WEARING THE RAINBOW TRIANGLE:
THE EFFECT OF OUT LESBIAN TEACHERS
AND LESBIAN TEACHER SUBJECTIVITIES
ON STUDENT CHOICE OF TOPICS, STUDENT WRITING,
AND STUDENT SUBJECT POSITIONS
IN THE FIRST-YEAR COMPOSITION CLASSROOM

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This dissertation examines out lesbian teachers in the college composition classroom from a viewpoint of feminist teacher research and “queer geography”. Employing composition history, the ideological erasure of lesbian teacher subjectivities in the composition classroom is outlined. Case studies of lesbian teachers and students in lesbian teachers’ composition classrooms indicate in a preliminary way that students’ choice of writing topics, student writing and student subject positions are affected by the presence of out lesbian composition teachers.
To Edward, Le gra do mo mhic.
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My beloved son, Edward Daniel Simpson, has been my biggest fan and supporter throughout what he came to call the “disorientation” process. When he was seven years old, I stood with him at a bus stop in the early morning blackness of a Michigan winter, and he asked me which doctoral program I thought I would go to. I said, “My heart says that we are going to Bowling Green.” He shot right back, “Well, Mom, my heart says I will go wherever you go.” He was eight years old when I tore him from a wonderful public Montessori school where he was loved and appreciated and brought him with me to my Ph.D. program. He is now 15 years old and a sophomore in high school. He has suffered many sacrifices in the intervening years, the poverty inherent in having a mother in graduate school, living in tiny apartments, eating far too much “cheesy mac” and wearing secondhand clothes. Most of all, he put up with his mother saying every summer, “I have to work on my dissertation.” Through it all, he handled it, even as a little boy, with equanimity, joy, humor and grace, just as he handles it now. His natural happiness and hilarious sense of humor, his deep kindness and compassion continue to make me a much better person than I would otherwise be. I will always be proud of him, more than of any doctoral degree. This dissertation is dedicated to Edward.

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Introduction: The project’s position

In all parts of my Ph.D. work—classes, doctoral language, preliminary examinations, prelims defense—I have felt that I am standing at the very beginning of my knowledge. I have fought the creeping doubts that I, a non-traditional, older, woman, single mother, lesbian, student do not belong in the academy. I have chosen instead to integrate all those various subject positions by learning what I can, asking the questions which both expose my ignorance and bring light to my personal and professional projects. In the same way I stand now before this doctoral project, which concerns the subjectivities of lesbian first-year composition teachers, a group who have long been silent and silenced. As my friend Jane Rosser says, I “live in hope” of contributing new knowledge through an examination of the multiple subject positions and subjectivities that lesbian teachers bring to first-year composition classrooms, and the ways in which those lesbian subjectivities affect student subject positions and student writing in the composition classroom.

In my search for information on this project, which stands on the edges of new knowledge and on the margins of several disciplines, I have discovered that only a few works have been published in the area of teacher subjectivities. McLeod (1997), Haswell (1996), and Henning (1995) are several examples in the field of composition studies; Menges and Kulieke (1984) is one study in higher education. None of these works were intended to address sexual orientation. In the area of the subjectivities of lesbian teachers, even less has been published, and I must acknowledge as one of those pioneers
Harriet Malinowitz, whose book, *Textual orientations: Lesbian and gay students and the making of discourse communities* (1995), has opened possibilities for my project and many other projects in composition studies, as has the work in literature of George Haggerty and Bonnie Zimmerman in *Professions of desire* (1995), among others. It is important to point out, too, that there are many thoughtful, scholarly conference papers on issues of lesbian and gay teacher subjectivities being given at the Conference on College Composition and Communication, at conferences in higher education, in literature, in education, and in lesbian and gay studies which are not appearing in the journals in these and other fields. While gate keeping may be an issue here, my hope, as a composition studies/rhetoric scholar, is that the cross disciplinary work necessary in such projects will be increasingly recognized in the scholarly journals in many fields, in particular, in composition studies and rhetoric.

**The scope of this project**

In my own project, it seems important to articulate that the focus is on lesbian, rather than on gay male, teachers, though this focus eliminates some of the literature connecting sexual orientation and teacher subjectivities. There are actually more conference papers and articles on gay male teacher subjectivities than on my topic, and those works have been instructive. I have come to believe through reading this material, however, that gay male teachers, much more directly and often than lesbian teachers, face issues concerning societal myths of predatory behavior and of “recruiting,” which produce a different, though linked, set of concerns than those of lesbian teachers. Also, Tyson (1999) notes, in her discussion of the nature of lesbian critical inquiry, “the questions, ‘What is a lesbian?’ and ‘What constitutes a lesbian literary text?’ belong to a
self-questioning form of theoretical activity not generally performed by gay criticism” (p.324). I have, therefore, decided to exclude from this project gay male teachers, and have not addressed issues of bisexual and transgender teachers. While the subjectivities of bisexual teachers and transgender teachers also deserve scholarly work, and it is my hope that this project opens possibilities for such work, I must acknowledge that these possibilities fall outside the scope of this project.

Lesbian teachers face many issues in the first-year composition classroom, including the historic invisibility of sexual orientation, of lesbian teachers, and even of the articulation of any personal, political, ideological, ethnic, gendered, or religious subject positions. As teachers, especially those of us trained in schools of education, we have inculcated the norm of “teacher neutrality” which at best is a polite fiction, to my mind, and at the worst a denial of a co-existing culture of “teacher authenticity.” With Adrienne Rich (1980),

I am concerned …how and why women’s choice of women as passionate comrades, life partners, co-workers, lovers, community has been crushed, invalidated, forced into hiding and disguise; and second, the virtual or total neglect of lesbian existence in a wide range of writings, including feminine scholarship (p. 159).

While Rich was writing more than twenty years ago, the fact that the lives of lesbians and lesbian teachers remain invisible is telling. The result of this erasure is a deep professional and personal conflict for lesbian teachers, resulting in an extremely high psychological, personal and professional cost. This cost includes constantly negotiated issues surrounding choosing to be or come out, choosing to adopt some degree of
outness, and deciding to remain closeted, pressures from university departments, school boards, administrators, parents, and students, personal safety issues, and job security.

In order to understand these multi-layered concerns and to begin to examine subjectivities of lesbian teachers, this project is, by necessity, a cross-disciplinary project. Feminist concerns raised and examined across the disciplines and particularly in women’s studies, queer studies, composition studies, education, and cultural studies must be integrated if the knowledge and methodologies generated in each of these fields can be used to inform the pedagogical needs of lesbian teachers. I argue too that these new knowledges and methodologies are also important to an understanding of the subject positions of all teachers and students-- lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgendered, and straight, and will help teachers to understand the subject positions and types of writing students choose to adopt in composition classrooms.

I want to address, in this discussion of the disciplines intersecting and grounding this project, why I have chosen to use the documentation guidelines of the American Psychological Association (APA). The strengths of this style are: its ability to provide, with the use of the in-text year, an historical context for cited research; its prevalent use in the field of education, women’s studies, cultural studies, and queer studies (fields which all intersect with composition studies in this project and whose professional journals require this style, as do some composition studies journals); and its immediate application to this heavily pedagogical project. I acknowledge APA’s elimination of first names in the bibliography, which can serve to erase the physical markers of women’s scholarship, but am including these first names or appropriate accompanying pronouns in the text, as a way of acknowledging women’s research. This acknowledgement seems
appropriate in a dissertation in which the erasure and disclosure of lesbian teacher subjectivities is integral.

CHAPTER 1:

Statement of the research question and related avenues

This project proposes a beginning examination of the ways in which the subject position/s of a lesbian teacher affect student subject positions, student writing, and pedagogical approaches in the first-year university composition classroom. The qualifier “beginning” stands as a marker signifying my sense that, in the field of composition pedagogy, this contribution is still at the earliest stages of what needs to be researched about teacher subjectivities, and specifically, lesbian teacher subjectivities. As such, I clearly identify this dissertation as a combination of theory making, composition studies history, and teacher research. This last, of necessity, generates ideas and practices from the experiences of a self-selected group of lesbian teachers, of students in my composition classes, and from my own experience as an out lesbian writing teacher. The scholarly positioning in composition studies of “teacher research” provides a geographical space for this project, which is also a piece of teacher-research. By acknowledging this composition studies approach and its usefulness in knowledge making, I also acknowledge the importance of taking responsibility for the effect I have on the research I carry out and on the students with whom I work (which, after all, is the whole point of lesbian teacher subjectivities). As a way of recognizing my own effect on the project, from now on I include myself (my subjective “self” or “selves”) when I talk about lesbian teachers, using terms such as “we” and “our” (Bissex, 1990). It seems, when such a “great cloud of witnesses,” professional, dedicated, lesbian teachers, give
voice to their own experiences and research, that it is a humbling privilege to be a part of that number.

In pursuing the connections generated by a research topic of this nature, I want to explore the ways in which the ideological stances of prevailing pedagogies affect teacher attempts to “decenter” their authority and neutralize personal/ideological stances in the classroom. By “decenter,” I refer to the efforts of teachers influenced by Freirean and other empowerment pedagogies to inhabit teaching subject positions that seek to delimit teacher authority and to transfer educational power to the hands of students. Nel Noddings (1999) and others, drawing on the early work of Carol Gilligan (1982, 1993), have posited an “ethics of caring” and a stance of “authenticity” which has permeated teacher-education programs in this country for many years—this ethic, as outlined by Noddings (1999) has led many teachers on all levels to a present position of ideological neutrality in the classroom. Teachers are taught to silence any ideological/ personal/ political stances as they enter the classroom door, with the assumption that, in fact, those stances are erased, and at the same time, are urged to be “authentic” as real persons to their students.

I argue, weaving theories of subjectivity, teacher-research, and composition history, that such stances which silence ideological positions and pose neutrality are fictional at best. In reality, a “neutral” stance erases, submerges, subverts, and ignores the subject position of all teachers, and, more specifically and dangerously, lesbian teachers’ subject positions and our effect on the subject positions of all students and on their writing. Decentering authority and neutralizing our subject positions (which may also serve as a normative way to claim authenticity) as lesbian teachers disrupts our
classroom effectiveness and dismantles our authenticity, the very trait Noddings (1999)--
and also teacher education programs--hope to foster in teachers.

