Advancing Equitable Education with Intersectional Approaches in Queer Theory
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Advancing Equitable Education with Intersectional Approaches in Queer Theory

Intersectional approaches in queer theory support the equitable design, implementation, and study of learning. They attend to identities and power structures at the intersections of race, gender, sexuality, coloniality, class, disability, and Indigeneity.

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Abstract

Intersectional queer theory is an orienting frame assembling traditions of thought that consider gender and sexuality at the intersection of other identities and structures. We consider intersectional queer theory through scholarship on queer of color critique, queer Indigenous and Two-Spirit theorizing, and queer disability studies. Using these frames, educators and researchers can design and study learning environments that affirm learners across marginalized identities and examine how interlocking power structures (re)produce dominant and subordinate relations.

Keywords

Queer theory, LGBTQ+, gender, sexuality, equity

Overview

To advance equitable education through the design and study of learning, we must consider gender and sexuality at the intersection of other identities and structures of power (Mayo & Blackburn, 2020) and recognize the many terms that people use to describe their sexual orientation, gender identity, and gender expression (GLAAD Media Reference Guide, n.d.). By gender and sexuality, we mean the social construction of gender and sexual norms and difference. Dominant gender and sexual norms are cisheteronormative, meaning they presume cisgender identity and heterosexuality to be normal and preferred ways of being. Learning environments often reproduce cisheteronormative constructions of difference that marginalize lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, Two-Spirit, plus other gender and sexual minoritized (LGBTQ2S+) learners. These forms of gender and sexual marginalization interlock with other forms of marginalization. By mobilizing intersectional approaches to queer theory, educators and researchers can design and study learning environments that affirm marginalized learners and examine interlocking structures of power.

Intersectional queer theory is an orienting frame that assembles multiple traditions of thought that explore oppression of gender and sexuality at the intersections of race, coloniality, class, disability, and Indigeneity. These theories provide analytic and design tools grounded in justice-oriented scholarship and activism. Below, we define and consider queer of color critique, queer Indigenous and Two-Spirit theorizing, and queer disability studies. While this primer examines intersections of identity and power structures with attention to race, class, coloniality, Indigeneity, and disability, its scope is limited by a primary focus on U.S. and Canadian contexts.

Queer of color (QOC) critique theorizes the social construction of domination that subordinates queer people of color, uplifting strategies of resistance in communities marginalized by race, class, gender, and sexuality (Brockenbrough, 2015). QOC critique encompasses an interdisciplinary range of theories that attend to specific identities and communities. In building theories that account for queer of color experience, QOC critique draws on and critiques other fields of thought. Women of color feminism and Black feminist thought by queer activists and writers, such as Audre Lorde, Gloria Anzaldúa, and Barbara Smith, offer important foundations (Hames-Garcia, 2011). In educational research, scholars have used the term “queer of color analysis” to center queer of color ways of knowing in knowledge production (McCreary, 2019).

Queer Indigenous and Two-Spirit theorizing is a frame we use to assemble numerous, evolving traditions of inquiry at the intersections of Indigeneity, gender, and sexuality. Queer Indigenous and Two-Spirit theorizing conceptualize constructions of gender and sexuality, such as the cisgender binary and hierarchical gender relations between men and women, as tools of ongoing settler colonial domination and erasure (Driskill, et al. 2011; Lugones, 2010). For instance, settler colonists treat queer Indigenous and Two-Spirit knowledges and practices as a threat to settler society. This body of work also emphasizes the need to understand Indigenous genders and sexualities as
unique categories and lifeways. Driskill and colleagues (2011) question the usefulness to Indigenous communities of theories not rooted in tribally specific traditions and not attentive to settler colonialism as an ongoing process.

Queer disability studies conceptualizes able-bodiedness as an intersecting oppressive norm and uplift knowledges in disabled queer, trans, and Black, Indigenous, and people of color (BIPOC) communities (Annamma et al., 2018; Piepzna-Samarasinha, 2018). This body of work critiques interlocking structures of power that define able-bodiedness, heterosexuality, and cisgender identity as natural and construct disabled and LGBTQ2S+ people as defective. Within education, Disability Critical Race (DisCrit) theorists have highlighted patterns of oppression at the intersection of able-bodiedness, white normativity, and cisheteronormativity (Annamma et al., 2022). Against these interlocking inequities, critical disability studies and disability justice activism highlight the need to learn from, and value, the knowledges and practices of Black, Indigenous, people of color (BIPOC) and LGBTQ2S+ disabled communities, which craft more just and ethical ways of being together (Piepzna-Samarasinha, 2018).

