, 2005, p.578), the responsibility falls upon both students and teachers alike. Talking about these issues in classroom settings can be the start of a shift of what is traditionally being taught in classroom settings in the USA. It has the potential to open up classroom space to issues of both positionality and reader response, important for “sophisticated understandings of the powerful effects of school texts on students differently situated in today’s multi-cultural classrooms” (Crocco, 2005, p. 578). These insights can play a big role in understanding what is happening in the world today rather than positioning classroom education in a silo, apart from “the real world” (Fassett & Warren, 2007).

While identity and difference topics themselves are considered challenging and are experienced as “difficult” by those whose sense of dominance or normativity could be destabilized, it doesn't get easier for the messengers of those topics (i.e., the instructors), especially if the faculty discussing these topics are from a marginalized community or have multiple marginalized identities in the contexts of Predominantly White Institutions (PWIs). These experiences have to be considered through a legacy-lens acknowledging that “historic access to higher education was based so heavily on race and gender that structural access continues to be limited” (Harris, 2020, p. 85.) despite restrictive policies being long gone.

With regards to educators, Sue et al. (2011) used qualitative interview methodology to find out the experience of faculty of color in predominantly white institutions and how they facilitate topics around race in the classrooms of a private university in the Northeastern United States. They found that faculty of color were expected to balance between their values and the desire to remain objective. This at times came at the cost of trying to stay neutral when talking about racial stereotypes and misinformation, and lack of acknowledgement of the racial journeys of students of color. There were many instances provided of implicit and explicit

microaggressions enacted towards instructors, such as questioning their authority and ability to teach, students interrupting lessons and expressing persistent doubt around the importance of talking about racial politics in classroom settings. The faculty of color were also expected to be experts in every issue around racial topics and situations. Most importantly, these forms of microaggressions caused strong emotional reactions among the faculty of color (Sue et al., 2011). Thus, if a faculty employs anti-oppressive pedagogies and experiential teaching methods, there is often resistance from students which may be in the form of microaggressions, further discriminating against marginalized educators (Sue et al., 2011). The reason for this could be that students find it difficult to face and let go of their biases, acknowledge their privileges, or experience their own internalized oppression trauma (Scharrón-Del Río, 2018).

Although resistance to identity conversation can be expected, there are also drawbacks to *not* engaging such topics in the classroom. If instructors take a different route and approach teaching about difficult issues without having open and meaningful dialogue (Chen & Lawless, 2018), it may impact students' "attitudes, willingness to confront their own biases, and ultimately their ability to become more culturally aware and sensitive" (Walls & Hall, 2017, p.60) towards marginalized groups. At the same time, ineffectively approaching classroom discussions of difference and identity also has negative impacts on students with marginalized identities. For their study, Walls and Hall (2017) used a focus group method to interview 22 African American students about their experiences when race related topics are discussed in class in a PWI. They found that the students from the minority group are under complex cognitive pressure and emotional load when it comes to talking about difficult topics especially those which they might personally connect to be or be part of (for example, a black student learning about racism in a PWI) in addition to their regular college work. They tend to remain visibly calm but are also

prepared for these conversations to become uncomfortable and hurtful which in turn increases their emotional stress. Some minority students avoid engaging in discussions of these difficult topics because they want to be seen as not being defensive and, in a way, conforming to the stereotypes attached to their communities. The results of this research connect to understanding the challenges of discussing topics related to marginalized groups in classroom settings. It is an important reminder that designing an LGBTQIA2+ affirming curriculum must take into account the differential discomfort of heterosexual cisgender students and that of LGBTQIA2+ students when queer topics are addressed in the classroom.

When it comes to self-disclosure and pedagogical practice, the topic of sexuality is considered very controversial since “Sexual identity is a complex, often invisible, yet sensitive, subject that individuals manage in different ways” (Nielsen & Alderson, 2014, p. 1086). Both professors and students can decide that they want to further reinforce the invisibility of stigmatized sexual identity fearing hostility and disregard from others in the classroom. Some other people might remain silent due to safety concerns and internalized oppression. There are also individuals who feel that self-disclosures of sexual identity reinforce heteronormativity and binary categories. And then there is the group from the LGBTQIA2+ community who in a supportive community can feel that self-disclosure in multiple ways can be empowering (Nielsen & Alderson, 2014).

Additionally, identities are intersectional. Thus, for people whose identities and histories bear the traumas of colonization, the relationship to gender and sexuality might be dually impacted. On one hand, their communities might not have access to funds of ancestral knowledge, thus relying on western ideologies of gender and sexuality to shape normativity. A major part of that legacy is Christianity, a large portion of which does not welcome LGBTQIA2+

identities and individuals. On the other hand, while some more *progressive* western views may provide a sense of acceptance of diversity in sexuality and gender, they also represent a colonial legacy and may, therefore, be resisted. In post-colonial contexts, LGBTQIA2+ individuals and communities may feel that queerness, as currently exists in activism, is a foreign/western concept originating with the colonizers, and that they should resist it (Scharrón-Del Río, 2018). The roots of this linear pattern of gender recognition can be traced to the decimation of kinship structures that had previously occupied relationality outside the linear path and the mimicry of what the previously colonizing powers had imposed to be accepted. As such a mother is a woman, a father is man, a child is coded to be either male or female, and these become the gender norms for the future descendants. Colonization has destroyed any roles beyond this pattern and denied any relationships outside of this linear reproductive kinship (O’Sullivan, 2021). As such, “decolonization is necessary in movements addressing gendered violence in settler colonial nation-states” (Mack & Na’puti, 2019, p. 348).

In U.S. higher education, the complexities of such limited belonging may be further exacerbated by an academic invisibility of queer individuals and issues. For example, social studies curricula claim to prepare students for the real world but do little to recognize the existence of queer individuals, movements and events (Maguth & Taylor, 2014). Furthermore, and ironically, the diversity agendas of universities can lead to homogeneity in approaches to difference and cultural recognition, which do not take into consideration the intersectionality of marginalization, and make queer students, faculty and staff and their needs even more invisible (Duran, 2018; Scharrón-Del Río, 2020). Specifically in relation to queer identities, much of the scholarship around sexual orientation in the classroom has focused on sexual desires and sexuality (Young, 2019). There is a dearth of research that takes into account the

multidimensional intersectional relationships within queer communities. Institutions fail to recognize the ways in which power and privilege operate in relationships across contexts (Calafell & Pattisapu, 2012). A student might face both sexual and racial marginalization and each of these identities should be seen both individually and also in relation to each other (Duran, 2018). Love et al. (2016) discuss how it is important to engage in such “difficult” conversations in the classroom. Academia does not exist in a social vacuum, so even if these topics are not addressed in the classroom, it is very likely that students are exposed to these conversations outside the classroom. There should be an acknowledgement and critical examination on how both students and teachers particularly from marginalized communities are constantly discriminated against. It is important to recognize that “blindness” towards these topics and an attempt to teach using a one-size-fits-all approach can be harmful as they reinforce a status quo which continues to suppress oppressed communities.

An important point which Zartner (2019) raises is how students at times are unsure of how to behave or approach heavy subjects, which is even more of a reason to grow this competency in educational settings. She found that although students have some reverence, respect, sympathy and compassion, sometimes, they just find it difficult to connect with experiences which might not be theirs. Even students who actively participate in classroom discussions can become withdrawn and exercise silence with emotionally difficult materials. They fear that they might say something offensive or appear callous or just do not know how to react to certain materials.

Complicating the possibility of queering education and preparing learners for challenging conversations in the “real world,” it is worth noting that education policies and discourses have not traditionally served LGBTQIA2+ teachers well. They have been overlooked, cast as deviants

or banned because they were seen as criminals to wanted to convert or spread homosexual propaganda to ‘innocent’ (heterosexual) students (Codd, 1988). While this was in 1988, even today when there isn’t enough support for inclusion of LGBTQIA2+ identities in the class, if a teacher strays into territories in which sexual and gender norms are questioned, it can lead to moral panic in the academic environment. This is because when cis heteronormativity is threatened, it by default threatens the discourses of power in education and an intervention to suppress this threat soon follows (Lee, 2020).

Though there has been an increase in the creation of policies particularly in the last few years, they might not necessarily be known to LGBTQIA2+ teachers and/or educators as a whole, and might not be acted upon by the school environment they are working at. There is also additional pressure on these faculties to either come out and present their authentic self or to not share certain parts of their lives pertaining to their LGBTQIA2+ identity which proves to be a hard terrain to constantly navigate. In their research, Codd (1988) noted that there were LGBTQIA2+ teachers who participated in activism through their teachings and curriculum. However, a lot of times, these efforts were not supported by the higher authorities. Newer research also shows how these challenges persist and how “educators continue to be challenged to teach LGBTQIA2+-inclusive curriculum that is also critical, culturally relevant, and responds to standards in social justice education” (Snapp et al., 2015, p.260).

Endo et al. (2010) in their research found that some teachers decided not to disclose their sexual identities to the students because of their fear of how the community, particularly the parents, would react to having an openly queer teacher in the classroom. Not only do they avoid any discussion pertaining to their personal lives, but they are also at times in situations which force them to make up stories about a heterosexual life that does not exist. The decision to not be

open about their sexual orientation at times also has to do with previous experiences of how their identities were perceived. They also have to navigate heteronormative expectations of gender stereotypes and there is a high probability of them being victims of assumptive homophobia. Another dilemma which LGBTQIA2+ teachers face is that sometimes they have to act as role models for queer students. However, there is a long list of discourses which deem queer teachers as a threat to the innocence of the students. As such they have to constantly navigate between being considered professional and not being perceived as a friend with whom students might share intimate information (Maylor, 2009).

In their research, Snapp et al. (2015) found that while LGBTQIA2+ issues were definitely taught in some classes, there were several missed opportunities which could have been achieved by using an inclusive curriculum and directly addressing homophobic and transphobic bullying and harassment. The reasons for this were both institutional and on the educators. Some of the reasons cited in this research included the use of suggestions from past research on how to incorporate LGBTQIA2+ issues into the courses rather than newer research. Additionally, having LGBTQIA2+ topics as standalone lessons, rather than attending to the topics from an intersectional perspective, further alienated the queer students and also did not address how oppression occurs due to multiple interrelated factors. Also, these lessons were limited to social science and humanities classrooms (Snapp et al., 2015). Such work informs the current project through considerations of how educational institutions can design LGBTQIA2+ inclusive curricula which takes into account the discomfort of and opportunities for students and teachers, both cis-heterosexual and LGBTQIA2+, while navigating the various intersectionality of identities which can make a curriculum more queer-affirming.

Approaches to Difference Topics in Educational Settings

Chandler (2004) suggests that moving away from competitive, academic talk to having a collective exploration of experiences in the classroom can help speak to the comfort and trust of students within the classroom. It can help them feel their stories are received with respect and that no presumptions are made about them without them addressing a matter. The movement of reflective discussions in pairs or as a whole group within safe boundaries can be created by engaging students in ethnographic writing assignments. However, for this to work, students have to come together as a group and be made aware of tools for analysis and models through which they can express themselves. One such framework is that of intersectionality.

According to Johnson and Rivera (2015) intersectionality can be used to understand and address diversity, social equity and inclusion in the classroom. Intersectionality is understood as “a theoretical framework that posits that multiple social categories (e.g., race, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, socioeconomic status) intersect at the micro level of individual experience to reflect multiple interlocking systems of privilege and oppression at the macro, social-structural level (e.g., racism, sexism, heterosexism)” (Bowleg, 2012, p. 1267). Understanding that various identities are involved using intersectionality can help with questioning the layers of biased categorization that exists. These biases can operate both on the explicit and implicit level. For example, Buyserie and Ramírez (2021) talk about native speakerism or the belief that native speakers of English are better learners and teachers in English based composition classrooms. As such it is important to consider how pre-fixed expectations and normative practices play a big role in the classroom regardless of what curricula we bring into play. Accordingly, scholars emphasize that the pedagogical value of intersectionality works to the optimum when it can allow the opening of various possibilities of mutual identification among “majority” and “minority” students allowing for a trans-identification (Johnson & Rivera, 2015).