By jeopardizing and conflicting **who we are** (our professional/ personal/
pedagogical/ ideological selves) as lesbian teachers, the fiction of ideologically
decentering and neutralizing our subjectivities also supports continued erasure of student
subject positions, in the ways in which students choose topics, choose to disclose/hide in
their writing. Writing theory and research show, repeatedly, the connection between
student choice of topic and of personal investment in their writing as crucial to student
writing success. Calkins (1986), Macrorie (1984) and Reif and Davis (1984) are a few of
some early expressivist statements of this now widely held construct in composition
studies, and Lynn Bloom (2000) offers a current examination. When lesbian, gay, and
straight teachers attempt to erase our own multiple subject positions, lesbian, gay, and
straight students, who make up every classroom, experience the erasure of their own
layers of identity and subject position. Such a stance is just one step, albeit an
unconscious one on the part of many teachers (lesbian, gay or straight), from telegraphing
homophobia to students.

An historical examination of the ideological stances of current and past
pedagogies undergirds this project. The history of modern composition pedagogies,
beginning with the expressivist pedagogies of Elbow (1973) and others, and moving
through the ethics of caring (Noddings, 1990; Gilligan, 1982; Belenky et. al., 1986),
process writing (Shaughnessy, 1977; Bartholomae, 1985; Lindeman, 1995; Flower and
Hayes, 1980; Hairston, 1982), empowerment (Freire, 1970; Shor, 1987, 1992; hooks,
1994), critical literacy (Giroux, 1997, 1992; Sleeter and McLaren, 1995), writing across

**Definition of key terms**

Central to the positioning of this project are definitions of key terms and phrases. I want simply to present and define terms because they are used in certain ways in the project. Part of this definitional work must include the ways in which these terms are problematic for and problematized by lesbian-identified teachers, including issues of essentialist vs. socially constructed ideas of sexual identity, fluidity of gender performance and sexuality, and the effects of heterosexist “normativity” and assumptions on the lives of lesbian teachers.

At this point, I want to pause and define terms I have already used in this introduction. Some scholars will argue that my choice of definitions are essentialist in nature, what Fuss (1989) calls “a belief in the real, true, essence of things, the invariable and fixed properties which define the “what ness” of a given entity” (xx) because I want to provide working definitions which make sense of and add layers of meaning to our real lives as lesbians and as lesbian teachers. Given Fuss’s definition of “essentialism,” these terms are essentialist, in many respects. If a definition is labeled essentialist because we as lesbians see those meanings as a “reality truth” that resonates with our own lived
experiences of what it means to be “women-loving women”—this last, in itself, is a good working definition of “lesbian”—many of us are, as I am, willing to accept this as a working definition. With Baudrillard (1988), I argue for a “theory of the real,” in which theory and “reality” are together generative:

If it [theory] no longer aspires to a discourse of truth, theory must assume the form of a world from which truth has withdrawn…. The status of theory could not be anything but a challenge to the real. Or, rather, their relation is one of respective challenge. For the real itself is without doubt only a challenge to theory…. (p. 98).

For the purposes of this project with regard to the subjectivities of lesbian teachers, I hope it will be helpful to readers and to lesbian teachers to define lesbian teachers in ways we might define ourselves if asked, realizing that those answers will vary greatly.

For many lesbians, the societal prejudices and difficulties we face, often every day, preclude the luxury of thinking in theoretical terms. As Fuss (1989) points out, Essentialism can be deployed effectively in the service of both idealist and materialist, progressive and reactionary, mythologizing and resistant discourses (p. xii).

If gay identity rhetoric is viewed as a movement involved with the procurement of basic human rights in our society, its “resistant” discourse can be effective as a sometimes (and often essentialist) one. Further, I make the rhetorical move of underscoring the both very real chasm between words used by lesbians and by the gay community in description of our real lives and the ways these descriptors are used in scholarly work by providing and interweaving what I will call here “working definitions” with theoretical definitions. In
Chapter 2, I extrapolate that double strand with a more theoretical discussion of these definitions as they relate to the discourses and subjectivities of lesbians, lesbian teachers, and the fictional “neutral” position of teachers inculcated in many schools of education.

Luce Irigaray, herself heterosexual, in her essay, “This Sex Which is Not One” (1977), while certainly not about lesbians or lesbianism except in the most theoretical sense, indicates a position which helps to form an important theoretical and practical assumption of this project. This assumption is that the very word “lesbian” introduces an assumed set of sexualities, of possibilities into the nature of women’s desire:

Their [women’s] desire is often interpreted, and feared, as a sort of insatiable hunger, a voracity that will swallow you whole (p.366). As Irigaray notes, and here she speaks directly about an all-encompassing “woman,” merely to name the nature of our desires is socio-culturally transgressive. Linking what are the dominant cultural taboos in American society against speaking of women’s sexualities and the nature of our desire, whether lesbian, straight, or other possibilities of enactment, with lesbianism, “the love which dares not speak its name,” and “lesbian” with “teacher,” this last its own moral, socio-cultural construction, delivers a transgressive discourse that is most often erased or diminished by what Vikki Krane (2001) calls our “homonegative” attitudes. Irigaray (1977) argues with regard to “woman,”

[Women’s desire] really involves a different economy more than anything else, one that upsets the linearity of a project, undermines the goal-object of desire, diffuses the polarization toward a single pleasure, disconcerts fidelity to a single discourse (p. 366).
For Irigaray then, the discussion of “woman” and desire is less transgressive, less binary, and more disruptive and problematic to unified notions of “woman.” In further discussion of the term “lesbian,” Rich (1993) defines the speaker in Pratt’s poems as “lesbian; her sexual hungers are for women” (p.155), a good working definition, as is “woman-loving woman” (not Rich’s phrase). While perhaps a more essentialist descriptor, such a definition is a practically useful one for lesbians, since it works at a basic level to describe the nature of our desire, as Lois Tyson (1999) notes,

A lesbian…is a woman whose sexual desire is directed toward women (p. 324).

Tyson argues for this definition as a more practical and inclusive definition, allowing us to recognize lesbian existence even within the confines of heterosexual marriage (p. 324).

Concurrently, she acknowledges the complicated constructions of lesbian subjectivities by theorists, such as Rich, that a lesbian is a “woman-identified woman” (p. 325).

A “woman-identified woman” [I have traced this definition to a document by the Radicalesbians (1971) entitled “The woman-identified woman,” in Crow, 2000] is one who identifies her lot in life with another woman, is a woman who may or may not live with another woman, yet is committed to that woman in a wide range of ways, is a woman who may not be partnered or even seeing another woman yet identifies her desire as woman-loving, is a woman who is emotionally and sexually available only to other women, is a woman who does not or will not consider men as viable emotional/sexual partners. She may call herself a “woman-loving woman” or a “woman-identified woman” (which last could also be used by women whose sexual orientation is heterosexual) rather than a “lesbian.” The construction of “lesbian” for women now in their 60’s and older is...
fraught with complications reflective of the outright persecution of lesbians in times even more dangerous than the present, and they may be hesitant or unwilling to use the descriptor of “lesbian.” Sometimes, a woman in these generations might describe herself as a “woman who loves another woman” and purposely vacates the multiple levels of meaning, connotative and denotative, of the term “lesbian.”

Lois Tyson (1999) provides a useful working definition of the terms “subject,” “subjectivity,” and “subject position.” The idea of “subjectivity,” for Tyson, is “one’s own selfhood, the way one views oneself and others, which develops from one’s life experiences” (p. 94). For Tyson (1999), such a definition is a feminist project:

To claim that we are objective, as patriarchy encourages men to do, is merely to blind ourselves to the ways in which we are not so (p. 94).

Michel Foucault (1972) defines the “subject” as

...not the speaking consciousness, not the author of the formulation, but a position that may be filled in certain conditions by various individuals (p. 15).

Diana Fuss (1989), building on Foucault (1972) in a discussion of social constructionism defines “subject-positions” as the “notion of ‘where I stand,’” and argues that this idea “can help us to read texts and to textualize readers” (pp. 29-31). Fuss’s definition adds the layer of fluidity and change in the performance of what are our often multiplicities of self. This does not imply schizophrenia or a lack of unity; rather it lays the groundwork for lesbian teachers as human beings and as subjects with subject positions, to define us in more fluid and performative ways.

The idea of “performance” and “performativity” is central to this project, since lesbian teachers do, and often must, “perform” to continue the precarious balance of
safety, job retention, student and parent perceptions, personal authenticity, and power
issues in schools and in the academy. Aspects of lesbian teacher subjectivities with regard
to “performance” and “performativity” are grounded in the work of Judith Butler (1990,
1993) and Peggy Phelan (1993) and are discussed in Chapter 2. Toril Moi (1999), in her
analysis of Judith Butler’s discussion of “gender performativity” Butler (1990) offers this:

…”When a critic speaks of “gender performativity” she intends to oppose “gender
essentialism”; that against the being of sex, she is asserting the doing ([my
boldface] of gender. To say that one performs one’s gender is to say that gender
is an act, and not a thing (p.55).

Such a definition further helps to disrupt the more essentialist definitions of “lesbian” and
“woman” in the discussion of Fuss (1989), Rich (1980), and Irigaray (1977) earlier in this
chapter. I want to hold these more essentialist and more fluid definitions in a tension
together as this illustrates the problematics involved when “lesbian” and “teacher,” both
very performative subject-positions, are considered. As a working definition for the
purposes of this project, I offer “performance” as that varying, according to individual and
not unchanging, set of actions each lesbian teacher ”performs”—i.e. presents to students in
the classroom on a wide range of topics with regard to her teaching persona and /or her
personal/professional self—degrees of disclosure to students, parents, administration and
other teaching and administrative support professionals, as well as the styles and
ideologies of pedagogy, lesbian, queer or otherwise, she enacts in the classroom.

In addition, employing the definitions of terms such as “queer” and “queer
theory” is be necessary to this project as used by Jagose (1996), Butler (1990), and Tyson
(1999). Annamarie Jagose (1996), in a discussion of what she terms the “general rather than specific” (p.73) history of the etymology of homosexuality, notes:

…The path traced by “homosexual”, “gay” or “lesbian” or “queer” accurately describes the terms and identificatory categories commonly used to frame same-sex desire in the twentieth century (p.74).

The use of “queer,” now in the twenty-first century, represents a re-appropriation by the LGBT community of a formerly “term of abuse” (p.74), and also, according to Jagose, is:

… [a] consequence of the constructionist problematising of any allegedly universal term (p.75).