Intersectional queer theory can inform educational research and practice in various ways, including research design, analysis, and learning design. Intersectional queer theories can be used to design research projects by shaping the research questions, methods, and contexts of study. Beyond questions of identity, an intersectional queer theory approach to research brings to the foreground issues of power, such as how power relations shape learning and the researcher’s relations with participants. These traditions of thought can also offer conceptual frameworks and analytics for interpreting data and conducting analysis attentive to intersections of identity and power. Moreover, intersectional queer theory can inform the design of learning environments, for example, by attending to how power operates in the classroom implicitly and explicitly. Intersectional queer theory approaches in education move us toward dismantling asymmetrical power structures and imagining new ways of relating and structuring learning environments.

Because there are multiple ways to apply intersectional queer theory, we weave examples of research and practice through each key lesson below. We also urge readers to read widely and support local activists groups doing this work on the ground.
Key Lessons

Gender and Sexuality as Interlocking Structures

Research and design of learning environments, including those that focus on LGBTQ2S+ learners, must understand the categories of gender and sexuality as interconnected with culture, race, class, coloniality, disability, and nationality. Gender and sexuality are identities and structures of power that intersect with other structures, each of which has unique historical, social, material, and ideological dimensions. Scholars and educators do not need to address every intersection or axis of power in each project, but they should be prepared to consider it as salient.

Lizárraga and Cortez’s (2020) study of the digital pedagogies of queer Latinx drag queens on social media exemplifies research design and analysis that attends to intersections of identity and power. Through an analysis of interviews and digital presence, they argue that queer Latinx drag queens who cross boundaries of race, gender, sexuality, and digital realms enact playful, gritty cyborg jotería pedagogies—Queer Latinx ways of teaching that cross and blend digital and physical realms—that gesture toward a more just and possible future. Their work highlights possibilities for challenging divisions between informal and formal learning environments and disrupting interlocking white and cisgender normativities in learning. For example, one of their research participants, Persia, a San Francisco drag queen and a queer Latinx elementary school teacher, brings queer of color playfulness and humor to her satirical social media video performances as a drag queen (which serve as a kind of informal teaching environment) and to her formal elementary school teaching. In the video, Persia disrupts the gentrification of poor, queer of color communities in San Francisco. In the classroom, Persia introduces playful queer banter that flattens teacher/student hierarchies.

Queerness as Always Relevant

Queerness is relevant in all learning environments, not just in spaces dedicated to LGBTQ2S+-identifying learners. Oppressive norms rely upon constructing some identities and ways of being as normal in opposition to those constructed as wrong or defective. This means queerness is always present, even in cisgender normative learning environments that may try to repress it. Moreover, structures of coloniality and race also depend on oppressive norms of gender and sexuality, as framed within whiteness, as tools for domination, control, and erasure.

McWilliams (2016) exemplifies attention to queerness as always relevant, applying a queered approach to the participatory design of an elementary learning environment. In designing a 10-week gender diversity unit, McWilliams and his teacher co-designers created activities that would highlight for learners how heterosexual normativity permeates students’ everyday lives, erasing the gender and sexual variances of humans. In the gender line activity, students were asked to identify
experiences in their lives when people told them that they were not behaving appropriately for their designated gender, also referred to as “gender policing.” As a class, they discussed incongruencies between stated beliefs in gender equality and their experiences of gender normativity. In particular, they noticed and discussed how girls felt freer to engage in traditionally masculine behaviors, while boys were not allowed similar freedoms to engage in traditionally feminine behaviors.

**Queerness as Politics and Identities**

While some approaches to queer theory in education focus on LGBTQ2S+ identities, intersectional queer theories urge attention to politics alongside and beyond identities. A focus on identities often falls within a politics of inclusion that seeks representation within educational systems and structures, such as adding LGBTQ2S+ history to the Social Science curriculum. While these efforts are important, inclusion-based politics often leave oppressive systems intact rather than transformed. Intersectional approaches to queer theory pave the way for a politics of anti-assimilation or refusal that aims to dismantle and transform systems rather than seek inclusion within them. They also value everyday practices of negotiation, even as they strive for social transformation.