This identification allows especially “majority” students to identify the biases that prevail and also share their own experiences of marginalization, exploitation, or powerlessness. There are various benefits of incorporating intersectionality into the design of a curriculum which is aiming to be LGBTQIA+ affirming such as it prevents us from generalizing that all members of a community might be similar because they have just one quality in common. It stops from reducing a person’s complex identity into a one dimensional one. It also works as reminder that oppressions of groups do interrelate and as such, we cannot accomplish social justice if we only address in isolation a single form of oppression (e.g., oppression of queer in academia). Also, it helps us to recognize that people internalize the labels and the multiple group identities which the society associates with their community. And as such these become their norm and it becomes hard for them to see how it can be problematic (Palczewski et al., 2019). Thus, incorporating intersectionality of identities into the content become an important aspect of the LGBTQIA2+ Learning and Affirming Challenge, described in chapter 2.

Intersectional approaches can also help address the hidden curriculum. For example, there is a powerful element of cis-heteronormativity which is prevalent in the classroom and this at times is communicated in insidious ways as the only real social and personal option. Cis-heteronormativity acts as a reiterative force because a lot of times people within the educational institution treat the subjects of LGBTQIA2+ themes and people as if they are contagious and need to be contained. It is further intensified by the myth that exposure to these themes produces a viral effect which corrupts those exposed to it. These myths and structures ensure that heterosexuality is seen as the only viable option to living life (Jones & Calafell, 2012). Even though there is a growing work addressing heterosexism and homophobia within classrooms, there is a lack of inclusion of identities and issues such as those related to the trans community.

The exclusion of trans identity can be partly contributed to the challenges which college students and professors face due to the way sex, gender and sexual identities as binary entities have been seen traditionally and also supported by traditional scientific, religious and political ideologies (Lovaas et al., 2002).

Gayles et al. (2015) talk about the power dynamics in classroom settings in their article. In their research they reflect on the intersectionality of race and sex and sex and sexuality. When a black female faculty and LGBT females shared these difficult dialogues in a classroom setting, there was an increase in student resistance and dissonance. For faculties, especially white faculties, they have more privilege and agency over when and how they want to talk about these difficult topics, the students were less combative. They also emphasize what Walls and Hall (2017) noted with regards to bringing the difficult conversation in the classroom despite the challenges. Feelings described as “discomfort, defensive, fearful, and attacked” (Gayles et al., 2015, p. 309) are common reactions to disagreements which arise when a narrative challenge the dominant identity status in the class room which is predominantly white and heterosexual in PWIs setting but they are important to deliver knowledge, awareness, and skills about oppression, privilege, and power.

However, we cannot ignore that cross-cultural subject matter learning can both promote or hinder the inclusive class setting which the teachers and students are aiming to achieve. The reason for the hindrance could be the selection of a teaching material. Crocco (2005) gives the example of the book *Shabanu* which despite exposing Pakistani women to US students does harm because it reinforces negative stereotypes associated with Islam in the West. This again connects to how the research findings can be used to design an LGBTQ+ inclusive curriculum

without falling into the tropes of using stereotypical portrayals for their representation in classroom settings.

In line with subject materials of the educational content mentioned above, Brigley Thompson (2018) talks about how vulnerability and risk are significant aspects of teaching practice especially for instructors who have the task to ask questions that allow students to practice representations, unlearning and questions their assumptions and also analyzing their own roles in oppressive narratives which form the difficult topics being addressed in classrooms. This is connected to one of the major tenets of Queer Communication Pedagogy (QCP) which focuses on the availability and usage of counter narrative including through oppositional and counter-readings of normative texts and experiences (Atay & Pensoneau-Conway, 2020). While this approach can go against the apolitical nature of education which helps to sustain the western cis-heteronormative hegemony of education in the U.S. (Chen & Lawless, 2018), it can help with breaking out from being complicit to oppressive narratives. Maybe the difficult topics may make students uncomfortable and lead to debates, but it will allow the classroom to be a space where discussions around marginalization will be studied more critically and there will be constant questioning of one's own relationship to power politics. It can allow especially dominant heterosexual white students to question their prejudices about minority groups and reflect on these issues (Brigley Thompson, 2018). Learning from a place of vulnerability is an important tenet of QCP (Atay & Pensoneau-Conway, 2020), the framework used to develop content of our Challenge.

Queer Communication Pedagogy as a Framework

To create more equitable academic contexts where effective and supportive engagements with difference are possible, scholars have theorized a queer communication pedagogy approach

to teaching and learning (Atay & Pensoneau-Conway, 2020). Queering pedagogy supports relationality and coalition building as part of learning that attends to the intersectionality of race, gender, nationality, ethnicity, ability and religion (Calafell & Pattisapu, 2012; Scharrón-Del Río, 2020; Young, 2019). It recognizes that students feel more connected when all their marginalized identities are affirmed and that a sense of belongingness positively impacts student outcomes (Duran, 2018).

Specifically, QCP is defined as “disrupting the taken-for-granted omnipresence of heteronormativity” (Manning, 2020, p.427). This type of feminist educational approach opens an alternative to the cis-heteronormative dominant form of education. It allows for the questioning of what we have been taught is important to education, how learning and teaching can take place and also provides alternatives to what we consider as knowledge production. It does not treat education, or most importantly - learning, to be in a silo but rather draws connections from various elements which allows us to play learning as a process of collaborative knowledge production. In doing so, it contributes towards a more inclusive learning process and also college culture. In connection to the interconnectedness of learning mentioned above, QCP is not confined to just formal education but allows us to explore other avenues in our day-to-day life where learning already occurs (Atay & Pensoneau-Conway, 2020).

QCP posits that to queer education is to alter our relationships to learning and knowledge production, including our understandings of what is important to learn, who are the knowers, and how and where learning happens. As an overall orientation, QCP incorporates several interconnected elements that contribute to building more inclusive college cultures. Firstly, LGBTQIA2+content and voices should be centered in curricula. Secondly, QCP is about transforming the relationships between learners and queer texts by stimulating oppositional and

counter-readings. Thirdly, learners should have regular opportunities “to question oppressive systems related to sexuality and gender (...) along with knowledge production” (Atay & Pensoneau-Conway, 2020, p. 8). Lastly, these components come together in a critical hope or in new intersectional and transnational ways to envision equitable futures and actions.

Importantly, Atay and Pensoneau-Conway (2020) note that QCP is not confined to formal educational settings, but “is committed to bridging the gap between classrooms and other spaces where learning can actively happen” (p. 8). Creating linked spaces for critical, authentic, and honest dialogues around LGBTQIA2+ issues will require teachers to be equipped with the tools to help them critically analyze their own realities, go beyond their own comfort zones, and question their own biases. Consistent with QCP, Betina Hsieh (2017) emphasizes the importance of engaged self-reflection on the part of the teacher to be an important element of transformation practice related to critical literacy in the classroom (Hsieh, 2017). Bittner (2020) talks about how it is important for teachers to introduce students to literature from multiple perspectives which feature a diverse representation of queer sexualities and genders. Going beyond just talking about the narratives of repression/oppression of queer people can allow heterosexual students to see queer people as more than just a marginalized group. Bittner (2020) recognizes that classrooms can be a challenging space to explore LGBTQIA2+ topics with fear of retaliation from straight identified students and peers. However, communicating the subject with a deeper analysis of LGBTQIA2+ topics in terms of real-world contexts can help with students understanding its relevance in the classroom.

Before incorporating QCP, one needs to understand what it brings to the classroom. It is interesting to note that the **concept of queerness** seeks to incorporate bodies that lost visibility during the gay movement of the 1960s and 1970s. As the gay and lesbian movement

incorporated more heteronormative practices such as marriage, adoption, they were seen as more “normal” and gained more public acceptance (Nemi Neto, 2018). However, queer as a term wants to highlight even the individuals who were erased by this normalization such as trans communities, gender non-conforming people amongst others. Queer pedagogy questions this normalization and focuses on developing educational practices which have their roots in fluidity and mobility present in the society and hold educational institutions accountable to not setting one set models of learning as that contributes to alienating various groups of students (Nemi Neto, 2018). It allows for us to look at practices of exclusion from a critical point of view which are otherwise naturalized in the classroom due to cis-heteronormativity. Also, what makes queer pedagogy important, is that it is not trying to replace one binary with another. Instead, it makes a case for us to see the various ways in which gender and sexuality can be expressed without the need for labeling them in static and constrictive ways. It poses questions through a queer lens as to why gay, lesbians, bisexual, trans, and gender non-conforming folx are not amply represented in the educational materials (Nemi Neto, 2018).

Such questions – of engaging with gender and sexual difference, of representation and inclusion – are central to QCP’s tenet of offering counter-narratives and oppositional readings. QCP theorizes that this offers opportunities for witnessing difference (rather than prescribing norms), a practice which allows for the building of queer relationality as both a support mechanism (for queer folx) and as transformative resistance to cis-heteronormativity (Atay & Pensoneau-Conway, 2020). Queer relationality or coalitional politics are QCP-ways of addressing what is more commonly known and studies as “allyship.”

Queer Communication Pedagogy and Allyship

A study conducted with 20 participants who were all students at a large, public four-year university located in a mid-sized city in the southeastern United States, gave insight into three different types of allyship expectations which are held by queer people (Forbes & Ueno, 2020). One of the expectations was personalized support which could be interchangeable with friendship, and they expected their allies to engage in recognizing patterns of discrimination which have been normalized. The other expectation was that their allies actively participated in political activism which were centered around queer issues. The final expectation which the research pointed out to something a little more nuanced consisting of queer people expecting their straight allies to incorporate elements one and two, i.e., engage in queer issues but at an interactional level (Forbes & Ueno, 2020). Similar definitions of allyship are also evident in the validated quantitative self-report measure of allyship, used in the current study (Jones et al., 2014). This instrument which includes the dimensions of 1) “knowledge and skills” (related to advocacy above) 2) “openness and support” (related to support above) and 3) “oppression awareness” (related to familiarity with discrimination above) with regards to LGBTQIA2+ issues and communities (Jones et al., 2014). Such convergence of definitions speaks to the importance of developing multi-faceted research methodologies that center queer perspectives on allyship.

One of the main facets of QCP is that it puts queer individuals and knowledge at the forefront of learning (Atay & Pensoneau-Conway, 2020) which can contribute towards better understanding of allyship expectations with queer people (Forbes & Ueno, 2020). This can take place when there is effort put in solidarity with the queer family (of choice) and this “requires a ritual of critical love speaking for the political, intellectual, and pedagogical” (Eguchi & Long, 2019, p.1605). QCP with one of its main ideas of collaborative learning from a place of vulnerability (Atay & Pensoneau-Conway, 2020) allows for this solidarity towards the queer

family (of choice) to grow. What is needed is an “opening up (of) different conceptions of material and relational ontologies that do not fit neatly into either side of (...) the binary (realism or social construction), and that can grapple with the complexities of educational research and practice” (Todd et al., 2016, p.187).