Further, Jagose (1996) quotes Weeks’ (1977) argument that “homosexual,” “lesbian,” “gay” are

Not just new labels for old realities; they point to changing reality, both in the ways a hostile society labeled homosexuality, and in the way those stigmatized saw themselves (Weeks, in Jagose, 1996, p. 75).

“Queer” then constitutes a new construction separate from “previous gay liberationist and lesbian feminist models” and “…effects a rupture which, far from absolute, is meaningful only in the context of its historical development (Jagose, 1996, p.75).

Performativity, under this construction of “queer,” is an integral assumption here— in Butler (1990), the idea that gender is fluid:

…Gender is not a noun, but neither is it a set of free-floating attributes, for we have seen that the substantive effect of gender is performatively produced and compelled by the regulatory practices of gender coherence. Hence, within the inherited discourse of the metaphysics of substance, gender proves to be
performative—that is, constituting the identity it is purported to be. In this sense, gender is always a doing, though not a doing by a subject who might be said to preexist the deed (pp.24-25).

In that performance, the enactments of varying sexualities are ever possible, that essentialist definitions are disrupted and problematized. Jagose (1996) argues:

The delegitimation of liberal, liberationist, ethnic and even separatist notions of identity generated the cultural space necessary for the emergence of the term “queer”; its non-specificity guarantees it against recent criticisms made of the exclusionist tendencies of “lesbian” and “gay” as identity categories. Although there is no agreement on the exact definition of queer, the interdependent spheres of activism and theory that constitute its necessary context have changed (p.76).

The presence of this cultural space is important to understanding further discussions in Chapter 2 of student and teacher subjectivities. Many, though not all, of my students express a much more fluid understanding of gender and sexualities, as possible for others and for themselves, than in any previous generation I have taught. Our campus GLBTQQSS (Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer, Questioning, Straight Supportive) group, VISION, enacts in its names the willingness of this younger generation to re-appropriate and to reinvent the possibilities for others’ and their own sexualities. I see, more and more, a willingness on the part of these young people, to not only re-appropriate but also to be fluid in their approach over their lifetimes and toward their own sexualities.

Tyson (1999) also defines and illustrates this anecdotal experience surrounding “queer,”
Some lesbians and gay men have adopted the word *queer* as an inclusive category for referring to a common political or cultural ground shared by gay men, lesbians, bisexuals, and all people who consider themselves, for whatever reasons, nonstraight…(p.336)

placing this in the context of the “white middle-class roots of the gay and lesbian feminist liberation movements,” which were not inclusive or even cognizant of “gay people of color and of working-class gay men and lesbians” (p.336). “Queer,” for Tyson, then, is …an inclusive term [which] seeks to heal these divisions by offering a collective identity to which all nonstraight people can belong (p.337).

As a theoretical construct, Tyson sees “queer” as a construct that disrupts the binary of heterosexuality vs. homosexuality (p.337):

…For queer theory, categories of sexuality cannot be defined by such simple oppositions as homosexual/heterosexual. Building on deconstruction’s insights into human subjectivity (selfhood) as a fluid, fragmented, dynamic collectivity of possible “selves,” queer theory defines individual sexuality as a fluid, fragmented, dynamic collectivity of possible sexualities…. Gay sexuality, lesbian sexuality, bisexuality, and heterosexuality are, for all of us, possibilities along a continuum of sexual possibilities…. influenced by how [individuals] conceive their own racial and class identities…. Sexuality exceeds these definitions and has a will, a creativity, an expressive need of its own (p. 337).

I point out here, as important to this project, that “queer” is a problematic construct for many older lesbians, given its long history as a term of defamation and abuse. Many of us older lesbians—and here I include myself—find it less problematic to call ourselves
“lesbian” than to call ourselves “queer,” feeling perhaps that use of the word “queer”
limits our effectiveness as activists for human rights and/or does not describe accurately
how we define ourselves. I do not mean to imply that “queer” is not a valid construct—
indeed, I think it is. I merely want to illustrate how this term may be perceived,
particularly in the context of lesbian teachers.

This brings us to a necessary discussion of “identity” and “gay identity politics”
as I employ these terms in this project. Annamarie Jagose (1996) provides a thorough and
concise history of the employment of gay liberation and lesbian feminist liberation
movements with regard to identity:

…It is possible to think of these movements as operating within changing
concepts of social transformation (p.59).

These changing concepts begin within the discourses of early lesbian feminist and gay
liberation, in which identity and gay identity politics are perceived as:

…securing equality for a homosexual population defined in terms of same-sex
object choice (p. 58).

It is important to note here that the lesbian feminist movement and the gay liberation
movements, particularly in the beginning, were streams running in entirely different
courses. Lesbians were excluded from gay men’s organizations and activism—if they
were permitted at all, lesbians were relegated to the “coffee-carrying” and secretarial
positions (McGarry and Wasserman, 1998). Lesbian feminists soon pulled out and began
our own organizations, believing that our agendas were not fundamentally the same in a
patriarchal society. As Jagose (1996) points out, however, both movements were
intent on transforming oppressive social structures by representing same-sex
sexual practices as legitimate…(p.60).

While still acknowledging “the malleability of gender and sexuality, each has an
avowedly constructionist understanding of sexuality” (p.60). Jagose (1996) poses this
argument in direct contradiction to accusations of these movements as “crudely
essentialist” (p.60), a position I have taken up earlier in this chapter.

A later 1970’s position arguing for “an ethnic model which emphasized
community identity and cultural difference,” was

...Conceived of as a strategic way of securing equal or increased legal protection
for gay and lesbian subjects, establishing visible and commodified lesbian and
gay urban communities, and legitimating ‘gay’ and ‘lesbian’ as categories of
identification (Jagose, 1996, pp. 59, 61).

This position is still widely held, in my opinion, because it helps to solidify our lesbian
and gay (and bisexual and transgender) identities as viable yet marginalized ideas for the
purpose of changing legislation which hinders our basic access to human rights, such as
housing, marriage, job protection, and parenting. In this way, our “solidified” identities
further our progress and constitute a foundational assumption for “gay identity politics,”
what current conservative legislators are pleased to call “the gay agenda.” That “agenda”
is, to my mind, the human agenda—the basic rights of all to have shelter, to have
meaningful work, to love and to parent, without abuse, harassment, and physical danger.

These terms, then, are social constructs, helping us, as lesbians, to access human rights,
just as earlier terms were employed to very similar ends. Cohen (1991) furthers this
argument, noting that:
…Political assertions of “identity” necessarily reiterate the reification of human bodies as “natural invariants” which such typologies have been both engendered and engendered by (p.77).

“Identity” then is embodied here both individually and within community, both for personal and community ends. Identity, in this way, may still be fluid and changeable over time, but is useful for personal and political ends, which may often be, though not always, the same.

**Research questions and methodologies:**

**Historical synthesis, naturalistic case study, web-based teacher surveys**

**Research questions**

I hope to contribute, by this project, to a clearer understanding of the ramifications, both for lesbian teachers and for their students, of the effect of the subject positions of lesbian teachers on students' subject positions and their writing.

Research questions asked include:

- How do students assess and draw conclusions about the subject position(s) of a lesbian teacher? How does her closeting or outness affect those perceptions?
- What are the reasons students give for adopting subject positions in response to perceived lesbian teacher subject positions?
- How do first-year composition students decide to choose lesbian and gay issues as themes for required essays? How are those decisions based on their perceptions of their lesbian/gay teachers?
- How do students' essays on lesbian and gay themes articulate and reveal student subject positions with regard to these issues, and with regard to their lesbian teacher?
• How do lesbian teachers assess their/our own subject positions in the classroom?

How does each lesbian teacher’s personal position of closeting or outness affect her/my perception of her/my subject position as a teacher?

• Why are these subject positions problematic for teachers who are lesbians?

**Methodologies**

In my research, I use three primary research methodologies to answer my research question: historical synthesis, a naturalistic case study, and a web-based survey. Each methodology contributes a different perspective and set of data for the project overall.

**Historical synthesis**

A sustaining methodology for this dissertation, particularly in Chapters 2 and 3, is an historical synthesis of pertinent bodies of scholarship as they permeate, intersect with, and enlighten each other and my research questions. Questions addressed within this synthesis include:

• In what ways do the history and pedagogies of composition studies inform, for example, the work of cultural studies, women’s studies, queer studies, and education, and the ideologies and rhetorics of the gay rights movement? In what ways do these disciplines inform composition studies and pedagogies?

• How do these intersections of disciplinary-crossing pedagogies illuminate and provide working theories and methods for the practice of feminist teaching by lesbian teachers in first-year composition programs?

• How do cross disciplinary and composition studies’ writing pedagogies in existing scholarship reflect and move forward the writing practices that emerge?
• Given this history of writing pedagogies, how do more recent and still emerging feminist, queer, and cultural studies practices affect current writing pedagogies?

• How do these practices impact lesbian writing teachers who are also negotiating the real praxis of their own lesbian identities with gay identity politics and rhetorics, most particularly the gay rights movements’ emphasis on “coming out,” on disclosing our sexual orientation?

**Naturalistic case study and close reading**

As a preliminary project in support of this historical synthesis and cross-disciplinary approach, a naturalistic case study is presented in Chapter 4. Bissex (1990) notes, “A case study is a way of learning, not a method of proving” (p. 70). Similarly, this component of my project is a very preliminary study of essays of a small group of students (10-15), some of whom were members of first-year writing classes I taught in the fall of 1998 at a large Midwestern state university and subsequent sections of first-year composition I taught, also at this university, from 1999-2001. The fall 1998 classes coincided with the beating death of Matthew Shepard, a gay University of Wyoming student. These essays cover a wide variety of lesbian and gay topics—tolerance for homosexuality in society, education for tolerance, intolerance for public displays of affection among gays and lesbians, lesbian dress performance, observations of drag queen contests. It is my hypothesis that these essays were a result of my speaking to the classes the day of Matthew Shepard's death, of challenging them as young people Shepard's age to become more tolerant, and at the same time, of inviting dissent to my point of view.
At that point, I outed myself only as the daughter of a gay man. I did not assign any of the lesbian and gay topics. The following year (1999-2000), I outed myself as a lesbian in the residential learning community at the university where I teach, and continued to receive occasional essays on lesbian and gay topics. These topics also were not directly assigned--the General Studies Writing program at this large midwestern state university provides a set of types of assignments that the students must complete. Within these program parameters, students in the two-course writing sequence classes I taught from 1999-2001, continue to choose these topics.