Shrodes’ (2020) multimodal analysis of LGBTQ+ reaction videos on YouTube exemplifies research and analysis of politics alongside identity. Mobilizing thinking from QOC critique, Shrodes considers how humor may expand political possibility for LGBTQ+ communities as a tool to subvert dominant ideologies of race, gender, and sexuality and gesture toward new ways of being in the world. For example, in one video, YouTube video creator Chase uses satire to critique YouTube’s advertising algorithms which had placed transphobic and homophobic content into the advertisements that played before his videos. Chase uses overstated gestures, such as shaking a pointed finger at the camera to mime an authoritarian figure and moving his fingers as if typing to symbolize the algorithms behind YouTube’s ad placements, to satirize and problematize the algorithmic processes that perpetuate dominant ideologies in the form of transphobic and homophobic content. Shrodes suggests that English language arts classes could connect with the everyday practices of students in teaching critical media literacies that disrupt power by bringing LGBTQ+ reaction videos into the classroom for analysis and to encourage students to create their own critical multimodal compositions.

**Learning to Practice the Work of Liberation Projects**

As intersectional queer theory offers analytics grounded in social justice, learning sciences scholarship can explain how learners practice these principles. Intersectional queer theories often uplift vernacular and activist ways of being, knowing, and doing through which multiply marginalized communities survive, resist, and transform power structures. Embedded within these lifeways are complex understandings of power, nuanced meaning-making of dominant ideologies,
and dynamic theories of change. Learning sciences scholarship can trace how members of communities come to learn these complex and meaningful knowledges and practices through participation in purpose-driven activities and communities.

Uttamchandani’s (2020) multi-year critical ethnographic study with Chroma, a community-based group for LGBTQ+ youth advocating for equitable education, illustrates the conditions and processes that lead to political learning. Uttamchandani develops the concept of educational intimacy as “the kinds of relationships built among people who are working together toward a shared social vision, particularly when that relationship allows for inclusive advancement of group-level goals” (2020, p. 53). He employs the concept to describe how youth supported collaborative decision-making and building a more just future according to how they hope to be treated. For teachers who support Genders & Sexualities Alliances (GSAs) in their schools, Uttamchandani demonstrates a way to encourage students to not only imagine ways to educate their schools about LGBTQ+ identities but also to develop ways of working together within their GSA that foster more just processes that may be counter to their daily experiences of schooling as oppressive and authoritarian.

Learning about Gender and Sexuality as Complex Systems

An intersectional queer approach frames the body, the individual, and interactions with others and institutions as complex and emergent processes. In complex systems, interactions between individual components of the system give rise to collective, system-level behaviors that are often difficult to predict simply by thinking about the behavior of each individual. In the context of gender and sexuality, the emergent, fluid natures of gender and sexuality emerge from many individual factors and social, historical, and institutional interactions where attention to any single factor cannot determine the outcome. Yet, societal norms suggest that gender and sexuality are individual “traits” that are biologically determined.

Paré et al. (2020a) demonstrated how multi-agent simulations of gender and sexuality-based marginalization could open up new ways for teaching and learning about gender and sexual experiences as complex, emergent, multilevel phenomena involving dynamic interactions between individuals, groups, and institutions. Paré et al. (2020b) designed Flocking QT Stories, a multiagent simulation that illustrates how structural (macro-level) phenomena such as gender and sexuality-based marginalization and resilience can manifest through individual-level interactions between computational agents. Flocking QT Stories is available online and includes a guide with reflective questions for engaging with the model. The code is also publicly available on GitHub for remixing, which could be used, for example, by a high school computer science class to engage with an example of queer code and coding practices.
Issues

Centering Blackness and Indigeneity

Within intersectional and anti-racist approaches to queer theory, it remains important to bring to the foreground Black queer theories (e.g., Quare theory) and Indigenous Queer Theories (e.g., Two-Spirit theories). Intersectional approaches name and disrupt the whiteness of queer theory as a disciplinary formation, which is necessary and ongoing work within queer studies in education. Yet, more is needed to center Black and Indigenous experiences, which can also intersect, and dismantle anti-Blackness and settler coloniality as interlocking structures. Moves to center Black and Indigenous queer epistemologies and ways of being in the research and design of learning may be one way to approach this tension. For instance, Lance McCready (2019) has called for theorizing grounded in Black queer ways of knowing, being, and doing.