However, this can lead to suppression from cis-heteronormativity in education because when the binary feels threatened, the discourses of power in education also are threatened (Lee, 2020). But what such opening up of different conceptions can give is an area where “recognizing and sitting with our privileged and marginalized positionalities opens a plethora of possibilities for alliance building. It is in the spaces that we show pain and failure that we can create an understanding of how alliance building can be possible” (Ghabra & Calafell, 2018, p. 51-52). This space for collaborative learning is what QCP allows us to create by centering queer knowledge and providing counter-discourses to the cis-hetero knowledge domination in western education (Atay & Pensoneau-Conway, 2020). One way of centering queer knowledge is through embodied vulnerabilities in the classroom (Hill, 2017), for example through queer autoethnography which “calls out the politics embedded in the narratives: it is a matter of making visible the invisible forces that undergird all social interactions and experiences rooted in heteronormativity” (Spieldenner & Eguchi, 2020, p. 135) in the classroom. This can also contribute towards learning from a place of vulnerability which can help “build community in our academic discipline and in queer studies” (Spieldenner & Eguchi, 2020, p. 139) as “forging community when one is “other” requires deliberate intention” (Spieldenner & Eguchi, 2020, p. 139).

Critical QCP scholarship, such as the one synthesized above, speaks to the importance of authentic and transformative allyship as an element of LGBTQIA2+ affirming education.

Although much of this critical QCP work is qualitative and autoethnographic, it also points to the need of assessing any educational intervention in terms of its capacity to further allyship, as is further discussed in chapter 2. Additionally, however, critical and autoethnographic queer scholarship may help us critique and understand the ways in which existing measures of allyship need to be re-considered and re-designed to center LGBTQIA2+ voices (as further elaborated upon in chapter 3 of this thesis).

Research Problem

From this literature review, we see that an important aspect which can contribute to growing LGBTQIA2+ inclusive education in classroom is the empirical research to see the reactions of learners to LGBTQIA2+ affirming curricula about diversity and inclusion of queer relationships and communities. As the literature shows, there are various power dynamics such as gender, race and sexual orientation which play a role in how students react to difficult conversations in classroom settings (Chen & Lawless, 2018). It is evident that a lot of times students' exposure to LGBTQIA2+ individuals, own sexual orientation and access to heterosexual white privileges play a role in how comfortable or uncomfortable they are to inclusive teaching materials (Scharrón-Del Río, 2018). Learners' perceptions about these difficult conversations are paramount in designing a curriculum which includes LGBTQIA2+ inclusive exemplars. Further, it is important to grow a better understanding of the impact of such learning on knowledge of and attitudes toward LGBTQIA2+ issues and communities, including one's self-assessment of their allyship competencies. To this end, this project set out to investigate the following research question:

RQ: How does having an LGBTQIA2++ affirming curriculum impact allyship toward LGBTQIA2+ individuals and communities?

CHAPTER 2

METHODOLOGY

The field of education is dominated by ideologies such as individualism, color-blindness, meritocracy which often mask the struggles faced by learners from marginalized communities and also camouflage the systems of oppressions which give birth to and uphold the conditions which cause these oppressions to continue (Huber, 2009). Specifically, “Dolores Delgado Bernal and Octavio Villalpando would argue these ideological beliefs are rooted in Western epistemologies that maintain white superiority through the production of knowledge creating what they term, *apartheid of knowledge in academia*” (Huber, 2009, p.640). This is something we tried to break away from by creating content which could provide counter-narratives to cis-white hetero dominant knowledge. We took our inspiration from QCP which draws on intersectionality of identities and relationalities between them to provide a space for collaborative learning where different groups of learners can incorporate their vulnerabilities in the learning process. In the next section, I will discuss my positionality in relation to this project, as well as explain the process of designing the Challenge, and carrying out the related research.

Researcher Positionality

The idea for my research work has its background in my queer advocacy in Bangladesh and the in the U.S. It is important to highlight how the forms of advocacy are different for me in Bangladesh and that in the U.S. In a predominantly brown-skinned country such as Bangladesh which was previously a British colony, there is still a lot of colorism and favoritism towards people who can communicate in English. The national language of Bangladesh is Bangla which is spoken by 98 percent of the population. If you look at the history of Bangladesh’s war of independence from Pakistan, the right to use the Bangla language was the main factor. The

medium of instruction in the state-provided basic education is in Bangla. However, with the history of colonialism, the elites of the country are educated in English-medium schools which follow British curricula and forms of assessment. This form of education carries the highest level of prestige in the country. As the role of English has become synonymous with global language, it threatens a cultural recolonization in the country (Rumnaz Imam, 2005).

Even though the institutionalized discrimination of LGBTQIA2+ individuals in Bangladesh is enacted by the Section 377 of the Penal Code (dating from the British Indian Government legislation of 1860) which makes same-sex relations unlawful (Chaney et al., 2020), as a fluent speaker of the language of the past colonizer and being on the fairer side of the skin color spectrum, I was able to work as a journalist in a national daily English newspaper where I could write about LGBTQIA2+ issues by camouflaging them as social topics. I was part of a privileged group, and I chose to use this privilege to highlight topics which other queer people who weren't as privileged could talk about. However, in the U.S., where as a brown, feminine, gay man I no longer enjoyed the privileges which were previously given to me in Bangladesh, I started using my background as a journalist to advocate for myself and other queer people of color.

Thus, even within tiny parts of my life, one can see the different intersectionality of identities that exist. Halberstam (2003) talks about how queer studies and queer pedagogy offers space for “a consciously cultivated multidisciplinary” (p. 363). As queer people with various intersectional identities, it is very difficult for us to fit into an educational system that values the pretense of apoliticality and does not take into consideration the various identities, experiences, and oppressions we live.

My journey in the U.S. has many layers and when I enrolled in a predominantly white educational institution, University of Maine, these layers became more prominent. This is not limited to just PWIs, research concentrating on Black queer undergraduates shows a severe neglect of topics relevant to queer communities and a lack of queer-affirming resources and disregard for issues of racism in LGBT centers at his Historically black colleges and universities and PWI respectively (Leyva et al., 2022). Historically, there has been the prevalence of a cis-hetero dominance in the education system in America which as queer POC, we have to navigate.

Heterosexual and masculine privileges are connected to a gendered system of oppression and social norms and roles that has adverse effects and restrict behaviors which women and men can display. Additionally, a lot of research has focused on how privilege is concentrated in Whiteness (Case et al., 2014). As I navigated through a white and cis-hetero biased educational system, I constantly questioned my sense of belonging in this institution. In addition to being a student, I was an instructor of record, assigned to teach several Public Speaking classes, including in-person and online.

As a feminine queer person, I questioned myself on how I dress when I took classes in person. How should I project my voice? How much hand gestures would be read as ‘too gay?’ What parts of my life should I bring into the class, and which should I leave behind? Over the years, I thought I have worked through therapy to help with these very vulnerabilities. The discomfort that my body felt in the initial days of teaching allowed me to have conversations with myself as to what I want to achieve with my platform as a teacher and what do I owe to myself? Dominique C. Hill (2017) talks about embodied vulnerability as an alternative pedagogical practice. In this practice, an educator can choose to bring their whole self into the classroom. It does make them vulnerable, but it can also allow for students to actually see their

teacher for who they are and perhaps learn from it. It allows for the “interplay around the social identities of race, gender, location (the classroom), and sexuality” (p. 438). I believe embodied vulnerability is an important component of QCP and, in various ways, I utilized it to express myself in the classroom and also educate students.

The curriculum of the introductory Public Speaking courses was grounded in ancient Greek rhetoric, as is typical for such courses in the U.S. (Valenzano et al., 2014). However, our course also intentionally built-in students’ engagement with diverse rhetorical styles and traditions, as well as speakers who represent co-cultures different from the dominant group of white, cis-heteronormative U.S. nationals of certain age and means. Additionally, the course left open spaces for alternative rhetoric that individual instructors can bring in. While we were given the teaching materials and had discussions on what exercises to include every class, there was room for me as an instructor to explore how I would like to conduct the classes. I want to highlight how as a feminine gay man who doesn’t fit into the category of a cis-passing gay man, I fall in the category of those who were and still continue to be rendered invisible. However, as an instructor of record, there were certain privileges and a voice given to me. But this limited privilege combined with my embodied vulnerability collided with the white cis-heteronormative normalization prevalent in most U.S classrooms. Even without being political, my embodied vulnerability makes the classroom political which usually would be expected to be apolitical. “Having ethnic and cultural backgrounds with histories marked by the trauma and exploitation of colonization means our relationship to sexuality and gender is complicated by this history in multiple ways” (Scharrón-Del Río, 2020, p. 295).

I also want to highlight that since I initially taught in a hybrid model because of the pandemic, certain weeks would be in person, while others would be over zoom. The zoom

classes allowed a certain level of barrier between the students and me which allowed me to express myself better. This was in various ways, some consciously and other unconsciously such as how I used my voice, hand gestures, mentioning of queer topics such as my partner with a masculine pronoun in conversations. This contributed vastly to bring my embodied vulnerability and incorporate it into my teaching when I taught in person.

It is important to highlight that during this period, I was also a student myself in the MA program. The experience of being both a student and an instructor over zoom played a big role in the envisioning of the LGBTQIA2+ Library Challenge. It helped me navigate my vulnerabilities both as a student and instructor which played an important role in connecting how participants might perceive the challenge and in what ways we could make it a safer environment which would allow them to bring their embodied vulnerabilities in a collaborative learning process.

But a sense of being conscious of how students are perceiving my own embodied vulnerability also lingered as I continued my journey as an instructor my and this was amplified when for the first time, I introduced Lily Indie's 2018 NSDA Informative National Champion speech - "Nobody Puts Baby in the Closet." In this particular speech, Indie discusses being queer both in America and around the world and how it impacts individuals. As the speech was being shown on the screen, I sat down at the back of the class. My body reacted as if it wasn't only Indie that the students were observing but also me. But it was very important for me to bring a queer person who using their body, lived experiences and non-heteronormative knowledge was delivering a speech about understanding queer individuals.

This is an example of a scenario were employing a QCP allows both the teacher and the learners to challenge normativity through different tasks and activities which examine and question traditional practices, assignments, readings etc. and also how the learning is conducted

on a daily basis. One major aspect of QCP is foregrounding vulnerability as a way to create a classroom community and prepare students to have conversations which are considered “difficult” or “challenging” by heteronormative standards (Atay & Pensoneau-Conway, 2020). Bringing this particular speech allowed me to bring my own vulnerabilities into the classroom but it wasn’t enough as a learning experience for the students. To make it more of a queer affirming learning experience, I started observing the change in body language or sense if there is any physical discomfort which students exhibited during this speech. In addition to observing, I created exercises around Indie’s speech - both written and spoken. I asked students to share what they liked about the speech and the topic of it. I noticed initially that students concentrated their answers more on Indie’s body language, use of materials in the speech but not directly on the topic itself. From this learning, I designed future classes which would help both students and me to engage on this “difficult” topic on a more vulnerable level when I played this speech in the classroom. This included direct prompts in regard to the topic of the speech itself and how it questions heteronormativity.

This was my motivation for my research work to find out more about how learners engage LGBTQIA2+ topics and how affirming teaching approaches may impact allyship and knowledge and openness toward LGBTQIA2+ topics. At the beginning of conceptualizing this project, the intended sample was Public Speaking students across 20+ sections taught at the University of Maine each semester. However, as the project evolved and we settled on implementing an online learning module, the study population became the general public, recruited through their participation in the Library Challenge. During the discussion process for my research, my thesis advisor and I were influenced by the Racial Justice Challenge which Jen Bonnet at Fogler Library at University of Maine conducted in collaboration with the Office for

Diversity and Inclusion, and which was initiated by a graduate student. This particular Challenge and other similar Challenges designed by Bonnet, in partnership with relevant departments at UMaine, consisted of a week-long program where participants over five days would experience various components related to the topic. This experience would include texts, visual aids, exercises, tasks, readings, spaces for group sharing and other virtual forms of learning.