A close reading of the essays collected on lesbian and gay issues are presented. By “close reading,” I mean an interpretation of these students’ writing, through the lens of their words in the essays and in their responses, of their multiple subjectivities and mine, based on the following questions:

- What topics around lesbian and gay issues do students choose to adopt, among those essays collected? How does the essay carry through (or not) the explicit stance of the writer? In what ways do the writer’s argument and/or language undermine, belie, or support her/his explicit stance?

- Do students self-identify with specific sexual orientations/subject positions—e.g., a record of the continuum of identification in the essays, from outing to complete non-self-disclosure?

- In what ways do students locate their choices of topics based on the positions they have adopted? (This may include many subject positions that erase or attempt to erase sexual orientation and highlight positions of non-tolerance, tolerance, acceptance, academic examination and/or nurturance.)
• In what ways do students locate their choice of topic and/or subject positions, given my outness as a lesbian teacher in the class?

• What tones do students adopt in their essays toward the lesbian and gay issues, based on their use of language—e.g., identification and use of “politically correct” or current terms accepted by the very diverse lesbian and gay community, or use of connotative/denotative terms? How does their use of language perpetuate or reappropriate derogatory words or phrases?

• How do students self-identify issues of internalized homophobia in their writing—e.g. narratives of intolerant (or tolerant) upbringings, uninformed use of language and terms?

• How do students self-identify issues of tolerance, acceptance, and nurturance—e.g. narratives of friends and relatives who are lesbian and gay?

• How might audiences of these essays (including their out lesbian teacher) perceive the layered identities of the student writers?

In this way, some very preliminary conclusions are drawn on the ways in which a lesbian teacher's subject position affects student subject positions and their writing in the first-year composition classroom.

Student responses for the close reading were elicited by asking the participants to complete a questionnaire (presented in full in chapter 5). The questionnaire asks them to define and interpret ideas of the term “subject position,” to discuss and interpret their own subject positions as students in the first-year composition classroom, to discuss and interpret their understandings of the subject positions of their teachers (any teachers they wish to discuss), and to write about their understanding of my subject position/s as their
teacher, and how my position/s have affected their writing in specific ways (this questionnaire, as a matter of course, is NOT administered until after the semester is over and grades are in). Further, the questionnaire asks participants the ways in which their own subject positions toward these topics have changed during the course of the semester and subsequently.

In addition, student-participants were asked to discuss their interpretations of issues of power in the classroom—e.g. ways in which the topics they chose were affected (or not) by my outing myself as a lesbian teacher, and in what ways this outness constrained their choices of topic? The questionnaire asks participants about the ways in which they negotiated issues of sexual orientation in their essays and in the classroom with a lesbian teacher, in ways that might have differed around issues such as race, class, ethnicity, and gender.

**Web-based surveys of lesbian teachers**

In addition to analyzing student texts and distributing questionnaires, I posted a web page soliciting responses from lesbian teachers to questions about their self-assessment regarding their own subject positions in the classroom, how they assess student perceptions of the lesbian/gay subject positions, and how closeting or outness affects teacher self-perception and perceptions of students towards teachers. This web page was circulated among several lesbian teacher audiences, with varying levels of outness: a lesbian/gay national (closed) listserv of Episcopalians, a closed mailing list of the Lesbian Teachers' Network, and the list for Gay, Lesbian, and Straight Educators Network (GLSEN), a national organization. These responses are reported in Chapter 4 in the discussion "possibilities for agency for lesbian teachers in the composition
In the next section of this chapter I provide abstracts of the remaining chapters, as a means to understanding the outline and direction of this project.

**Chapter 2:**

**A literature review of composition history and teacher subjectivities**

Chapter 2 examines theories and practices of positionality and subjectivity in the history of composition history, including work from scholars and practitioners in expressivism, ethics of caring, personal authenticity, process writing, empowerment, critical literacy and writing across the curriculum pedagogies. Included is a synthesis/analysis of these theories and practices in terms of lesbian teacher and straight or gay student subjectivities.

**Chapter 3:**

**Lesbian teacher subjectivities in empowerment pedagogies**

In this chapter, a literature review and critique of feminist, cultural, empowerment, critical and queer/lesbian projects and pedagogies that are situated most closely to this dissertation are provided. By doing so, it is hoped that an understanding is gained of their impact on and marginalization of lesbian teacher and straight, lesbian, or gay student subjectivities in composition studies and in composition classrooms.

**Chapter 4:**

**Subjectivities of lesbian teachers: A case study**

The results of the naturalistic case study are presented in this chapter: one lesbian teacher’s classroom as a site of inquiry, enriched by the experiences of self-selected lesbian teachers around the country. Using relevant responses from lesbian teachers to the web-based survey, the ramifications of coming out for lesbian teachers in the
composition classroom are examined. It should be noted that this is a very preliminary excursion into lesbian teacher subjectivities: little research exists in this area, though the beginnings of such research are surfacing in conference papers. Additionally, this examination explores the possibilities for agency, not only for teachers but also for students and for student writing, when lesbian teachers acknowledge their sexual orientation in the composition classroom.

Chapter 5:

Student subjectivities: A case study

Chapter 5 examines student writing about queer issues and student writers’ responses to the questionnaire in a naturalistic case study approach. Students’ essays speak for themselves with regard to their perspectives on GLBT issues, and the responses, to student understanding of lesbian teacher subjectivities. A thematic approach is used to synthesize student writings and responses and to address the very preliminary hypothesis with regard to lesbian teacher subjectivities and the effect thereof on student subject positions.

Chapter 6:

Implications of the research, future recommendations, and a proposed classroom approach

In this chapter, discussion of implications of the case study and questionnaires for use in the composition classroom, by lesbian (as well as gay and straight) teachers, and for further research is central. In addition, a composition course design which employs these preliminary findings and that could be used by lesbian teachers is presented.
Conclusion to Chapter 1

This research project explicitly confronts the “assumptions of gender neutrality, gender inclusiveness, and researcher disinterestedness” of dominant research models. One of the major purposes of the study is to make explicit, in a variety of school tasks and through a variety of research methodologies, the students’ and teacher’s subject positions as women or men, as gay, lesbian, or straight, in multiple formations. Such a purpose precludes any sort of move towards neutrality, insisting instead that such a move would be unscholarly, dishonest, and self-defeating. As Susan Bordo (1990) points out, if we wish to empower diverse voices, we would do better, I believe, to shift strategy from the methodological dictum that we foreswear talk of “male” and female” realities…to the messier, more slippery, practical struggle to create institutions and communities that will not permit some groups of people to make determinations about reality for all (p. 142).

In a composition classroom and in a study that seeks to uncover for students the real subject positions of teacher and students, we must be able to talk together as men and women, in male and female bodies. This grounding discussion, hearing viewpoints constructed often in socially gendered ways for first-year college students, is crucial to the stated agenda of lessening homophobic responses. This is particularly crucial in our society, which encourages male acting-out of violence against the unfamiliar or “unacceptable” (Kuribayashi and Tharp, 1998), in this case, against gay and lesbian students and teachers.

This study is also “gender inclusive” in the ways that Sullivan (1992) defines—it is “designed for women” (p. 51). As a lesbian teacher, I am intimately involved with the
problematics of predominantly male-authorized and female-staffed institutions.
Elementary and high schools as well as universities are run, in most cases still, by men, and staffed, in most cases, by women. As a lesbian in a patriarchal and very often homophobic setting, the physical and emotional dangers of either staying closeted or coming out are great. By authoring and designing a study which foregrounds my positionality as woman, lesbian, teacher (and implicitly, as lover and mother), I am opening up, I trust, some discursive space for other lesbian teachers.

Complete “disruption” occurs around the issue of my vestedness as a researcher. There is no disinterest here. That possibility is eliminated from the outset as I place my own subject position as lesbian teacher in a place where it cannot be missed by my students—nor probably will it be missed by their parents, by my department chair and writing program administrator (who may field some or many complaints), or by the director of the learning community where I teach. I am critically interested, as all good researchers should be, in this study—in the senses that I am involved as both researcher and participant and also that I care deeply, personally, about the outcomes and consequences. In this way, the validity of this study is increased—it is more academically honest, in such a study, to be interested rather than disinterested.

While I openly state that I do not accomplish that same space for lesbian teachers who also occupy other positions different than mine in ethnicity, race, and social location—which limit the validity and scope of this study—still I am, at least, writing from one woman’s perspective. What I find out, what my students find out, through this work with our subject positions, may create possibilities for rhetorical space and further study by women in other locations and subject positions.
As an “out” lesbian teacher of first-year composition in the university setting—I am out to my colleagues, lesbian, gay and straight, and to lesbian, gay, and straight students on campus—I recognize, as do the authors cited, that location, academic climate, and safety issues continue to problematize the position of being explicitly out, particularly in public and private secondary and elementary schools. As I seek to articulate my subject position as lesbian, mother, feminist, and teacher—I negotiate daily the ways in which I come out and my motivations for doing so. Though the kinds of questions this study asks necessitate the centrality of my (and other) lesbian teachers’ subject positions, I believe that few of us want our classes to be “all about us.” That is the worst and most unscholarly and unteacherly form of education and research. On the other hand, I (and other out teachers) do not wish to perpetuate the soul numbing closeting and invisibility we have felt forced to adopt in the past.

Professionally, it is important to me that, first and foremost, students view me as a competent and intelligent teacher of writing. Additionally, I see daily the crucial role I play, as all teachers do, in making classrooms safe for all students—lesbian, gay, and straight. I hear—and challenge—the homophobic remarks students make to each other and to those with whom they are unfamiliar. The publication of this study impacts all those different public and private intersections for me, a lesbian teacher, as those intersections impact countless other lesbian and gay teachers. As I seek to be authentic—and out—in my composition classes to all my students, my goal, as it is the goal of many lesbian teachers, is to bring the best teaching self I can offer to my students.