Understanding Transnational and Diasporic Theories

The intersectional approaches to queer theory we have reviewed here primarily speak to U.S. and Canadian contexts, which occludes attention to transnational and diasporic queer theories, as well as the workings of empire and coloniality across the globe. Though U.S. women of color feminism and decolonial feminism meaningfully shape queer of color critique and queer Indigenous and Two-Spirit theorizing, future reviews may further discuss queer theories outside of U.S. and Canadian contexts, transnational and diasporic theories, and queer theories of empire and colonialism in global contexts. Moreover, scholars should strive to explicate how transnational and diasporic queer theories can be made salient for questions of culture, language, identity, and learning in U.S. and Canadian contexts.

Attending to Asymmetrical Relations of Power

An intersectional approach to gender and sexuality highlights interlocking power structures outside and within LGBTQ2S+ spaces. Relations of power along lines of race, nationality, ability, and class can create asymmetrical power structures within LGBTQ2S+ spaces that marginalize queer and trans BIPOC and disabled people. These power relations are embedded in everyday interactions and structures of schooling and can appear to those not marginalized by them as “business as usual.” For instance, GSAs and other LGBTQ+ affinity spaces can design participation structures that privilege white and able-bodied queer members, thereby marginalizing BIPOC and disabled LGBTQ+ participants. In predominantly white and upper/middle-class spaces, structures of power are at play that may not be visible to those who benefit from these structures. Attending to asymmetrical relations of power thus requires explicit attention to marginalized people’s
experiences with power and oppression. It also requires attending to how power is distributed inside and outside of LGBTQ2S+ spaces.

Critiquing the ‘Family’ as a Normative Institution

Families and communities tend to be understood and framed (intentionally or unintentionally) in normative ways that center biological relations, cisgender-heterosexual-reproductivity, and normative ideas about gender relations within family and community structures. Notions of the family and community are also framed within white and able-bodied normative ideals that shape values around who is seen as a “good” family. Intersectional queer approaches challenge normative frames of family and community and open up new possibilities for recognizing the importance of intergenerational learning, queer families, chosen families, and more. For example, queer and trans ancestors or elders might not be biologically related but are recognized as people within queer and trans communities who have valuable intergenerational knowledge to pass on to younger community members.

Addressing Pushback in Formal Learning

Educators and researchers who bring queer and intersectional lenses into formal learning environments such as schools may encounter pushback against efforts to change oppressive systems and structures. Schooling can be a site of social reproduction that reinforces dominant social norms and relations of power, marginalizing nondominant students and critical thought along intersecting lines of race, coloniality, class, gender, sexuality, Indigeneity, and disability. In doing work within formal learning spaces, it is crucial to identify and support students, community leaders, caregivers, teachers, and administrators leading equitable education efforts. Partnering with existing efforts, and offering resources and assistance for partners to attend to intersections of identity and power where needed, will lead to more effective and sustained changes.

Learning as Language Evolves

The terminologies that describe queer and trans identities, experiences, and politics matter to the people who use them to understand and represent themselves and to find a community where they feel recognized. Terminology also changes over time and across communities. For instance, queer is a term that was used as a slur in U.S. and Canadian contexts but has since been reclaimed by the LGBTQ+ community. Initially, it was reclaimed by queer activists as a politically radical and deliberately provocative term. Since, it has become an umbrella term to describe LGBTQ+ identities, histories, and experiences. That said, people who experienced “queer” as a slur used against them may not feel that the term has been reclaimed or is appropriate for them. Queer is also a term that may not adequately represent BIPOC LGBTQ2S+ experiences. Within intersectional approaches to queer theory, terms should describe and engage with experiences rather than define or limit what they may become. New words may yet arise that open up new
ways of understanding gender and sexuality as intersecting identities and interlocking power structures. As such, scholars and educators must continue to learn and remain open to change.

References


Resources


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