As the scope of creating an entire curriculum was not possible in our time limit, we thought if it would work as a library challenge where participants over five days will be exposed to a curriculum that was developed using queer pedagogy. This led us to Jen Bonnet, Librarian for Anthropology, Communication & Journalism, Native American Programs, and Nursing, and Nancy Lewis, Head, Reference & Information Literacy Department at University of Maine's Raymond H. Fogler Library. Bonnet became a part of the research team while Lewis provided continuous feedback in the design of what would ultimately become the LGBTQIA2+ Learning & Affirming Challenge. The intended study design itself remained more or less the same - volunteer participants took a pre-survey, then completed a 5-day long Challenge through the UMaine Fogler Library, followed by a post-survey. The pre-and post survey consisted of a demographic questionnaire and a validated allyship measure with three dimensions: knowledge and skills, openness and support, and oppression awareness (Jones et al., 2014).

Intervention Design: The LGBTQIA2+ Learning and Affirming Challenge

When we initially thought about the challenge, we had to visualize what we want a five-day curriculum to look like. We were informed by QCP - which offered us a critical feminist educational approach which could be an impactful method to transform cis-heteronormative education and model difference-affirming learning (Atay & Pensoneau-Conway, 2020). Based on this, there were five days with each day focusing on different aspects of making a curriculum

more LGBTQIA2+ affirming - acceptance for queer identities, questioning cis-heteronormativity in education and daily lives, intersectionality of identities and power in relation to learning, queering of educational settings, and ideas for future actions and initiatives. It was intentional on our part to design this challenge with topics which could create a sense of shared vulnerability considering how students are usually exposed to learning in gender binaries. As such, introducing topics which put individuals who have been erased even by the gay and lesbian movement at the center of learning was a major intervention. To address this discomfort and make the learning a place for shared vulnerability to exist and be addressed with respect was an integral part of the challenge. Various materials including peer reviewed articles, videos, Padlets for reflection, surveys, quotes from queer individuals, etc. were introduced and shared every day so that there was more than one way in which participants could connect (if they choose to) with the topics. The curriculum consciously introduced students to individuals who do not fit into the binary, speeches and ways of communication which do not follow the standard Eurocentric pattern and lay a big emphasis on creating places which vulnerabilities could be explored within classroom settings which questioning the normative forms and topics which are prevalent in the education system

Moreover, each day followed the same structure (with content variation), incorporating the four key elements of QCP. Firstly, we *featured LGBTQIA2+ voices and perspectives* by starting with quotes and hyperlinked bios of queer scholars, activists, and celebrities, normalizing queer presence in our everyday lives and in the context of this learning opportunity. Secondly, key to working toward *queer relationality and coalitional politics* is providing opportunities for witnessing difference - we offered these through accessible videos and blogs that were both informative and included personal narratives; additionally, we attempted to

stimulate such critical sharings and reflections in the daily Padlet forums. Thirdly, we endeavored to grow *competencies in queer oppositional readings* by linking to texts that defined important terms (e.g., cis-heteronormativity), then offered examples of reading mundane situations through those terms, and finally asked participants to reflect on the relevance of the terms in their own lives. Finally, we worked to counter the “critical turn off” (Fassett & Warren, 2007) or the disillusionment which might come with awareness of oppression, through the Padlet-facilitated reflections which focused on not only seeing and naming queer “issues,” but also connecting such naming to actions at different scales to *embolden critical hope*. This culminated in the final day of the challenge, when participants constructed action plans.

The choice of content topics, summarized above, was also guided by four principles of QCP which Atay and Pensoneau-Conway (2020) talk about. We wanted the topics to allow for vulnerabilities and reflection to be a part of the learning process while building a space for collaborative learning which was relational in nature and questioned the dominant cis-heteronormative western educational system. They define QCP as “shifts in perspectives and decentering cis-heterosexuality and cis-heterosexual structures to critique and challenge oppressive and discriminatory power dynamics” (Atay & Pensoneau-Conway, 2020, p. 6).

The Welcome page served multiple purposes. It was a place to welcome the participants into this shared community of learning from a place of vulnerability and hope, as well as set up expectations and situate participants in the learning context. After an orienting quote by Audre Lorde, the challenge established community agreements or some guiding principles of engaging, learning with discomfort, setting expectations and speaking from a place of one’s truth as we embarked on the five-day journey to collaborative learning. One of the most visually capturing elements of the page is an image from the 2015 Rainbow Rally which was organized by queer

volunteers in Bangladesh. This was very significant because I am from Bangladesh and bringing queer knowledge from beyond the west. One of the individuals shown in the picture was brutally murdered for their LGBTQ+ activism and I felt that it was important the until the world learns how to become more LGBTQIA2+ affirming, these attacks on innocent people will continue. This was followed by acknowledgments for the designers of the challenge, University of Maine's land acknowledgment statements, information about how various educational institutions in the U.S. occupy indigenous lands, a LGBTQIA2+ affirming and acknowledging statement and lastly, how the challenge has limitation whereby this particular program could not cover every member or identity present in the queer community and how some identities are given more space or representation in this challenge.

Day 1: Re/situating selves. The goal of this day was to set a foundation for what to expect in this Challenge throughout the week. It aimed to create a place of learning where learners could be comfortable in affirming their identities and also recognize areas where they can support or not be a part of the gendering of language that takes place. This is important because one of tenets of QCP is relationality and for learners to develop connections with one another, there should be content which allows for them to be themselves and which promotes respect for their vulnerabilities from fellow learners.

The first day started off with a quote by actor Elliot Page which focused on the importance of being accepted for who we are. This was followed by a video focusing on how labels, especially harmful ones, can impact individuals negatively. After the video, participants were asked to participate in a Padlet discussion with prompts related to how labels can impact individuals. The purpose of this was two-fold - one, the Padlet created a space for individuals to be vulnerable, share and participate in a collaborative learning process; two, it allowed for

participants to reflect based on the video and prompts. Both collaborative learning, related to witnessing and queer relationality, and reflections are big parts of QCP. It also allowed for participants to engage in non-traditional learnings beyond the western realms which are exclusionary to identities beyond the binary by exploring the concepts such as self-identified labeling, stereotypes amongst others. Also, the day focused on how labels are cultural constructs and as such they can be varying from culture to culture and dynamic. The participants were provided with another video where Geo Neptune, a Passamaquoddy Two-Spirit basketmaker, storyteller, and educator talks about indigenous gender knowledge and labels. Again, this works to “question oppressive systems related to sexuality and gender (...) along with knowledge production” (Atay & Pensoneau-Conway, 2020, p. 8), an integral part of QCP. The first day part of the program ended with prompts for personal reflection, a short preview of what participants could expect from Day 2 and some additional resources to further engage with the topics shared on Day 1.

Day 2: Un/resettling understanding. The goal of this day was of the day was to recognize what is cis-heteronormativity and how it exists in education, our daily lives and also how it contributes towards the gendering of the English language whereby gender and sex is seen in binary rather than the spectrum is which they exist. This is important because once as learners we are able to recognize how cis-heteronormativity dominates our lives, we can work towards creating ways to re-affirm our identities. For example, on this day, learners were introduced to ‘pronouns’ as a way to affirm one's gender and sexuality and counter the binary which is established due to the cis-hetero dominated gendering of language. Also, this follows one of the ideas of QCP to provide oppositional learnings whereby we can approach a topic in multiple diverse ways.

This day started with two quotes - one by Jamie Arpin-Ricci, author, pastor, and community activist and the other by Dr. Kim Tallbear, professor of Native Studies, University of Alberta. Both these quotes emphasized the importance of identifying gender and sexual identities beyond the binary and its colonial legacies (e.g., O’Sullivan, 2021). The first video for the day defined cis-heteronormativity and explained how it prevails through language, communication, structures etc. in our daily lives. This was followed by providing examples to participants of areas in which how cis-heteronormativity exists in our daily lives and are grounded by societal norms and expectations. Participants were then given a prompt to think of words that come to their minds when they think of cis-heteronormativity and asked to share on a Padlet. A video followed about how heteronormativity is problematic and also introduced pronouns and pronoun statements as a way to enact affirmation of gender and sexuality self-determination. Another Padlet was provided with a prompt to reflect on a time from the participants’ lives where they experienced and/or expressed cis-heteronormativity. The second day part of the program ended with prompts for personal reflection, a short preview of what participants could expect from Day 3 and some additional resources to further engage with the topics shared on Day 2. This day used QCP in various ways including centering queer knowledge through videos, peer reviewed articles etc. in an attempt to question the oppressive knowledge of cis-heteronormativity and centering LGBTQIA2+ content and voices in the curricula.

Day 3: Engaging queer connections. The goal of this day was to explore how identities do not operate in silos but in intersectionality with various identities and recognizing and incorporating intersectionality in the learning process is an important tenet of QCP. This can be important in various ways such as it actually answers one major question often asked by privileged group members as to what learning about marginalized groups do for them. A

curriculum developed drawing multiple intersectionality because the privileged and marginalized groups and also within members of each of these groups can address such questions.

This day began with a quote by Sonya Renee Taylor, author, poet, spoken word artist, humanitarian and social justice activist, educator, and founder of The Body is Not An Apology movement which focuses on how injustice can disproportionately impact people of different race, gender, sexual orientation, ability, age etc. This was followed by three videos which focused on what is intersectionality from different speakers, one of which is Dr. Kimberlé Crenshaw whose work laid the base for the concept of intersectionality. It also included a reading by Dr. Kimberlé Crenshaw for individuals who want to refer to written materials and/or explore the topic deeper. This was followed by two prompts where participants were asked to explain what intersectionality means to them by drafting a tweet and also adding a hashtag to it in the Padlet. The purpose of the tweet styled reflection was to diversify various ways in which reflection and collaborative learning can take place and also the dynamic nature of learning in the era of internet. The third day part of the program ended with prompts for personal reflection, a short preview of what participants could expect from Day 4 and some additional resources to further engage with the topics shared on Day 3. The materials provided on this day closely followed the applications of QCP (Atay & Pensoneau-Conway, 2020) and provided students and instructors with various materials which they could employ in the classroom to make learning more intersectional rather than in a silo.

Day 4: Queering/querying inclusivity. The goal of this day was to explore how learners belonging to the queer community can feel invisible in the classroom and also provide resources on how to make educational settings more LGBTQIA2+ affirming. This is important because

centering of LGBTQIA2+ content in the curriculum is an important tenet of QCP and it helps to center queer individuals rather than considering them at the bylines.

This day began with a quote by Skye Tooley, trans/nonbinary, anti-bias and social justice educator about the importance of making classrooms safer spaces and more LGBTQIA2+ affirming which laid the foundation of learning for the way which was ways in which one could make the class more queer affirming. This was followed with a where individuals spoke about how they want to be seen and heard and another video where students spoke about how they would want their professors to know about them in the classroom. There was also an article shared about how using the phrase “preferred” gender pronoun is no longer accepted as it gives the idea that while this particular pronoun is preferred, there can be other pronouns which are also acceptable for a person. The last video of the day reflected on how teachers and students can make the classroom in an inclusive space. The Padlet based reflection of the day focused on asking participants to reflect on how our educational settings would be more LGBTQIA2+ affirming. The fourth day part of the program ended with prompts for personal reflection, a short preview of what participants could expect from Day 5 and some additional resources to further engage with the topics shared on Day 4. The content of day four closely followed the applications of QCP (Atay & Pensoneau-Conway, 2020) especially one about how various component, even those explored in the challenge so far come together in critical hope with new, intersectional and transnational ways to envision equitable futures and actions which can allow for the class to be more LGBTQIA2+ affirming.

Day 5: Re/affirming commitments. The goal of this day was to provide the participants with content which can help them to take action beyond the Challenge. QCP advocates for critical hope where new intersectional and transnational ways need to be incorporated into our

lives and the classroom to have an equitable future and also it will help to understand how actions which need to be taken also need to be equitable based on various factors impacting different groups of people differently.