In the following chapter, an historical discussion of composition pedagogies serves to introduce the ways that these instructional approaches have created and
perpetuated an evolution of teacher subjectivities. It is important to understand this evolution in order to make visible the previously invisible location of lesbian teachers of composition.
Chapter 2: A literature review of composition history and teacher subjectivity:

The emergence and promulgation of (lesbian)teacher and student
subjectivities in composition pedagogies

Introduction

Using definitions of composition pedagogies crafted by theorists and teachers central to these approaches as organizing themes, I want to show their socially constructed place in the history of American composition studies, for the purpose of foregrounding teacher subjectivities as they are produced in these pedagogies. Most particularly, I want to examine how lesbian teacher subjectivities were/are are erased, marginalized, submerged, enacted, and performed within such pedagogies.

As teachers, we are aware of the specific contexts of our teaching, of the lives of our students, of the academic writing needs of our students, of expectations of our university administrations for required writing outcomes, and of constraints and expectations of the English departments of which we are members. We are aware, too, of public and media perceptions of our task, of us as “moral representatives,” often stated in terms of the giving or rescinding of government funding for our universities and for our writing programs.

It is the context of this awareness of “teacher as text” that particularly problematizes, for many in American society, the idea of out lesbian teachers. Composition pedagogies arise out of social constructs and exigencies and they are not divorced from the realities of students’ academic concerns and needs, their families, hometown cultures, and religious and sexual attitudes. In order to foreground the
changing nature of teacher subjectivities, the following review of the literature is organized from an historical perspective.

**(Lesbian)/teacher subjectivity: Review of the literature**

One possible trajectory of this project is the disruption and reconfiguration of the idea of transgression in the matching of the words “lesbian” and “teacher.” Claudia Ruitenberg (2001) extends this important argument for lesbian teachers,

…The physicality and corporeal sexuality attached to queer teaching bodies offer an opportunity to make explicit and question the assumed absence of physicality and corporeal sexuality that has been an implicit professional norm for “teachers” and “academics”. The visible presence of queer bodies in the fields of teachers and academics is uncomfortable because it threatens to reveal hidden and unquestioned professional norms—and so it should (p. 10).

Ruitenberg, whose scholarly work is in the field of education, here brings forward covertly assumed “knowledge sets” of what teachers, particularly lesbian teachers, should “be” and how we should act, issues of performativity which will be taken up in a few paragraphs. As the discussion is open to conflict, disruption, theoretical and “real-time” behavior, attitudes, thinking and practice, the multiplicities of the encoded phrase “lesbian teacher” will transform and be transformed in our lesbian and lesbian teaching lives.

Adrienne Rich (1993), in her analysis of lesbian poet Minnie Bruce Pratt’s work, provides an extension of the complication and disruption of being lesbians and lesbian teachers in American society:
The sexual women in these poems are activists whose bedroom is never far removed from what happens in the streets. It should go without saying, but probably doesn’t, that no lesbian or gay bedroom—in whatever gentrified neighborhood or tent pitched off the Appalachian trail—is a safe harbor from bigotry (and for some, not only bigotry, but lethal violence) (p.150).

I argue here that that same intrinsically politicized construction is present for lesbian teachers, particularly out and or “obvious” lesbian teachers—teachers who do not “pass” as straight (heterosexual). To call oneself a lesbian teacher is to embody oneself as a teacher who acknowledges or, if more closeted, embodies the presentation of her own sexual orientation in ways that heterosexual women teachers do not articulate verbally, but which are very apparent to students reading teachers as text. While some women who are teachers and identify as straight openly talk of their husbands and perhaps wear wedding rings, their sexual orientation remains unarticulated. If some of these teachers are pregnant, students continue to add assumptions, just as they do when lesbians present themselves in the classroom sans wedding ring, or wearing one from their partner on the traditional finger, and without mention of husband, but rather “partner” or “spouse.” Students continually build their constructions of us, of their “teachers as texts.”

For lesbian teachers, particularly those of us who are out to our students and/or who do not pass as straight, our locations as lesbians is further complicated and disrupted by our students’ perceptions arising from their background and town culture and by the academy’s covert and overt definitions of what should and should not be with regard to the construction of “teacher” and of “lesbian.” Watney (1993), building on Foucault’s ideas on the sexuality of children, argues,
We should recognize the high priority of targeting the domain of “educational psychology” that underpins so many aspects of the training of teachers. This in turn involves acknowledging the erotic component that plays so central a part in all educational environments. As long as education is imagined to be entirely nonsexual, the actual erotics of the pedagogic situation can be displaced away in the imaginary likeness of the evil pervert, “promoting” his or her sexuality with “innocent” children (p. 398).

Watney’s point is important for the heterosexist culture that is “school.” I can testify, as a lesbian formerly married to a man, that my perceived heterosexuality, while I was still married, was rarely the subject of comment, as I was passing/passing as straight, and therefore unremarkable in the predominately heterosexist and therefore hegemonic culture of the university.

These student perceptions are further complicated and disrupted if, as lesbian teachers, we were formerly married to men, if we have children (what method?), if we wear wedding rings from our same sex partners on the traditional finger. This differs, of course, from school to school, with many variables affecting each school’s culture—the presence or lack thereof of a viable on-campus GLBT organization or faculty group, the degree of openness of the town—but does not lessen our students’ assessments of us as “teacher texts.”

Many teachers, similarly, while often holding mentally and publicly a position of “neutrality” combined with teacher authority, began a shift in their own subject positions, often necessitated by the current accepted pedagogical stances, and, I speculate, the real impossibility of neutrality, which, at best, is fictional and highly problematic and, at
worse, professionally and personally destructive, especially for lesbian teachers. Toni McNaron (1997) in her study of lesbian and gay professors of this time, *Poisoned ivy: Lesbian and gay academics confronting homophobia*, speaks of her own erasure and invisibility over a 25-year career as an academic:

> In the absence of heterosexual senior women and in the unexamined presence of sexism, I had no mentors of either sex or any sexual orientation. In this context I became mute as a teacher, a potential scholar, and a colleague. In my literature classes, I avoided texts and topics that might lead to any whisper of homosexuality. My writing was bland and ineffectual. Relationships with colleagues progressed nicely up to a point, but then stopped as if we had come up against a brick wall. My inability to mention my private life kept our conversations on a superficial, impersonal level. Those who liked me and suspected I was a lesbian were too polite to break the silence. Those who did not like me and suspected I was a lesbian watched closely, hoping to catch me in some glaring mistake. A third group, who ignored me altogether, seemed not to suspect that I had a sexual or emotional life at all, since I was neither married nor interested in dating men. Encased in silence, I nonetheless made my way in the academy, succeeding in the classroom and governance structure, while languishing as a scholar and as a person (p. 5).

The erasure of McNaron’s and other lesbian professors’ sexual subjectivity parallels, I would argue, the decision not to focus on marginalized groups of women during the women’s movements of the 1960’s and 1970’s, with the thinking that what was most important was simply to act on behalf of all women. An important edited collection of
articles on women professors, *Academic women on the move*, edited by Alice S. Rossi and Ann Calderwood (1973), limits its focus to “women students and faculty in academe” but argues that,

This does not mean that our concerns are limited to this privileged stratum of American society. Many of us have been deeply involved in aspects of the women’s movement that concern poor, black and Chicano underprivileged girls and working women… (p. xiv).

The collection not only, for the most part, ignores these populations, but also contains, perhaps unsurprisingly for the time, no discussions of lesbian academics. Kay Klotzberger (1973), in her chapter on “Political actions by academic women” remarks,

The academic women’s movement is surprisingly devoid of radical politics. The goals of the movement are moderate, if not conservative, in comparison to neofeminist organizations that attack the sexist nature of American society. Academic women’s groups are concerned almost exclusively with women’s status within their professions…(pp.384, 385).

My intent here is not to criticize women academics of this time for their lack of attention to lesbian professors. Given the constraints of women’s places in the academy at that point in history, attempts by the women’s movement to change the material conditions of their working lives are laudatory. I merely wish to underscore the invisibility of this additional layer of identity—sexual orientation—that existed for lesbian academics of the time. Michelle Fine (1988), in her article “Sexuality, Schooling and Adolescent Females” identifies “prevailing discourses of female sexuality in the public schools” as discourses of “sexuality as violence,” “sexuality as victimization,” “sexuality as individual
morality,” and “a discourse of desire.” It is this last discourse, she argues, that “introduces explicit notions of sexual subjectivity for women” (p.35, in Fine, 1992):

The naming of desire, pleasure or sexual entitlement, particularly for females, barely exists in the formal agenda of public schooling on sexuality…. A genuine discourse of desire would invite adolescents to explore what feels good and bad, desirable and undesirable, grounded in experiences, needs and limits. Such a discourse would release females from a position of receptivity, enable an analysis of the dialectics of victimization and pleasure and would pose female adolescents as subjects of sexuality, initiators as well as negotiators (pp.36-37, in Fine, 1992).

Fine recognizes here the strong institutional constraints on the teaching of sex education to young women and foregrounds the idea of a discourse of desire which gets at the heart of the problem that lesbian teachers both pose, in their sexual subjectivities, and face, in public education. Fine continues,

In this political context, many public school educators nevertheless continue to take personal and professional risks to create materials and foster classroom environments that speak fully to the sexual subjectivities of young women and men. Some operate within the privacy of their classrooms, subverting the official curriculum and engaging students in critical discussion…. Within public classrooms, it seems that female desire may indeed be addressed when educators act subversively…. (pp.37-38, in Fine, 1992).

When the teacher of these students is lesbian, this subversion may operate on several levels, depending upon the constraints of the teacher’s location, upon her level of outness,
on the strictures of the community, since the discourse of desire now is complicated by the sexual subjectivity of the teacher. Fine notes, further, that

The ambivalence surrounding female heterosexuality places the victim and subject in opposition and derogates all women who represent female sexual subjectivities outside of marriage—prostitutes, lesbians, single mothers, women involved with multiple partners, and particularly, black single mothers (pp.47-48, in Fine, 1992).

In her view, the silencing in public education of these sexual subjectivities—and necessarily, of the women who own them—lends itself to victimization of these women. While Fine’s research is centered around adolescent females, her work is important for this project as it impinges on both female and male student sexual subjectivities and views of lesbian teacher subjectivities in its foregrounding of silencing and erasure as forms of official policy in public education.

