



Nelson, Cynthia D. (2009) *Sexual Identities in English Language Education: Classroom Conversations*. London: Routledge.

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Sexual Identities in English Language Education provides readers with an unflinching yet sensitive look into the intersections of sexuality, teaching, and learning. In its pages, Cynthia Nelson manages to solidify approximately two decades of scholarship pertaining to the subject. Her own original empirical research presents well-considered insights for teachers and researchers involved in all forms of education. Moving beyond description, she aims to map out ways in which the learning of students and the professionalism of teachers can be enhanced through a refusal to steer clear of overt classroom discussions of sexual diversity. Inevitably some will ask what relevance sexuality has to a language classroom. While reflecting on this question, I was reminded of an essay by Ruth Frankenberg (2001) in which she points out that in the context of the USA at least, “whiteness” is often considered invisible, yet it is always highly visible to non-white people (as are its privileges). In like manner, when attention is turned to the pedagogic implications of the social

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dynamics in language classrooms, heterosexuality *and its sociocultural pervasiveness* can be invisible to many. As Nelson's findings reinforce, heterosexuality is "clamorously apparent" (see Kitzing, 2006) to non-heterosexual students and teachers, and it is omnipresent in its masquerade as society (Warner, 1993). Thus to suggest that sexuality has no place in language classrooms is to show ignorance of the hidden heterosexual curriculum and to remain unaware of an important aspect of sociocultural literacy. Nelson's empirical study skilfully demonstrates that ignoring sexuality sets limits on language learning; limits that can often be traced back to erroneous assumptions on the part of educators.

In the introductory chapter (*Queering Language Education*), Nelson sets out to investigate how language teaching practices are changing in response to globalised sexual diversity. Aligning herself with queer theory, she stresses that sexual identities are "processes rather than properties" of a person (p. 23) and thus contingent: "not facts but acts" (Nelson, 1999). She emphasises that 'sexual-identity inquiry' is the best way to engage students of diverse cultural backgrounds with lesbian and gay issues in language classes and positions this approach against what she calls gay inclusion. She covers a lot of ground in this chapter, deftly summarising poststructuralist ideas about identity as well as pulling queer theory down to earth for uninitiated readers. In this chapter and at the start of parts two and three, her transparency brings forth tantalising descriptions of methodology which will be useful to other researchers who will doubtless be inspired by this study. The review of prior research also constitutes a valuable resource.

Part two (*Teachers' Perspectives*) presents findings from focus group discussions that Nelson conducted with ESOL teachers at a conference in the USA, most of whom had also taught (or were based) in other countries. It opens with chapter two (*Teaching Multisexual Student Cohorts*) in which Nelson finds that many well-meaning teachers think gay and lesbian students have only occasionally sat in their classrooms. This perception might demonstrate misreadings of culturally diverse sexual identity performances, and also misses students who might be very deft at concealing their non-normative sexualities. Nelson urges teachers never to presume a "monosexualized" world either in the classroom or beyond, and to frame class activities so that all

students will feel confident about sharing their perspectives. Here Nelson convincingly demonstrates the limitations of essentialist notions of sexual identity, in which ‘gay’ and ‘lesbian’ are treated as stable and unproblematic. Anti-gay behaviours in the classroom certainly need to be addressed, and the inclusion of homosexuality as a topic is better than avoidance. However Nelson shows that these well-intentioned efforts can go astray because they ultimately result in the ‘othering’ of non-heterosexuality. She then turns to queer theory to find solutions. Chapter three (*Engaging with Gay and Lesbian Themes*) shifts attention to the inclusion of lesbian/gay subject matter in the classroom. The data and analysis in this section are revealing and sobering, with Nelson arguing that the erasure of gay/lesbian/queer perspectives from curricula and classrooms involves ‘feats’ of avoidance and often patronizing assumptions about what students of various cultures can handle. Also, the exclusion of sexuality as a topic of discussion serves merely to normalise heterosexuality rather than desexualise the classroom. As will become clear below, this stance limits language learning. Nelson asserts that sexual diversity can be approached with an “interrogating spirit” (from Canagarajah, 2006) so that English learning is enhanced for all. If the real aim is to promote the learning of language and culture (rather than to promote tolerance), it becomes more feasible to explore sexual themes.