The final day of the challenge began with a quote Laverne Cox, actress and LGBTQIA2+ advocate where she is asserting her position in the society and what is her hope for herself. This was followed by a reading about allyship, the importance of straight allies reflecting on their privilege when practicing allyship, and what we can do as allies to support LGBTQIA2+ communities in learning environments and a video on allyship. Based on these readings and videos, participants were provided with an action plan template which they could personalize to include ways in which they could continue their commitment and work to create LGBTQIA2+ affirming experiences. There was also recognition that as learners we will make mistakes and we should continue learning from them and how this challenge does not cover all the topics and there is so much room for work to be done. The final day part of the program ended with prompts for personal reflection, some additional resources to further engage with the topics shared on Day 5 and a thank you to the participants for their constant participation and engagement. The content of day four closely followed the applications of QCP (Atay & Pensoneau-Conway, 2020) especially one about critical hope and also relation building as an important aspect in the process of learning and teaching.

The Dynamic Nature of the Challenge

We wanted to ensure that the Challenge's content was not fixed and could be modified, changed, adapted differently if needed. To allow the content to be dynamic in nature, after the initial design of the challenge, it was shared with graduate and undergraduate students and educators at the University of Maine, as well as with queer community educators and advocates.

Educators included faculty and staff who have relevant instructional roles - for example, staff at the Rainbow Resources Center run workshops. Similarly, librarians have instructional responsibilities both as teachers in classes and through library challenges. The purpose of this was to garner feedback from them to make additional modifications to the challenge to make it more inclusive and queer affirming before being launched. The challenge was designed to be dynamic with content of it being modified or changed based on response from participants throughout the challenge design, during the Challenge, and also after the Challenge. For example, initially when we shared the content of the Challenge with two professors in the School of Social Work, University of Maine, we got the feedback that the Challenge design compromised accessibility for participants with certain disabilities. Our lead designer of the Challenge, Jen Bonnet, took the feedback and made multiple modifications such as ensuring that any links open into a new tab and were accessible using reading gadgets.

In addition to the preliminary feedback described above, we collected insights from:

- Focus groups conducted at the conclusion of the Challenge, to gather feedback on participants' experiences.
- Unsolicited emails from participants that we received throughout the Challenge week.
- and a program evaluation sent within a week after the Challenge ended.

Responses resulted in programmatic changes, as well as a collaborative and dynamic design that enabled mutual learning, in itself embodying QCP (Atay & Pensoneau-Conway, 2020). For example, participants questioned the initial title of the Challenge as possibly exclusionary. Originally called the LGBTQ+ Learning & Affirming Challenge, the feedback led us to rework the title into the LGBTQIA2+ Learning & Affirming Challenge. Even after the Challenge ended,

it is available online with options to email Jen Bonnet with any feedback so that any important changes which can make it more LGBTQIA2+ affirming can be made.

Publicity around the challenge was done using various listservs which included national email lists in the fields of Communication Studies and Library Science. The publicity also included requesting department heads to share the challenge with students and faculty. This along with word of mouth, resulted in over 1,400 people participating from across the U.S. They represented a variety of positionalities in terms of gender, age, and occupation, including K-12 and higher education librarians, high school, undergraduate, and graduate students, teachers and professors, and community members with an interest in the topic.

Ethics Review and Participant Recruitment

The study was conducted after receiving approval from the Institutional Review Board for the Protection of Human Subjects (IRB) at University of Maine. The Board was presented with the rationale behind the research about how an important aspect which can contribute to practices of developing and implementing LGBTQIA2+ inclusive education is participatory empirical research. Along with the rationale, details of the personnel involved, research questions, funding information, summary of the project, methods, information about confidentiality, consent, risks involved, benefits and compensation were also included. After feedback from the board, changes were made, and the IRB reviewed the application and approved the research on 3/25/2022.

Participants were recruited for both the qualitative and the quantitative arm of the project, described in more detail below. Focus group participants were purposively invited from among University of Maine's students, educators, and staff affiliated with the Women's, Gender, and Sexuality program and among members of campus organizations, focusing on LGBTQIA2+

issues, such as Wilde Stein and the Rainbow Resource Center. The recruitment of survey respondents drew from participants in the LGBTQIA2+ Learning and Affirming Challenge. When signing up for the Challenge, individuals were provided with an option to volunteer to take a survey related to their learning. Over 400 people, ages 18 and older, from around the United States completed the first, pre-challenge survey. After expected attrition, there were 158 matched pre-/post-surveys, which were analyzed for this project.

Data Collection and Analysis

Figure 1- Research design process and data collected at each step



In this research design process, I was the lead on designing the demographic questionnaire on Qualtrics with guidance from Dr. Liliana Herakova and Jen Bonnet. As part of the Five-Day Challenge, I led the process of developing content to be included each day. The design itself was implemented by Jen Bonnet who has expertise in designing multiple similar challenges as part of Fogler Library. The Challenge in its current form is informed by the feedback we received from community members, educators, students and graduate teaching assistants, faculty, university staff members and many others. These feedback notes were provided as part of the feedback collection process prior to the launching of the Challenge, Padlet-facilitated discussions during the Challenge, unsolicited emails, post Challenge program evaluation, and two focus groups. I conducted both focus groups which comprised one conversation among faculty and another - among graduate students, interviewed separately to

allow for better feedback on what they thought of the Challenge material and queering of curriculum.

Data were collected in both qualitative and quantitative ways. These two different forms of data collection occurred simultaneously but were independent of each other. The present thesis focused only on the results of the quantitative arm of the study. Nevertheless, I review the full research design below.

The qualitative element consisted of conducting two focus groups with the intended aims to 1) conceptualize LGBTQIA2+ affirmation in the classroom and 2) to assess responses to the learning module/library challenge. The protocol included open ended questions about what participants think of the LGBTQIA2+ affirming curricula and what mundane teaching practices communicate affirmation of intersectional identities. Each focus group had 3-4 participants. The first focus group consisted mostly of educators while the second focus group had graduate students and some of them were also graduate teaching assistants. The purpose of dividing the two groups was to ensure that both these groups could be more open in their participation in addressing the questions during the focus group discussions. Each session lasted 1 - 1.5 hours and was conducted at a time convenient to the participants. Focus groups were conducted over Zoom with both video and audio recorded. Data from the focus groups will be analyzed at a later time.

Quantitative data were collected in connection to the launching of the LGBTQIA2+ Learning and Affirming Library Challenge. As part of signing up to participate in the challenge, participants were able to opt-in and complete a short survey (pre-test) that measured their allyship with LGBTQIA2+ communities, as well as demographic variables and previous exposure to LGBTQIA2+ communities and issues. After completing the “challenge,”

participants completed another survey (post-test), using the same variables to see if there are any changes in allyship attitudes (Jones et al., 2014). The post-challenge survey also included open-ended questions about participants' experience with the learning unit. These were anonymous surveys and conducted through Qualtrics. Pre- and post-Challenge surveys were the same, except demographic questions were answered only in the first survey. Allyship relations questions were asked both in pre- and post-surveys. Participants had a unique code assigned to them so that we could compare pre- and post-survey data (the entire survey is included in the Appendix to this thesis).

Allyship questionnaire. The allyship questionnaire used was adapted from the LGBT Ally Identity Measure by Jones et al. (2014) which was designed to “assess the skills to support lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender (LGBT) persons, knowledge of the LGBT experience, awareness of LGBT oppression, and engagement in action among heterosexual allies to the LGBT community” (Jones et al., 2014, p. 181). Jones et al. (2014) reported Cronbach's alpha reliability scores as follows: “ $\alpha = .8$ for the knowledge and skills items, $.82$ for openness and support, and $\alpha = .76$ for oppression awareness” (p. 190).

Working with this validated measure, in which the statements were phrased using only the words “sexuality” and “sexual minorities,” we added “gender minority” to each statement, so that they were more inclusive of LGBTQIA2+ individuals. For example, “I have taken a public stand on important issues facing sexual minorities” became “I have taken a public stand on important issues facing sexual and gender minorities.” For each statement, participants responded on a 5-point Likert scale, with one 1 indicating “strongly disagree” and 5 indicating “strongly agree.” Thus, higher scores suggested more knowledge, openness, and oppression awareness with regards to LGBTQIA2+ issues and communities.

Quantitative data analysis. To test if there was any difference in allyship score before and after the challenge, a paired samples t-test was conducted for each question in the allyship measure. While prior validation of this scale has indicated the presence of 3 distinct factors - knowledge and skills, openness and support, and oppression awareness - here, we decided to look at changes in scores for each question separately, as we wanted to better assess this educational intervention and where its impacts may be most meaningful. Results are reported and discussed in the next chapter.

CHAPTER 3

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Results

Sample description. A total of 158 individuals (N = 158) fully completed both the pre- and post-Challenge survey. Overall, participants ranged in age from 18 to 74, with the largest percentage in the 45 - 54 years of age group (28 %, n = 44), followed by those between 35 and 44 years of age (24 %, n = 38). The vast majority of the sample identified as cis-gender females (78 %, n = 123), followed by cis-gender males (9 %, n = 14) and non-binary, trans, and/or gender-queer (9 %, n = 14) individuals. Of the respondents, majority identified as heterosexual (55 %, n = 87). For the purposes of analyses, we combined all other participants in the category of “queer” (45 %, n = 71), which included: gay or lesbian (7%, n = 11), bisexual (14 %, n = 22), queer (6 %, n = 9), pansexual (5 %, n = 8), demisexual (2 %, n = 3), and asexual (5 %, n = 8), some people did not identify with any of these categories and/or preferred not to answer (6 %, n = 9). Over 90 % of participants identified as white.

Respondents represented a variety of occupations: many considered themselves educators (32 %, n = 51), 18 % identified as community members (n = 28), advocates represented 9 % of the sample (n = 14), and students - 5 % of the sample (n = 8). A notable proportion - 34 % (n = 54) selected “other” and filled in “librarian” as their occupation. It is important to observe, however, that respondents were selecting their primary occupational affiliation and it is possible that many wore more than one hat. Despite the range in ages, sexuality, and occupations, 92 % of participants (n = 145) **had not** had experiences discussing LGBTQIA2+ topics in their high school education; additionally, 76 % (n = 120) reported that their parents or guardians **had also**

not talked about LGBTQIA2+ issues and topics with them. The vast majority, however, have discussed LGBTQIA2+ topics with other individuals at some point in their lives (98 %, n = 155).

Changes in allyship scores. As discussed above, a paired samples t-test was done for each statement in the allyship questionnaire, comparing participants' responses before and after completing the LGBTQIA2+ Learning and Affirming Challenge. There were significant positive differences for most statements (see table below), indicating that participating in the Challenge improved respondents' perceptions of their allyship competencies. There were no significant differences for three Items in the "oppression awareness" dimension of the scale, while the other two items in this factor showed only a very slight significant growth. This, along with the already high mean scores for each statement in the pre-test (above 4.6), suggests that the sample started with a perception that their understanding of LGBTQIA2+ oppression was already adequate, and the Challenge did little to contribute to growth in this area.

We tested each statement in the Allyship measure separately, as this was an educational intervention and we wanted to see where it had the greatest impact in terms of learning and growth, which could also inform future planning for such interventions with a variety of samples. For most items, growth was small, but significant - around .3 points. The greatest growth (of .7 points) was observed in competencies around access to resources (items 3 and 8 below) and understanding of theories of gender and sexual identity development (item 6). The means for developing skills to support sexual and gender minority people (item 2) rose by .5.