Complication and disruption also arise personally, with partners who may not be out or do not wish to be, with family and friends in the same locale who may or may not wish us to be out, and with the internalized homophobia many lesbian teachers confront internally and frequently. These various subject-positions are, I argue, intrinsically performative. Peggy Phelan, in her Ontology of performance (1983), notes that,

Performance’s only life is in the present. Performance cannot be saved, recorded, documented, or otherwise in the circulation of representations; once it does so, it becomes something other than performance…. Performance occurs over a time that will not be repeated. It can be performed again, but this repetition itself marks it as “different” (p.146).
Every teacher, upon entering a classroom, every time delivers a performance of the lesson and of their teaching personas, and that performance changes subtly through and between each class meeting. This performance, consciously or subconsciously, delivered, conveys to our students a variety of important pieces of information. Students minutely (often alarmingly) and constantly scrutinize our sense of our authority as teachers and their perception of our authority, what our dress, hair, use of jewelry, our body language, even to the shaven or unshaven appearance of our legs, are. Lesbian teachers not only deliver their teaching “performance,” but also, integrally, persona performances in which levels of social and student attitudes toward lesbianism and women are negotiated and filtered in multiple ways. Students, in their turn, may adjust their own subject positions with regard to relationships as students to us, their teachers.

This constant site of negotiation and information, as quickly operated as the Internet from a very fast computer, is played out, not only through sexual orientation, but also through gender. Annamarie Jagose (1996) argues that the importance of Butler’s *Gender trouble* (1990), which, in turn, builds on earlier ideas outlined by Foucault (1972) is,

…to specify how gender operates as a regulatory construct that privileges heterosexuality and, furthermore, how the deconstruction of normative models of gender legitimates lesbian and gay subject positions (p. 83).

This construct is key to understanding how of gay identity politics and a rhetoric of coming out impacts lesbian teachers and also begins to imply a definition of performativity important to the subjectivities of lesbians and lesbian teachers. As the lesbian and gay community works to achieve basic human rights in the workplace,
specifically here in the schools and in the academy, the ways in which our lives as lesbians and as lesbian teachers problematize and disrupt heterosexist views of “women” and of “teachers” also foreground issues of “performance” and of “performativity” of lesbian teachers.

I argue here that all teachers, certainly the effective ones, are in a very real sense, “performers.” Regardless of our Myers-Briggs inventory (and in a very anecdotal way, many teachers I’ve talked to personally are INFJ’s—introverted, intuitive, feeling, judging), as teachers we learn, if we are to survive and to enjoy our students, how to “get across,” how to speak to students of each succeeding generation, how to generate models of learning that enable and empower each particular set of students, how to lecture and not lecture, how to listen specifically, how to hang on to our students’ attention and how to find what methods and vehicles work best to involve students in their own learning. Adding the layer of “lesbian” to “teacher” and issues of performance and performativity become central to how lesbian teachers function as texts (and as humans) in the classroom. In the next section, a very brief outline of the history of composition pedagogies serves to highlight ways in which teacher subjectivities, and therefore necessarily, lesbian teacher subjectivities, complicate, conflict, and perhaps, clarify, the themes of those pedagogies. It is not the intent of this survey to exhaustively trace the history of teacher subjectivities, though this would be a worthwhile project, but to sketch out the transmogrification of teacher subjectivities as dictated by evolving composition pedagogies.
Composition pedagogies and teacher subjectivities:
A short history and review of the literature

In the years prior to the Dartmouth Conference, many professors of “rhetoric”—i.e. persuasive writing in a heavily grammar- and instructor-driven, Aristotelian rhetorical context, what Berlin (1987) terms “current-traditional rhetoric”—maintained towards students an authoritative, often highly impersonal stance. In this classroom environment, Berlin declares,

Truth in written discourse is conceived exclusively in empirical and rational terms. The writing class is to focus on discourse that deals with the rational faculties: description and narration to be concerned with sense impression and imagination, exposition with “setting forth” the generalized ideas derived from sense impressions and understanding, and argument with understanding leading to conviction…. This rhetoric makes the patterns of arrangement and superficial correctness the main ends of writing instruction (pp.8-9).

In such a context, personal information was rarely, if ever, revealed to students, and, many professors were men. Connors (1997) notes that the teacher of writing at the turn of the twentieth century, then called a “teacher of rhetoric,” is:

…increasingly marginalized, overworked and ill paid. Instead of being a senior professor, the rhetoric teacher is typically an instructor, or a graduate student. Instead of teaching a discipline rooted in millennia of tradition, he—or, increasingly, she—is teaching a congeries of theory and pedagogy less than forty years old. Instead of being sought by students, rhetoric courses…were despised
and sneered at, and their instructors have fallen from the empyrean of named
chairs to the status of permanent underclass: “composition teachers,” oppressed,
ill-used and secretly despised (pp.171-172).

Students, certainly, had no voice. Brereton (1995) states,

In almost every account of composition studies the students are silent, a fine irony
in light of the enormous amounts of discourse they have elicited as well as
produced (p. 437).

In this context, both students and composition teachers are silenced by constraints of the
academy and the pedagogies of the time.

Berlin (1987) traces this current-traditional rhetoric into the period from 1920-
1940, which he identifies as the beginning of college first-year composition programs,

Berlin notes that teachers of current-traditional rhetoric “looked upon the college as the
training ground for a middle-class, professionally certified meritocracy” (p. 71). He
examines several streams in these programs: “liberal culture,” “expressionist rhetoric,”
and “social rhetoric.” He describes advocates of liberal culture as those who

looked upon the university as the preparatory school for an elite, aristocratic
group of individualists….For the proponents of liberal culture, the purpose of the
English teacher was to cultivate the exceptional students, the geniuses, and, at the most, to tolerate all others. (p. 72).

Composition teachers’ subjectivity at this time is located working with the most able students. Berlin points to “liberal culture,” in its “emphasis on the cultivation of self,” as the path to the development of expressionist rhetoric:

For expressionist rhetoric…writing, all writing, is art. This means writing can be learned but not taught. The work of the teacher is to provide an environment in which students can learn what cannot be directly imparted in instruction….The writing teacher must…encourage the student to call on metaphor, to seek in sensory experience materials that can be used in suggesting the truths of the unconscious—the private personal, visionary world of ultimate truth (p.75).

This rhetoric marks a shift in the role of teachers, from a very teacher-directed and centered approach, to a slightly more student-centered one. The teacher is still the “director” of learning and in this pedagogy, it seems implicitly understood that the more naturally gifted students are those who will succeed. Myers (1996), arguing from the work of progressivist educators John Dewey and W. Hughes Mearns, says that at this time in the history of creative writing pedagogy, it was thought that

The educational value of literature is that it is the best means that humans have devised to touch the secret sources of their lives. But if it is to do so it must be studied from within. It is not to be learned about, but experienced firsthand—from the creative, not the scholarly point of view (p.114).

At the same time, these educators recognized that
Some teaching is required in learning how to write; trusting to natural growth—the intrinsic powers all students possess—is necessary but not sufficient (p.115). Myers recognizes the inconsistency in these two statements and sees a compromise in the idea that

The teacher of creative writing made suggestions but never demands. Even when suggesting something—reading, revisions—he or she spoke unimperatively, in the voice of a fellow writer who had acquired perhaps a wider experience (p.118).

In the work of Peter Elbow and Lucy Calkins in the 1970’s and 1980’s, an extrapolation of this early expressionist rhetoric comes to fruition, which I take up later in this discussion.

Berlin’s third movement, social rhetoric, taking place during the 1930’s, was, he argues, “a tendency to view writing as a social activity, growing within a social context and carrying social consequences” (p. 81). He identifies two ramifications of these movements at opposite ends of the spectrum of composition pedagogy:

…The concerns for the social implications of the composition class led to an exclusion of all writing tasks except those found at the time to be needed by adults. At its best, however, the recognition of the social nature of writing led to a fully blown rhetoric of public discourse, a transactional rhetoric close to an Aristotelian model. Here was an attempt to prepare students for a comprehensive response to varied rhetorical situations, involving a consideration of the writer’s and audience’s roles and the definition of issues and exigencies (pp.81-82).

This approach continues on in first-year composition programs today in many university first-year writing programs. While some may view this as a “skill-based” pedagogy,
Berlin introduces University of Wisconsin rhetoric professor Warren Taylor, who in his essay “Rhetoric in a Democracy” (1938), views the role of the composition teacher as one who trains students for life as citizens:

…Rhetoric is viewed as the art of making reasoned evaluations of public utterances, of discovering the worth of the means used to communicate instructive knowledge and to affect opinion. As such, it requires of its users a knowledge of the means by which lines of action designed to solve social problems may be presented to the people and of the ways in which they may respond to them (qtd. in Berlin, 1987, p. 87).

Berlin notes that, “… for Taylor, the keepers of this rhetoric were writing teachers”:

Formulating the principles of a rhetoric for democracy and stating the criteria for the evaluation of the use of these principles and in public utterances is rightly the job of composition teachers (qtd. in Berlin, 1987, p. 88).

The subjectivity of college writing teachers as purveyors of democracy is an interesting one, for it recognizes the inherent political ideology of composition educators and espouses that ideology as good and useful in ways that are often positivist and unexamined. It articulates the importance of writing and rhetoric as an integral part of American citizenship and training for participation in a democratic society. In the 1960’s, this egalitarianism is manifested in the work of open admissions universities (Shaughnessy, 1977) and currently, Dr. Sidney Ribeau (2002), the president of Bowling Green State University, Bowling Green, Ohio—my university—has instituted a “values initiative” which has as its core the production of students as citizens:
We want to prepare students who are leaders and decision makers, students who are articulate and principled. If we graduated accountants who had the highest GPA in American but they did not know how to use their accounting degree in a way that was ethical and really contributed to their society, then I would think that we had done only half the job. (p. 3)

Teachers, then, in this view, occupy a complicated place in the classroom—teachers of writing and teachers of values, teachers of citizenship and teachers of democracy. Composition professors teach values when we teach audience to our students. We urge our students to pay attention to diversity issues and to the pluralistic nature of our society when we teach audience, tone, and the nature of fair arguments. We teach open-mindedness to alternative viewpoints when we teach the importance of rhetoric that sees and acknowledges the other side of the question.

From 1940-1960, current-traditional rhetoric was most prevalent in university writing programs, with some schools opting for communication skills courses (Berlin, 1987, p. 104). Connors (1997) adds that:

The history of teaching and writing from the 1940’s through the present is a history of epistemological warfare, of progressive theoretical and empirical research struggling with entrenched traditional pedagogy (p.102).