Attention in chapter 4 (*Tackling Homophobia, Heterosexism, and Heteronormativity*) turns to how teachers can deal with the expression during class time of negative attitudes on the subject of sexual diversity. The focus group data shows that teachers found heterosexist comments from students hurtful or disturbing, and this often led to subsequent avoidance of the topic of sexuality. Forbidding ‘offensive’ comments has little effect if students are unaware or unsure of what constitutes such a breach. In line with queer theory, Nelson maintains that teachers must address *heteronormativity* because it lies at the source of discriminatory attitudes. The burning question of just how to address such a slippery problem as heteronormativity is answered, and the solution comes back again to critical inquiry as a learning tool. Nelson adroitly makes the case that linking negative comments to language and discourse can be highly productive pedagogically without teachers being culturally hegemonic about the issue of sexuality. Chapter 5 (*Negotiating Sexual Identities in the Classroom*) closes part two by taking a direct

look at the negotiation of teachers' own sexual identities in class. The myth that only gay/lesbian teachers can 'authentically' teach subject matter related to gay/lesbian experience is debunked firmly. In addition, Nelson (citing Morgan, 2004) posits that teacher identity can become pedagogy. The important point is made that heterosexual teachers 'come out' as straight regularly (via wedding rings and references to romantic partners) and the discussions which result are inevitably considered unproblematic opportunities for language learning. On the other hand, coming out as gay or lesbian can be both socially constructive and constraining due to the hypersexualization of 'gayness'. Nelson suggests that whether or not teachers choose to name their own sexual identities, a productive focus could be the linguistic nuances and consequences of how identities are communicated. Thus queer inquiry again provides a way forward.

Part Three (*Inside Three Classes*) is based on Nelson's observations of classroom conversations. Student perspectives begin to emerge alongside those of teachers, and it becomes obvious that the two can diverge sharply. Chapter six (*"Not Animal in the Zoo": Tony's Class*) focuses on a class undergoing a unit on 'lesbian/gay culture'. Nelson outlines many lost opportunities for learning, but she is careful to say that her goal is to be *constructively* critical. She suggests that it might be more pedagogically useful to focus discussion on how gay and lesbian people are represented than 'what they are like.' This approach depersonalises things somewhat, diffusing tensions, but more importantly it is likely to kindle interest. Additionally, shared experiences or points of view need to be critically analysed and reflected on so that everyone is given a chance to explore the issues and challenge assumptions. These themes are well supported in chapter seven (*Invisible Outings: Gina's Class*). Gina stimulates discussion without framing gay and lesbian topics as controversial, and this circumvents othering. Neither does she elicit students' personal experiences, a move which makes it easier for students to speak out without fear of reprisal. She does this by framing discussion around the functions that gay communities might serve *from the point of view of their members* (i.e. students take "a gay vantage point"). Another problem identified is that sexuality is often spoken of through euphemism and innuendo. Indirect communication is seen to have its place in the language classroom, but these students often fail to grasp subtexts. Even when Gina comes out as lesbian, Nelson's post-class interviews

show that at least one student has misunderstood. Nelson argues that teachers might have to be more candid than usual when talking about sexual diversity amongst learners. Finally in chapter eight (*Foreign Meanings: Roxanne's Class*), further evidence emerges for the merits of an inquiry approach. Roxanne's lesson reinforces that sexual diversity is a topic that students of diverse cultural backgrounds are comfortable discussing, provided that the focus is placed on meaning making and that self-disclosure of sexual identity is optional. Unique to this chapter is the perspective of Pablo, a gay class member who participated in a class discussion about lesbians (which arose from a picture of two women holding hands). He reports later that although his contribution was limited, he gained great joy from the discussion: "I enjoyed EVERYTHING in that class [discussion]...every every word, you know" (p. 194). Pablo provides evidence that gay and lesbian students are in our language classrooms, greatly affected (often silently) by curricula both formal and hidden. He has invested in both gay identity and English, and the two cannot easily be separated without risk of disengagement from language learning (cf King, 2008; Norton, 2000).

Chapter 9 (*Framing Sexual Diversity as a Pedagogic Resource*) concludes the book by emphasising that a "discourse inquiry" approach is the best way to frame sexual diversity as subject matter in a language classroom, as opposed to what Nelson calls "counselling" and "controversies" approaches. Discourse inquiry allows the *challenges* of sexual discussions to be understood as *opportunities* for learning of language and culture. Perhaps the most important of Nelson's messages is that sociosexual literacy is part of culture, and in a globalised world it behoves language teachers to assist students in developing some skills in this area.

This book will be indispensable for educators contemplating the facilitation of sexual literacy, whether that learning takes the form of language lessons, sexuality education programmes, or teachable moments across the curriculum. Nelson is wise to emphasise that her suggestions will not apply to every teaching/learning situation, but at least now teachers have somewhere to start. I must say that reading this book has at times been an emotional experience for me. As a gay man who has spent more than a decade teaching in ESOL (and other)

classrooms, I found the courage of these teachers inspiring; the courage to deal with sexual diversity in the classroom and to place those efforts under Nelson's microscope. I empathised with their fears and felt déjà vu concerning the challenges they faced in integrating topics of sexual diversity into their lessons. Most refreshing of all, however, has been the constructive and expert advice of Cynthia Nelson, who succeeds in identifying realistic and exciting guidelines for the task.

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About the Reviewer

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