Table 2: Allyship Scale pre-/post-Challenge

| Allyship questionnaire statement | Pre-test mean | Post-test mean | T-test score | Significance |
|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------|----------------|-------------------------|--------------|
| 1. I know about resources (for example: books, Web sites, support groups, etc.) for sexual and gender minority people in my area. | 3.78 | 4.09 +.3 | t (157) = - 2.8 | p < .01 |
| 2. I have developed the skills necessary to provide support if a sexual or gender minority person needs my help. | 3.72 | 4.17 +.5 | t (157) = - 4.47 | p < .001 |
| 3. I know about resources for families of sexual and gender minority people. | 3.34 | 4.01 +.7 | t (157) = - 5.62 | p < .001 |
| 4. I know of organizations that advocate for sexual and gender minority issues. | 4.0 | 4.22 +.2 | t (157) = - 2.18 | p < .05 |
| 5. I keep myself informed through reading books and other media about various issues faced by sexual and gender minorities groups, in order to increase my awareness of their experiences. | 4.13 | 4.47 +.3 | t (157) = - 3.62 *** | p < .001 |
| 6. I am aware of the various theories of sexual and gender minority identity development. | 3.41 | 4.09 +.7 | t (157) = - 6.01 *** | p < .001 |
| 7. I am aware of policies in my workplace and/or community that affect sexual and gender minority groups. | 3.89 | 4.15 +.3 | t (157) = - 2.68 ** | p < .01 |
| 8. If requested, I know where to find religious or spiritual resources for sexual and gender minority people. | 2.79 | 3.48 +.7 | t (157) = - 4.9 *** | p < .001 |
| 9. I have engaged in efforts to promote more widespread acceptance of sexual and gender minority people. | 4.04 | 4.34 +.3 | t (157) = - 3.18 ** | p < .01 |
| 10. I have taken a public stand on important issues facing sexual and gender minority people. | 3.83 | 4.09 +.3 | t (157) = - 2.27 * | p < .05 |
| 11. I try to increase my knowledge about | 4.44 | 4.77 | t (157) = | p < .001 |

| | | | | |
|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------|---------------|------------------------|---------|
| sexual and gender minority groups. | | +3 | - 4.25 ** | |
| 12. I am comfortable with knowing that, in being an ally to sexual and gender minority individuals, people may assume I am a sexual or gender minority person. | 4.49 | 4.75 +3 | t (157) = - 3.04 ** | p < .01 |
| 13. If I see discrimination against a sexual or gender minority person or group occur, I actively work to confront it. | 4.04 | 4.35 +3 | t (157) = - 3.02 ** | p < .01 |
| 14. I regularly engage in conversations with sexual or gender minority people. | 4.15 | 4.47 +3 | t (157) = - 2.92 ** | p < .01 |
| 15. I am open to learning about the experiences of sexual and gender minority people from someone who identifies as an LGBTQ person. | 4.86 | 4.88 +0.02 | t (157) = - 0.32 | p > .05 |
| 16. I think sexual and gender minority groups are oppressed by society in the United States. | 4.71 | 4.80 +0.1 | t (157) = - 1.23 | p > .05 |
| 17. I think sexual and gender minority individuals face barriers in the workplace that are not faced by heterosexuals. | 4.68 | 4.82 +0.1 | t (157) = - 2.08 * | p < .05 |
| 18. Sexual and gender minority adolescents experience more bullying than heterosexual adolescents. | 4.74 | 4.87 +0.1 | t (157) = - 1.2 | p < .05 |
| 19. Sexual and gender minority adolescents experience more depression and suicidal thoughts than heterosexual adolescents. | 4.79 | 4.88 +0.1 | t (157) = - 1.5 | p > .05 |

Discussion

As discussed above, the LGBTQIA2+ Learning & Affirming Challenge was created by drawing inspiration from the four principles of QCP which Atay and Pensoneau-Conway (2020) talk about. One of the major aspects of the Challenge itself was an attempt to allow for vulnerabilities and reflection which could also include embodied vulnerability for some of us to take center stage of this collaborating learning process (Hill, 2017). It connects to QCP's aim for

“shifts in perspectives and decentering cis-heterosexuality and cis-heterosexual structures to critique and challenge oppressive and discriminatory power dynamics” (Atay & Pensoneau-Conway, 2020, p. 6). The survey which participants took at the beginning and end of the challenge with some demographic questions and questions about respondents' understanding of and connection to LGBTQIA2+ issues and communities helped us understand if there were any significant changes in allyship. We tested each statement in the allyship measure separately to see where there was the greatest impact in terms of learning and growth, which could also inform future planning for such interventions with a variety of samples.

The results showed significant positive differences for most statements which indicated that this five-day intervention (LGBTQIA2+ Learning and Affirming Challenge⁴) had a noticeable impact in improving respondents' perceptions of their allyship capacities. While we cannot say for sure that the participation in the challenge was the sole reason for these positive changes, we cannot overlook how the challenge created a space for collaborative learning and reflection from a place of vulnerability as we explored various topics such as cis-heteronormativity, gender, sexuality, and intersectionality. In addition to learning about these topics each day, further resources for future engagement were also provided for participants continued self-directed learning. Considering that the Challenge had a role to play, it is definitely worth noting how an intervention over only five days can have an impact on learners, provided the learning experience is developed intentionally keeping queer sensitivities at the forefront. The intersectionality of identities and relational nature of them was a central tenet of the Challenge and if a curriculum incorporates them, it can contribute to educational context where coalitional politics are possible (Abdi & Cuomo, 2020). In QCP, coalitional politics refers to a

⁴ <https://libguides.library.umaine.edu/lgbtq>

practice of bearing witness to difference and accepting disagreement as generative; it is a mode of queering learning where it is not certainty of knowledge that matters, but commitment to relationship, support, and honoring each other's humanity (Gutierrez-Perez & Ramirez, 2021). Such an environment could allow the inclusive participation of different groups which are historically privileged or marginalized. Inclusivity here is envisioned as a possibility for various vulnerabilities to be shared and witnessed without individuals feeling threatened or further marginalized. This was evident at various points in the Challenge particularly the reflection and sharing which took place in Padlet posts.

The absence of LGBTQIA2+ topics in the curricula that survey respondents have been exposed to echoes scholarship which has highlighted the dominance of cis-heteropatriarchy underlying U.S. education system. As Blackburn and Smith (2010) wrote, “Nearly every school in the United States is heteronormative; that is, they are based upon the concept that heterosexuality is normal, and homosexuality is not” (p. 626). Binary dichotomies of biological sex, of gender, and of sexuality become ingrained and naturalized into the education system as soon as a child enters, and this continues over the years of education. There is the constant indoctrination of gender and also that assumption that romantic attractions are inevitably and heteronormatively determined by one’s genitalia. As such, over the years, it becomes difficult for students and teachers to see beyond the traditional gender binary which is further enforced by the dominance of heterosexual desires. These are entrenched by the curricula and pedagogy which facilitate learning (Blackburn & Smith, 2010). This is also evident in our survey results where despite the range in sexuality, ages and occupations, a vast majority of the participants shared that they had no experiences discussing LGBTQIA2+ topics in their high school education. It is glaring that more than a decade has passed between the literature mentioned above and the

survey conducted and yet learning spaces remain dominated by white cis-heteronormativity both in terms of who are the learners and what is being taught. One of the ways to counter this narrative is the presence of an LGBTQIA2+ affirming learning spaces which feature queer coalitional politics (Abdi & Cuomo, 2020). The results of the present study suggest the Challenge worked toward shifting positionalities in this direction, as indicated particularly by the significant growth in the allyship dimension of openness and support.

Research in higher education contexts has shown that a lot of scholarship is divided in a very categorical manner - “students (experiences, outcomes, demographics, development), faculty (preparation, tenure, satisfaction), administrative leaders (career tracks, leadership style), organizations (culture, structures, change), governance and finance (state oversight, boards of trustees, faculty governance), policy (national, state, institutional), and teaching (curriculum, pedagogy, technology) (Renn, 2010, p. 133)”. Instead of treating each of these areas as separate categories, we followed the guidance of QCP whose salient features involve relational, intersectional and transnational ways to envision equitable futures and actions (Atay & Pensoneau-Conway, 2020). As such the Challenge was designed keeping in mind not only the intersectionality of identities and topics which have real life significance beyond the classroom but also the different intersectionalities within participants who took part in it. Considering how the results from the t-test showed significant positive differences for most statements, it points towards the importance of a LGBTQIA2+ curriculum which significantly takes into account the relationality and vulnerability of learning among various groups and also considers the various factors which can impact these relations beyond the classroom.

The survey results indicate that there was growth in the participants’ knowledge about resources available. Respondents seemed to be more aware of where to find resources related to

LGBTQIA2+ issues and also, they pointed towards an increase in skills whereby they can provide support to minority groups if needed. We consciously ensured that learners were provided with topics, resources and forms of learnings which could challenge western cis-heteronormative silencing of education. Also, it is important to note that the Challenge did not promote a unidimensional learning environment where a curriculum is provided, and learners simply follow that. Instead, we designed it to produce multi-dimensionality in terms of how learning can take place. For example, the Padlet discussions provided opportunities for learners to engage with each other and with the Challenge creators as an essential part of the learning process centering collaborative knowledge production and resource sharing.

According to research conducted using data from a national survey of 5,149 students, there is a strong relationship between LGBTQIA2+ students' perception of the campus climate to their experience of learnings in the classroom (Garvey et al., 2015). For example, if these students did not feel represented or acknowledged by their instructors - in their interaction with the teachers or in what they are taught in class - they felt a sense of isolation even beyond the classroom. The research also pointed towards the scarcity of research which examines LGBTQIA2+ students' experiences in specific institutional contexts, such as access to materials or diverse resources. The findings also showed a glaring lack of inclusivity for LGBTQIA2+ issues and identities in the curriculum (Garvey et al., 2015). In a scenario where there is such dearth of knowledge related to LGBTQIA2+ affirming learning, the fact that there was a positive increase in knowledge about access to queer affirming learning further supports the potential of the Challenge as an impactful tool for queering learning.

Continuing on the lines of positive change, respondents indicated a statistically significant improvement in their understandings of theories related to gender and sexual

identities. In terms of specific content in the Challenge, this can be related to materials on pronoun use, hegemonic cis-heteronormativity, and queer intersectionality. With regards to pronouns, specifically, the English language is gendered and a lot of the reimagining of this language is being advanced by non-binary communities. If there is absence of information, including theories, related to gender and sexual identity, it becomes difficult to know how language constructs who we are and how it can also reject those who do not adhere to its gendered constructions (Welch & Norris, 2020). Learners should be provided with materials which can help them self-educate about the histories and realities of difference and struggle, which have contributed and continue to contribute to the expansion of the meaning of humanity.

Contrary to the significant positive change in the allyship dimensions of “knowledge and skill,” as well as “openness and support,” there was a lack of significant or meaningful results in the “oppression awareness” factor of the scale. One of the main reasons for this could be that in the pre-test, the respondents marked the questions related to oppression awareness quite high, with means exceeding 4.6 on a 5-point scale. This could be attributed to the sample, most of whom were white college- educated individuals, or currently attended college. As Barber et al. (2020) have noted, “Universities are not level playing fields where all students have an equal opportunity to participate and succeed. The misuse of standardized tests such as the GRE excludes students who could have otherwise succeeded ... Innovative pedagogies and programs can overcome these challenges but are not widely applied in higher education” (p.1440). While it is encouraging to know that the participants in the survey felt they had sufficient awareness about the oppression of queer people, it also points towards who has most access to information and who benefits from knowledge the most.