For Connors, this struggle has its basis between the theoretical pedagogy in the journals—*English Journal* and in 1947, *College Composition and Communication*, and the skills-oriented workbooks and handbooks most often used by English teachers of the time (p. 102). (When my son entered junior high in 2001, I saw copies of *Warriner’s*, circa late 1960’s, sitting in his English classroom. He was able to avoid these only
because he was in the honors class, which, interestingly, studied literature, rather than grammar).

One advance that the establishment of CCC and its attendant organization, College Composition and Communication Conference (CCCC) created was a true “professional identity” for English teachers:

…With the establishment of the CCCC and its journal, College Composition and Communication, teachers of freshman composition took a giant step toward qualifying for full membership in the English department, with the attendant privileges—tenure, promotion, higher salaries, leaves—even though these were not widespread until much later. The journal served as a forum for discussing the lot of composition teachers as well as for encouraging and disseminating theoretical and practical research in the teaching of writing (Berlin, 1987, p. 106).

Implicit in this statement is the real plight of composition teachers, who, more and more, were women. These teachers had no job security, filled the lowest of instructor positions, and rarely had benefits, thus holding the most tenuous of economic positions. This “feminization of composition,” as Eileen Schell (1992) would later term it, has obvious implications for the silencing and self-erasure of lesbian teachers during this time, as the necessity of retaining work would preclude any self-disclosure.

As a result of the Dartmouth Conference in 1966, a watershed in composition history in that it marks a very definite shift to process pedagogies, interest was building in more expressive modes of writing, and on students claiming their education in an integrated approach. As Berlin (1987) notes,
Throughout the sixties, essays arguing for writing as self-expression continue to appear, moving, as might be expected, in increasingly original directions. This method of writing was encouraged by the Dartmouth Conference, a meeting in 1966 of teachers and scholars from the United States and Britain…to discuss the teaching of English in the public schools. The emphasis in John Dixon’s report on the conference, *Growth through English*, is on language and personal growth, the use of English studies for building an inner world (p. 149).

It is at this juncture that expressionist rhetoricians like Peter Elbow (1973), Donald Graves (1975), Donald Murray (1978), Ken Macrorie (1970, 1976) and later Lucy Calkins (1986), Toby Fulwiler (1987), and Tom Romano (1987) began to write about models of teaching and writing that called for an increasingly personalized location of teachers. Elbow (1973) places this type of learning for students, interestingly at the end of the Vietnam War, squarely in a politicized location:

Many people are now trying to become less helpless, both personally and politically: trying to claim more control over their own lives. One of the ways people most lack control over their own lives is through lacking control over words. Words come at you on a piece of paper and you often feel helpless before them. And when you want to put some words of your own back on another piece of paper, you often feel even more helpless (p. vii).

As for the teacher of this “teacherless classroom,” Elbow says,

I find I can set up a teacherless writing class in my own class *as long as I follow all the same procedures as everyone else*: I too must put in my piece of writing each week; I too must get everyone’s response to it; I too must give my own
reactions to other pieces of writing. I find I’m most useful to a class if I submit pieces of writing that I’m still unsure of…and if I reveal my reactions to other pieces in such a way that students can feel these reactions are very much, mine, personal, idiosyncratic—not attempts to attain some general or correct perception of the words…. In short, I can only set up something like the teacherless class in my own class if I adopt more the role of a learner and less the role of a teacher (p.ix).

Elbow’s words illustrate the direction of writing instruction for the expressionists of this time in his emphasis on student-centered teaching, classroom egalitarianism, and teacher vulnerability and teacher authenticity. These latter threads—vulnerability and authenticity in teacher subjectivity—surface again in the early 1980’s in the “ethics of care,” foundationalized in the work of Carol Gilligan (1982), Nel Noddings (1984), and Belenky et. al. (1986) with regards to women’s ways of knowing and women’s psychology and transferred directly to composition teaching, most notably in the work of Lucy McCormick Calkins (1986) and later feminist composition scholars, whose work will be taken up a little later. Additionally, these threads also are woven in parallel ways in the work of Paolo Freire (1970) and the composition scholars—Shor (1987), hooks (1994) and others—who identify themselves as Freiristas.

Many teachers, similarly, while often holding mentally and publicly a position of “neutrality” combined with teacher authority, began a shift in their own subject positions, often necessitated by the current accepted pedagogical stances, and, I argue, the real impossibility of neutrality, which, at best, is fictional and highly problematic and at worse, professionally and personally destructive, especially for lesbian teachers.
Another reason for a shift in teacher subjectivities was the material realities composition teachers were encountering. For example, by 1968, composition teachers and scholars were beginning to face the realities of open admissions policies. Mina Shaughnessy (1977) writes, in *Errors and Expectations*,

Toward the end of the sixties and largely in response to the protests of that decade, many four-year colleges began admitting students who were not by traditional standards ready for college. The numbers of such students varied from college to college as did the commitment to the task of teaching them (1)…In the spring of 1970, the City University of New York adopted an admissions policy that guaranteed to every city resident with a high school diploma a place in one of its eighteen tuition free colleges, thereby opening its doors…to a wider range of students than any college had probably ever admitted or thought of admitting to its campus—academic winners and losers from the best and worst high schools in the country, the children of the lettered and the illiterate, the blue-collar, the white-collar and the unemployed…reflecting that city’s intense, troubled version of America (pp. 1-2).

This shift in many universities of increased enrollment and under-prepared first-year students, as well as the higher influx of many more students of color, women students, and adult, working-class students than ever before, which continues today in many public and private universities, forced many teachers to “dive in,” as Shaughnessy (1977) termed it, in an effort to adjust their own perceptions of these students as well as adjust their teaching styles and methods of delivery in order for students to succeed.
Additionally, many more women were hired to help teach these populations, remaining at the lowest pay and at the bottom of professorial hierarchy, what Shaughnessy, in Jane Maher (1997) and later, others, like Susan Miller (1991) and Eileen Schell (1992), called the “feminization of composition.” In this shift, at the crux of many converging streams, more women teachers, teaching to women, adult and students of color, teachers’ own subject positions, by necessity, were undergoing change, both publicly and privately.

Min-Zhan Lu (1991) later critiques what she calls the "politics of linguistic innocence” of Shaughnessy and her contemporaries in composition, and it seems important to point out here, as it will be relevant later, that Shaughnessy (1973, 1976, 1977) understood her students as desirous of acquiring the skills necessary to academic success, to enter the field of public discourse and career advancement. What might appear as the “othering” of marginalized students, from our stance in critical pedagogies years down the road, seems a culturally sensitive and historically appropriate construct rose to meet the students’ desires and wishes. Shaughnessy and her colleagues were acting in a socio-historical context, with both student and administrative exigencies, to teach students for academic success (Maher, 1997).

In doing so, and concurrently with the beginning of Freiran ideas in the early 1970’s through the “ethics of caring” of Carol Gilligan (1982) and Nel Noddings (1984), many teachers’ shift to more student-directed subject positions begins to emerge. It is important to an understanding of this discussion to briefly discuss what I call here, after Noddings (1984), the “ethics of care,” as I employ it here.
Gilligan’s (1982) work on the moral choices of women, *In a different voice*, researched and written in the wake of the Roe vs. Wade decision, demanded a full reconsideration of valorized studies on human development. Gilligan examines how these studies, based on the use of only male subjects, erroneously generalized ways in which women’s psychological development occurs. As long as these assumptions remain unquestioned, Gilligan argues, there can be no clear understanding of the true nature of women’s knowing and choices. As a result, women’s voices are silenced and healthy patterns of women’s human development are hindered or excluded.

Gilligan’s challenge to the exclusively male-identified nature of research in psychology led women scholars in many fields, including composition studies, to questions the nature and generalizations of studies in their own fields. In composition studies, for example, William Perry’s model of the stages of development in student writers has been attacked because of its use of only male subjects, and its subsequent generalization to women students (Tedesco, 1991).

Gilligan’s understanding of women as participants in extended “networks of care,” who choose care and relationships over many men’s concern for rights and responsibilities, led women compositionists in the late 1980’s and early 1990’s to begin examining the writing choices and habits of their women students. Elizabeth Flynn (1988) challenges writing teachers to teach women writing strategies that “involve active construction, the recreation of one’s identity” (p. 434). The idea of a pedagogy which models for women students ways of writing which permit them to use “revision and discovery” and “new rhetorical strategies” holds the possibility for women to use writing to “construct new selves” (respectively, Susan Osborn, 1991, and Flynn, 1988).
Teaching writing strategies that help women students try out “multiple voices” and approaches center, for many women compositionists, on challenging traditional masculinist models of agonistic rhetoric. Pedagogy that supports this “construction of selves” can result in what I will call “multivocality”: women may gain the writing skills that will enable them to choose among a variety of rhetorical strategies for success in the academy and in the professional arena. Rather than being silenced (or pigeon-holed) by what Harriet Malinowitz (1997) calls “masculinist forms,” women students can choose the ways in which they produce texts in the academy, and in so doing, may choose to protect one self, present another self, or try on a new self. Particularly important for composition pedagogy is Gilligan’s discussion of how women and men arrive at moral decisions. For Gilligan, men approach moral choice from positions of rights and individual freedom, while women make decisions based on an “ethics of care”—a network of interdependent relationships, responsibilities, and a “desire not to hurt.” This new construction of women’s moral understanding implies the need to revisit composition teachers’ ways, for example, of teaching argumentative essays in first-year composition classes. The prevailing method of teaching a largely agonistic form of persuasion on ethical/moral issues is based on a masculinist stance of individual freedom and rights. Women students, who operate from a strong “ethics of care,” and see the relational/responsible web as primary, may experience an agonistic model of persuasion as problematic, which makes argument writing very difficult. Composition theorists working from Gilligan--Osborn (1991), for example--suggest that faculty teach students, particularly women students, a variety of rhetorical strategies for approaching persuasive assignments.
Olivia Frey (1990) illustrates how professional academic discourse valorizes, through gatekeeping in publication and promotion, the use of the adversarial position. Frey proposes a model, instead, of negotiation and mediation for affording a “view of knowledge [which] allows for two different views to be right and meaningful at the same time” (p. 522). As a means to making collaborative/small group work more effective, Mary Lay (1992) proposes a model of androgyny that would expand the “range of collaborative strategies…traditionally reserved for either males or females” (p. 83). Lay grounds her discussion in a thorough examination of psychologists’ views of female bonding (Gilligan, 1982 and Chodorow, 1978, along with sociologists Belenky et. al., 1986) and male bonding (Sherrod, 1987; Hammond and Jablow, 1987; Spence, and Helmrich, 1978), and of psychological definitions of masculinity, femininity and androgyny (but ends with literary scholar Carolyn Heilbrun’s (1964) definition of androgyny) as

suggest[ing] a spirit of reconciliation between the sexes…. a full range of experience open to individuals who may, as women, be aggressive, as men, tender; it suggests a spectrum upon which human beings choose their places without respect to propriety or custom (p. x-xi).