However, if we analyze the “oppression awareness” dimension of the scale and the kind of language each of the statements in it used, it can allow for a debate to occur. For example, one of the statements reads: “I think the sexual and gender minority groups are oppressed by society in the United States.” This may raise the question of how such “thinking” is shaped. On one side, it can be seen that it should not be the responsibility of queer people to make their allies aware of the barriers, bullying, oppression that they face and hence, the curriculum should be designed with self-determined education in mind. Additionally, it is wrong to assume that such learning would be to the benefit of cis-heteronormative individuals only; curricula should be designed in a manner that there is opportunity for all learners irrespective of the gender and sexual identity to learn about inequitable power relations involving gender and sexuality. On the other hand, a focus on “oppression” can be seen as adding to a dominant queer-victimizing cis-hetero narrative, where intersectional queer community members are constantly suffering and in need of rescue from their white, cis-hetero allies to serve their own elevated sense of superior morality (Forbes & Ueno, 2020).

At the same time, both of these sides can occur and be true simultaneously. One of the tenets of QCP involves learners “to question oppressive systems related to sexuality and gender (...) along with knowledge production” (Atay & Pensoneau-Conway, 2020, p. 8), including through oppositional and counter-readings of normative texts and experiences. However, literature (Helmer, 2015) shows that when counter narratives are offered in the classroom, learners try to fit them into recognizable fixed categories (e.g., trying to fit characters of story as lesbian, gay, or bisexual without exploring the possibilities of sexual fluidity) and educators also do not at times challenge this narrative. As such there is continuation of cis-hetero dominated education (Helmer, 2015).

Implications

The result of the survey highlights the role of a QCP-informed LGBTQIA2+ affirming curriculum in increasing learners' knowledge and skills to address LGBTQIA2+ topics, awareness about the challenges faced by the queer community, and also what actions they can take to support the queer community. Participating in the Challenge was also intended to foster a collaborative learning space that can have positive queer-affirming impacts. While QCP was developed within Communication Studies, its application in the Challenge, which included a wide range of participants, shows that it is adaptable and impactful across disciplines. One of the major ways the project achieved interdisciplinarity and transferability was via the inclusion of a myriad of resources which engage learners in reflective and collaborative knowledge-creation processes oppositional to the those dominated by cis-hetero white education. As such, learning no longer remains apolitical, or operates within the silo of any particular discipline designed to support only content-specific classroom learning. Instead, it offers an intersectional and transnational array of content which can be incorporated in different ways.

The queering of learning shouldn't be limited to just social science classes as it has been traditionally (Snapp et al., 2015), it can help be an integral part of all disciplines and contribute significantly to the advancement of learning in any discipline. A study based on the cross-sectional survey of students from the Schools of Medicine, Dental Medicine, and Nursing at the University of Pennsylvania (Green et al., 2018) found that despite there being high comfort levels and positive attitudes from the participants towards LGBTQIA2+ health, most of them reported not to be equipped with enough formal preparation and also indicated huge gaps in training across various disciplines to address queer health. One of the major outcomes of the research was highlighting how health professional schools should develop formal content which address LGBTQIA2+ health. Designing a curriculum with QCP at its core can help address this

challenge. Thus, QCP is relevant in any discipline despite its origin being rooted in Communication Studies. Through bringing LGBTQIA2+ affirmation across the curriculum, QCP, in fact, can help promote critical communication competencies within various academic disciplines. Such competencies include: the incorporation and meaningful engagement of diverse voices and perspectives, systematic inquiry into dominant and counter-narratives, and reflexive examination of the ways in which one's own experiences, perspectives and biases shape perception and meaning-making.

Another important aspect of the Challenge was that it allowed for vulnerabilities to be an active part of the learning process (Ghabra & Calafell, 2018; Hill, 2017). It recognized how knowledge is not equally divided, how marginalized participants can feel further marginalized when discussing these topics especially if they are part of the queer community, how straight individuals can feel overwhelmed, defensive or guilty and various other factors. Both educators and learners have a role to play in creating this space and to question the white cis-hetero dominance prevalent in education. For example, there were various opinions shared on the Padlets by the participants. In the design process, at the very beginning of the challenge, we recognized how it was important that we as learners are able to engage with the content, learn from a position which can involve discomfort, setting of expectation and speaking from a place of truth and vulnerability. This aspect of the project allowed for different opinions to co-exist in the Padlets, for agreements and disagreements to flourish but not from a place of hurt but a place of mutual respect and learning, and also an acknowledgement of existing differences. The Challenge was designed with feedback taken from learners, educators, community members, university employees, advocates and people from different walks of life. This played a

significant role in various counter-learnings to co-exist and offered an array of resources which could be incorporated into different disciplines.

Limitations and Future Research

While we don't know the racial identifications of the more than 1,400 Challenge participants, the majority (90 percent) of those who completed both the pre- and post- survey identified themselves as white. Literature has shown how whiteness is considered normal within higher education and it is constantly recreated (Rudick & Golsan, 2018). One of the ways in which this takes place is the disproportionate number of white individuals in educational institutions which in turn creates "increased earning potential and access to high-power social networks, the concentrated awarding of this valued commodity to whites serves to reinforce the existing racial paradigm" (Cabrera, 2014, p. 32). One of the most important aspects of the Challenge itself was the inclusion of knowledge created by individuals who are part of various marginalized groups, for example, one of the materials provided on Day 1 of the project was a video created by Passamaquoddy Two-Spirit basketmaker, storyteller, and educator, Geo Neptune who shared knowledge of the Wabanaki peoples on self-definition, indigenous gender knowledge and labels. Each day of the Challenge featured transnational queer speakers, scholars, and activists with various racial, ethnic, and national identities.

However, "woke" and intentionally queer the design of the program itself, we have to wonder if this is done for the benefit of the predominantly white cis-hetero community who represent the majority of higher education learners in the U.S. and are able to gain from this knowledge. The challenge has the potential to be more productive if there is a diverse group of learners in terms of race, age, gender, sexuality and other groups - and, in fact, if they are part of the creators of the program, honoring the knowledge, as well as the learning needs, of their

communities. This will also enrich the content presented in the project as evidenced even by the limited-in-scope experience of putting together this Challenge, which was an ongoing creation and mutual learning process, involving conversations between the designers and diverse groups of stakeholders.

In terms of the survey, as discussed above there is a lot of potential for queering of the scales in the Allyship questionnaire which we used. While the scale does provide us with a base to measure significant changes in allyship score after an intervention, it is limited in its queering of scales and also what it aims to find out. By queering here, I mean developing the scales from a position of what are the expectations from the queer community from their straight allies. One suggestion to do that would be to address the categories of the scale from a place of vulnerability for both the queer and non-queer participants. Incorporating the tenet of QCP related to intersectional and transnational ways to envision equitable futures and actions (Atay & Pensoneau-Conway, 2020) and also recognizing how significant the role of language is in terms of inclusivity and exclusivity, there is opportunity for further queering of the scale categories.

Such a survey can help collect data which can give better insights on how we can make learning from LGBTQIA2+ affirming and also why is the process of doing so important not just in the classroom but also in day to day lives of learners. Similarly, a majority of the questions in the questionnaire focused on gender and sexual minority groups, it did not substantively address the subject of race or other intersectional identities. This leaves us with the question if there would be a significant positive change in the scale if the number of participants from marginalized groups there were higher and also was queering of the scales. As we have seen from literature discussed above, there can be various reasons which prevent students and faculties from engaging in “difficult” topics especially if they are themselves part of a

marginalized community (Walls & Hall, 2017). An important area of future research can include the development of a new Allyship scale which can incorporate intersectionalities of identities.

The results of the survey indicate that a majority of the respondents were white and cis-women and also that a lot of the participants were teachers or identified as librarians. Schools are “microcosms of society, which, despite having potential to drive change, often replicate and reinforce systems of oppression” (Bettini et al., 2021, p. 528). When new teachers of color are not part of the discursive spaces which are normalized in teaching which is most prominently - white, female, middle-class and heterosexual, they tend to face additional struggles to become an educator. When they are not welcomed into being part of the space which is already dominated by a group and also, they have to silently struggle to either fit in or experience imposter syndrome believing that their success was out of luck and soon their lack of academic abilities will be exposed (Wilkinson, 2020). Being in white privileged spaces also allows novice teachers of color to bear witness to the marginalization that happens to students of color. This puts them with the additional responsibility to challenge oppressive systems but at the same time they feel pressured to be committed to their loyalty to the institution because in many ways they are forced to compromise to do so (Bettini et al., 2021). As such the content of the Challenge which brings together various relationality and intersectionalities can be an important tool not just in how educators and learners participate in collaborative learning but it can also allow for privileged cis-hetero educators to connect better with educators from marginalized groups who feel double binded on one side by their own experience of navigating in a white privilege cis-hetero educational environment and on the other in their journey to support learners from marginalized groups.

Due to a variety of factors, the ultimate research questions and design changed in the course of conceptualizing and conducting the Challenge. However, it is important to highlight some of the initial ideas as I believe there is a lot of potential in incorporating some of them into the classroom to make it more queer affirming. Initially, the idea was to develop a complete curriculum for the Introduction to Public Speaking courses using QCP and queer theory. What would that have included? Mendick (2014) mentions how such a curriculum would diverge from the “the binary oppositions that infuse our language: straight/gay, male/female, white/black, mature/childish or adolescent, rational/emotional, civilized/primitive, mind/body, and so on” (p.330). Then to test the impact, the intention was that half of the 20 plus sections in which Public Speaking courses are offered every semester would receive the deep QCP curriculum and the other half would have had the regular curriculum, where queer speakers and topics are present but queerness as a lens is not deeply interwoven.

Students who were eligible based on age and consent, from both the groups would have been required to take a survey at the beginning of the semester to understand where they stand in terms of allyship towards the LGBTQIA+ community. At the end of the semester, students would have been required to take another survey to measure if there have been any changes to their level of allyship. The idea was to understand if the intervention of a curriculum designed using queer theory and queer pedagogy would have an impact on how students perceived the LGBTQIA+ community.

An important and interesting aspect of this research if it could have been carried out as initially conceived would have been the involvement of various stakeholders including teachers, instructors of record, university employees, community members and most importantly students in the design and implementation of the curriculum. An additional integral element, enacting

QCP in various spaces, would have been that I planned to work with instructors who were using the queer pedagogy inspired curriculum throughout the semester. It is not only important to bring a curriculum into the classroom, but I strongly believe developing relational competencies for its delivery could make a big difference.

CHAPTER 4

CONCLUSION

Despite the resistance we might face to bringing conversations around race, gender, sexuality, immigration status and other topics which question the white cis-hetero privilege guarded by the system of education into the classroom, there are drawbacks to not engaging with these topics (Chen & Lawless, 2018; Walls & Hall, 2017). Avoiding such topics risks suggesting they are not relevant and will not allow for students and teachers to question their own biases and become more sensitive (Chen & Lawless, 2018; Walls & Hall, 2017). In the current political climate, there is a lot of anxiety which the LGBTQIA2+ community is facing. For example, proposals for “anti-trans discriminatory bills banning people from going to the restroom aligning with their gender identity or serving in the military remind us that discrimination remains entrenched in the fiber of society” (Suárez et al., 2021, p. 239).

Classrooms can be sites of/for response, where “embodied vulnerability serves as intervention to assumptions that progress, grow, and cultivate a life of their own” (Hill, 2017, p. 437). Hill (2017) advocates for making a choice of utilizing our bodies and emotions as pedagogical tools, “enacting our queerness” in a way which demands that “students reckon with it in a manner that is inviting but critical, open but personal” (p. 434). One example of such opening was the integration of “Nobody Puts Baby in the Closer” speech in the Public Speaking curriculum, where it allowed an opportunity for students and teachers to share a critical experience of disruption to and reflection about the presence of cis-heteronormativity in western apolitical education.

The inspiration behind this research started with the very discomfort experienced in the classroom by an instructor who is a queer person of color during the introduction of a queer topic

to a predominantly white group of students. This is not limited to my personal life, however: “Research on the experiences of faculty of color in predominantly White institutions (PWIs) suggests that they often experience the campus climate as invalidating, alienating, and hostile” (Sue et al, 2011, p. 211). These feelings are further aggravated when we want to bring topics such as race, ethnicity, immigration status, sexual and gender identity and others into the classroom and that is exactly what happened when we introduced Lily Indie’s 2018 NSDA Informative National Champion speech “Nobody Puts Baby in the Closet” in a Public Speaking class. Research (Chen & Lawless, 2018) done into why certain topics are more difficult to discuss than others in the classroom points towards the apolitical nature of education which helps to sustain the western cis-heteronormative hegemony of education.

Chen and Lawless (2018) approach these “marginalized” identities as social constructions which gain their meanings from history, geopolitical and sociocultural contexts. When we see it from this perspective, it becomes clear that the discomfort is not only about these identities themselves but how they position themselves in relation to power struggles between privileged and non-privileged groups. Also, when we discuss these topics in the classroom, we have to address the injustices and historical trauma attached to them (Scharrón-Del Río, 2018). As such these topics can feel risky to discuss because they challenge the cis-heteronormative western status quo prevalent in education and beyond the classroom. Research has indicated intersectionality of various factors which might prevent both students and teachers from engaging with these topics. Some of the prominent ones include, how for white, heterosexual learners, these topics are uncomfortable because this push them to reflect on their own privileges and internalized traumas (Scharrón-Del Río, 2018). On the other hand, students from marginalized backgrounds might feel an added cognitive and emotional load to engage in these

topics especially if it connects directly to their lived experience of being part of the discussed community and they also do not want to be seen as defensive by their more privileged classmates (Walls & Hall, 2017). A faculty from a marginalized group can avoid bringing these topics because they are expected to be an expert on these topics, balance their values and at the same time remain objective (Sue et al., 2011). Also, the notions of “civility, teacher immediacy, or teacher credibility” function to stop teachers from engaging with these topics (Chen & Lawless, 2018, p. 376). For example, teacher immediacy puts the expectations that teachers should be approachable to students. However, introducing these topics can distance students from educators which also then questions instructors’ credibility and capabilities (Chen & Lawless, 2018).

All of this speaks to the need for adaptable and relevant resources educators can use to integrate and engage difference in meaningful curricular ways. The present project provided one such intervention - the LGBTQIA2+ Learning and Affirming Challenge, which extended into educational spaces the interdisciplinarity of knowledge it benefitted from. The project developed and tested a five-day curriculum that can be implemented (partially or fully) across variety of courses. Since there likely are LGBTQIA2+ learners in every classroom, why contribute to further alienation by limiting LGBTQIA2+ affirming curricula to the humanities and social sciences (Snapp et al., 2015)? With this project, we wanted to address a major disparity by offering queer instructional communication competencies across the disciplines and independent of content. For example, a consideration of pronouns and identity work, which we explored in our Challenge, can be included it as part of icebreakers and community building early in the semester. Not only will it help students to feel more welcome, but it will also set up the

expectation that mutual respect of one's gender identity will be ensured which can benefit retention, learning and academic success in the classroom (Duran, 2018).

In addition to its practical and adaptable applications, this program helps fill a gap because it was designed and modified with feedback from multiple groups and stakeholders; it was an amalgamation of knowledge shared by different groups of learners, educators, community people, librarians, straight individuals, queer individuals and others. This contrasts with a one-directional "expert" approaches that re-perform educational cis-heteropatriarchy: in most cases, it is the educators who lead the creation of a curriculum and there is increased demands for including students in the feedback process (Malecka et al., 2020). The multifaceted knowledge shared in the ongoing design process allowed us to create content which spoke to the intersectionality of identities which is prevalent among learners. The materials provided were not mere educational materials for consumption within the classroom, but they can be used in real life situations, including to questions the cis-hetero white knowledge that dominates western education. We hope that both the LGBTQIA2+ Learning and Affirming Challenge itself (as a product), as well as the process we followed in developing it, can serve as models for future endeavors of queering education toward more equitable and inclusive learning spaces.

My own experience as a research and a program designer can attest to this potential, recognizing, in line with QCP, that learning is an ongoing and relational process. One of the important continuous learnings for me is about what the concept of queering means for me. While for this thesis, centering of queer individuals and queer knowledge played an important role in what was included in the curriculum for the Challenge, it also highlights the importance of intersectionality between various identities which can impact learning in the classroom. As such queering for me now tends to include centering of various identities that are traditionally

marginalized in educational setting and are important for both LGBTQIA2+ members and straight allies. Additionally, centering here does not mean only inclusion in content, but actually facilitating meaningful considerations of identities, positionalities, and their experiences within intersectional social systems.

A key theme throughout the paper was how when topics of “differences” are discussed in the classroom, there can be tension and defensiveness from school authorities, faculty, and students belonging to privileged groups. However, the flipside of defensiveness can be vulnerability and I learnt that vulnerability plays a very important role both in evoking emotions and also in the creation of ways which can help address those very emotions. A lot of the defensiveness can also arise from the socially created habitus of the individuals which they might at times not even be aware of. Thus, learning from a place of vulnerability which is an important aspect of QCP can be used to address these behaviors in the classroom so that these topics can be catered not only towards the queer community members but also highlight how it can be helpful for cis- and straight allies.

An idea that I played around with in the thesis is how learning which evokes a particular amount of discomfort in the classroom is not necessarily bad but can be a stage towards addressing topics which question the dominance of cis-heteronormativity in education and beyond. However, this can arise the question as to how we can ensure that both students and faculty are well equipped to address this discomfort. That is something which opens conversation around future areas of research into this topic. For me, both as a graduate student and also from the learning process during this research, one of the directions in answering this question would be to consider better mentoring of teachers. This may involve listing what some of these usually unaddressed topics are, recognizing the importance of engaging them in the classroom, and also

opening up avenues through which students and instructors can experience the discomfort but in a productive way. For example: allowing for an autoethnography inspired reflection at the end of this lesson could help faculty understand some of the aspects and ways that the students are feeling discomfort and that will allow them a chance to address this in the classroom and make it part of the learning process.

I also acknowledge that there was lot of qualitative data collected during the Challenge itself in the form of the Padlet reflections and the focus groups, which can be coded to provide further insight into how people make sense of the meanings and experiences of LGBTQIA2+ affirming learning. The focus group discussions, which were kept separate between graduate students and faculty, allowed me to further access some of the concepts presented in the Challenge and also reiterated how important a topic this is. Although I had not formally analyzed the data yet, a strong and repeated sentiment in these conversations was a frustration with the lack of availability of queer affirming learning materials especially ones which take into consideration the intersectionalities of identities present in the classroom and beyond. Insights from these focus groups also allowed me to further ponder upon ways in which the LGBTQIA2+ affirming learning materials can be developed so that their usage is not limited to particular disciplines but can be used to better learning processes in different disciplines. Future analysis of the qualitative data and future research explorations should offer a focused examination of this question.

In closing, I also want to highlight how this project was conceived from the personal experience of a queer, brown, feminine graduate teaching assistant (aka me). The journey to this thesis took more than two years and included the companionship and collaboration of so many individuals from different walks of life with a multitude of experiences, gender and sexual

identity, age groups and other intersectionality of identities. A project which aims to develop a LGBTQIA2+ affirming curriculum, thus, needs to involve difference as central to its creation, so that both the outcome and the learning process can impact one another just like in the case of the Challenge, which constantly evolved based on feedback. As for my own ongoing journey, I intend to use the lessons learnt in this ongoing process, and the collected data to further work on this topic and I hope to inspire others to join in this queer world-making.

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APPENDIX: Survey Instrument

You are about to begin a survey conducted as part of a research led by Tausif Sanzum Karim and faculty sponsor Liliana Herakova, Ph.D. and social sciences & humanities librarian Jen Bonnet, at the University of Maine. The purpose is to assess the impact of an LGBTQ+ affirming curriculum. By clicking the arrow to proceed to the survey, you are affirming that you are at least 18 years of age.

Demographic/ Identity Questionnaire

Q1 What is your current age range?

- 18-24
- 25-34
- 35-44
- 45-54
- 55-64
- 65-74
- 75-84
- 85 or older

Q2 You are completing this challenge primarily as...

- Student
- Educator
- Social worker
- Activist
- Advocate
- Community member (
- Other _____

Q3 What motivated you to participate in the LGBTQ+ Learning and Affirming Challenge?

Q4 What gender do you identify as?

- Cis-male
- Cis- female
- Non-binary
- Transgender
- Other _____
- Prefer not to answer

Q5 What sexual orientation do you identify with?

- Asexual
- Heterosexual/straight
- Gay
- Lesbian
- Bisexual

- Queer
- Quilbag
- Demisexual
- Pansexual
- Homosexual
- Aromantic
- Other _____
- Prefer not to answer

Q6 What is your religious affiliation

- Christianity
- Judaism
- Islam
- Buddhism
- Hinduism
- Paganism
- No religion
- Other _____
- Prefer not to answer

Q7 In your own words, what is your racial identification: _____

Q8 What was the size of your high school senior class? _____

Q9 How many LGBTQ+ people do you know?

- 0
- 1-5
- 6-10
- 11-15
- More and 15

Q10 How would you describe the quality of your relationship with the LGBTQ+ people you know? _____

Q11 Did you learn about LGBTQ+ related topics in high school?

- Yes
- No

Q12 If yes, can you please share what you recall learning about LGBTQ+ related topics?

Q13 Did your parents or guardians expose you to LGBTQ+ related topics?

- Yes
- No

Q14 If yes, can you please share what you recall about the topics you were exposed to?

Q15 Have you discussed LGBTQ+ related topics with another individual?

- Yes
- No

Q16 If yes, can you please share what topics of discussions did you have?

Part II: Allyship

For each statement below, indicate your agreement or disagreement as they apply to you (1 = strongly disagree; 5 = strongly agree)

1. I know about resources (for example: books, Web sites, support groups, etc.) for sexual and gender minority people in my area
2. I have developed the skills necessary to provide support if a sexual or sexual or gender minority person needs my help.
3. I know about resources for families of sexual and gender minority people.
4. I know of organizations that advocate for sexual and gender minority issues.
5. I keep myself informed through reading books and other media about various issues faced by sexual and gender minorities groups, in order to increase my awareness of their experiences
6. I am aware of the various theories of sexual and gender minority identity development
7. I am aware of policies in my workplace and/or community that affect sexual and gender minority groups.
8. If requested, I know where to find religious or spiritual resources for sexual and gender minority people.
9. I have engaged in efforts to promote more widespread acceptance of sexual and gender minority people.
10. I have taken a public stand on important issues facing sexual and gender minority people.
11. I try to increase my knowledge about sexual and gender minority groups.
12. I am comfortable with knowing that, in being an ally to sexual minority individuals, people may assume I am a sexual or gender minority person.
13. If I see discrimination against a sexual or gender minority person or group occur, I actively work to confront it
14. I regularly engage in conversations with sexual and gender minority people.
15. I am open to learning about the experiences of sexual and gender minority people from someone who identifies as an LGBTQ+ person.
16. I think sexual and gender minority groups are oppressed by society in the United States.
17. I think sexual and gender minority individuals face barriers in the workplace that are not faced by heterosexuals.
18. Sexual and gender minority adolescents experience more bullying than heterosexual adolescents.
19. Sexual and gender minority adolescents experience more depression and suicidal thoughts than heterosexual adolescents.

BIOGRAPHY OF THE AUTHOR

Tausif Sanzum is the media relations manager at American Friends Service Committee working primarily with international programs. He is also a journalist with works in the Huffington Post, Bangor Daily News, Washington Blade, amongst others writing primarily on LGBTQ topics. He has B.A in English Literature from BRAC University, Bangladesh. Tausif is a candidate for the Masters of Arts in Communication from the University of Maine in December 2022.