Further, she discusses, within adult gender identity, the effects of “projection, the myth of scientific objectivity, and the power of the patriarchy” on collaborative efforts. Lay connects roles of “androgynous male and androgynous female” to a new model of “androgynous collaborators,” persons who can “enter into relationships with others and maintain those relationships in such a way that interpersonal conflict does not disrupt the thinking and writing process” (p. 98).
Lay (1990) proposes journal- and log-keeping exercises as important means of both writing about collaboration and changing attitudes about collaboration, citing Janet Emig and Toby Fulwiler (p. 96). She states that these journals “need not even mention androgyny or feminine/masculine but instead be provoked by the reader or instructor using non-gender-linked terms” (p.97), and earlier, “Collaborators may best accept interpersonal strategies if these strategies are disassociated from gender role” (p.96). I question, as I think Shirley Rose (1990), Pamela Annas (1985), Susan Osborn (1991), and others would also, the assumption that gender can be so easily subsumed in small group, collaborative work in the writing classroom. But implicit in the work of these composition scholars is the idea that writing teachers will occupy a professional/personal subjectivity or subjectivities that support this kind of writing for students. Teachers in this vein must, of necessity, be willing to inhabit decidedly ideological positions of authenticity and vestedness to support such student work.

Catherine Lamb (1991) poses the Bakhtinian model of the “dialogic” as a means of socially constructing knowledge in ways that are more productive for students than the traditional agonistic forms of writing. For Lillian Bridwell-Bowles (1992), teachers must offer students writing strategies which both “critique…the standard conventions” and lay “outside the dominant discourse” (p. 350). These alternative ways of writing will provide students with a wider range of rhetorical choices—multivocality, if you will—for writing tasks in the academy. In this stance, teachers act as change agents.

Women writers who employ alternative and/or feminist approaches to literacy make knowledge for themselves in socially transformative ways. Pamela Annas (1985) argues for a “politics of style” which foregrounds for women writers the “problematic
relationship between writer, subject and audience…” (p. 366). For Annas, this relationship consisted in “writing that matters… [in] consideration of audience…and investment in the subject” (p. 370). Annas’s words reflect the expressivist influence of composition scholars and theorists in the late 1970’s and 1980’s— of Peter Elbow (1973) and James Britton (1982) --and also, the rich cross-disciplinary contributions of Gilligan and others. In 1997, Harriet Malinowitz argues that these earlier expressivist concerns are not enough to prepare women students to write critically. She challenges feminist educators not to prepare students to participate in the world as it exists; the goal, rather, [is] to help them develop the skills to construct and transform the world (p.310).

Malinowitz furthers illustrates here the subjectivity of teachers as integral to creating social change. Malinowitz (1995, 1996a, 1996b, 1997), an out lesbian composition professor, whose argument that teachers of composition should be involved in the social construction of change agency, is of particular interest and I will take up her ideas in the following chapter on empowerment and critical pedagogies.

For lesbian teachers, then, the juxtaposed themes and pedagogical constructs in composition history of fictionalized neutrality and teacher as authority, expressivist egalitarianism and teacher as invested self, ethics of caring and teacher as authentic self, and the beginnings of teaching for transformative action and teacher as change agent pose a complicated series of teacher subjectivities. It was not until the 1990’s that composition teachers began to emerge from the closet in their professional lives (Case, 1995; Griffin, 1992; Harbeck, 1992; Jennings, 1994; Malinowitz, 1995; Woods and Harbeck, 1992). Before this time, lesbian educators worked within the constraints of the academy and the
confines of the closet silenced, erased and marginalized. If lesbian teachers adopted a
stance of authority and neutrality, they could (and some still do) use this positionality to
present only a “professional” persona, erasing for a good part of each working day their
“real” selves. Many lesbian composition teachers, as noted earlier, face very real
material conditions that make this necessary: refusal of employment, job loss, loss of
tenure and promotion, and physical danger.

Additionally, I must acknowledge here my assumption, throughout this project,
that living and teaching as an out lesbian educator is a more productive personal,
psychological and professional subjectivity than not doing so. Many would and do not
agree. If lesbian teachers are invested in a location of teacher authority and neutrality,
they may see a position of personal disclosure as unnecessary and even unprofessional. It
is not my intention to condemn or detract from the many decades of fine teaching such
lesbians have performed. In the early 1990’s, I attended the Annual Conference of the
National Conference of the Teachers of English and concluded that if all the lesbian
teachers there outed themselves in their home districts and were fired for their coming
out, a great number of high school and English classrooms would suddenly and truly be
Elbow’s “teacherless classrooms.”

If lesbian high school English teachers took their education training or college
composition professors began teaching in either the 1970’s during the emphasis on
expressivist pedagogy and teacher vestedness, or the 1980’s during the focus on an ethics
of care and teacher authenticity, they were faced with the psychological costs of what I
will call professional schizophrenia. When the composition pedagogies of the times call
for a certain measure of personal authenticity in the classroom, lesbian writing teachers
were made to choose a particular persona for their students and colleagues and another for their home and personal lives. In the next chapter, I want to further Malinowitz’s (1995) discussion of the ways in which expressivist pedagogies problematize student writing assignments and lesbian and gay students’ subjectivities as well.
Chapter 3:

Lesbian teacher subjectivities in empowerment pedagogies

Teacher subjectivities, as they evolved from the rhetoric, constraints and demands of successive writing pedagogies in the history of composition studies, are examined in Chapter 2. In this chapter, I uncover and critique the positivist assumptions of Writing Across the Curriculum (WAC), a widespread empowerment pedagogy that is both very prevalent in university academic programs across the country and that also illustrates very clearly the issues surrounding lesbian teacher subjectivities in the academy. I also discuss, later in the chapter, other empowerment pedagogies in relation to lesbian teacher subjectivities.

The WAC movement emerged in the early 1980s in composition studies and in university programs in the United States. Writing Across the Curriculum (WAC) programs in university settings have been widely documented during the last nearly thirty years of their existence in the United States and efforts at such programs have been in existence since 1890 (Russell, 1992). Researchers have examined topics such as program design (Dunn, 1983; Ferris and Smith, 1992; Fulwiler, 1984; McLeod, 1992; Peterson, 1992; Sandler, 1992; Stout and Magnotto, 1992; Thaiss, 1992; Walvoord, 1992, 1996; Yancey and Huot, 1997), teacher training (8, 1998; Anderson, 1991; Bartz and Fleming, 1991; Bradford, 1991; Cummins et. al., 1991; Hughes and Jensen-Cekall, 1991; Huot, 1997; Kinkead, 1997; Kuriloff, 1992; Magnotto and Stout, 1992; Moran and Herrington, 1997; Odell, 1992; Prior et. al., 1997; Rempe, 1995; Royster, 1992; Selfe, 1997; Walvoord, 1997; Williamson,1997), and pedagogical approaches (Abels, 1994; Anson et.

This discussion seeks to foreground the ideological assumptions of WAC, to assess the few available critiques, and given these critiques, to project implications for the future of Writing Across the Curriculum university programs as they affect lesbian teacher and student subjectivities in the classroom. Particular focus questions for the research will include: What is the ideology of WAC? How is this ideology framed in composition studies? Are some student populations marginalized by the use of WAC in the university classroom, and if so, what groups are these? How does a virtual absence of critique affect/perpetuate this marginalization? Can critiques of WAC ideology inform future delivery of WAC university programs? As a composition teacher who has been a “believer” in teaching college students the conventions, discourse, research questions, and documentation in the disciplines, and as an out lesbian teacher interested in how teacher and student subjectivities affect and are affected by sexual orientation and pedagogy, I want to critically examine the philosophy and pedagogy of Writing Across the Curriculum.

**Review of the Literature: Prevailing WAC Ideologies**

Barbara Walvoord, a central figure in Writing Across the Curriculum program administration and scholarship, in her 1996 article “The Future of WAC,” examines WAC as a “social movement organization” (p. 58). This approach is possible, she
maintains, “because of its change agenda and its collective nature—faculty talking to one another, moving to effect reform” (p. 59). Walvoord situates the history of WAC ideology in its response to a nationally perceived crisis—“a widespread perception that student writing was inadequate” (p. 61). WAC, she notes,

...was born in a time of increasing pressure for access by previously underserved populations. Faculty faced hard questions about the meaning of education, equality, literacy, democracy, diversity, knowledge, power and liberation (p. 61).

WAC, in Walvoord’s view, stands directly in the philosophy of a “liberation pedagogy” (p. 62). As a liberatory pedagogy, WAC approaches seek to provide students with the discipline-specific skills they will need in order to succeed, first in the university, and eventually, in their chosen professional careers. This goal is accomplished in an egalitarian framework: all students are educated in the conventions of “academic writing” in a wide variety of core and elective classes throughout the university curriculum so that they are all, in a pluralistic society, afforded the opportunity to enter the professional arena, the world of work.

Two ideological stances underlying the uses of WAC pedagogy may be characterized as “learning the communities of academic discourse” and “the rhetoric of disciplinary inquiry.” Helping students learn “discourse communities” in academic disciplines, notes Peshe Kuriloff (1996), “socializ[es] students into the university...[and] introduces students to writing and thinking in a single discipline which serves as a model for how discourse works in any discipline” (p. 485).
An early definition of “discourse community,” which concisely states many WAC programs’ continued understanding of what (and how) students should learn academic writing, is Herzberg’s (1992) comment that a discourse community…is the center of a set of ideas…and is epistemic or constitutive of the group’s knowledge (p. 223).

For Herzberg, academic and/or professional groups both generate knowledge and define the boundaries of that knowledge, or at least concretize the nature of knowledge-making within the group. Harris (1989) notes that a sense of collaboration distinguishes a discourse community, in the group’s…stress…on a shared or collaborative project…only an affinity of beliefs and purposes, consensus, is left to hold such communities together. The sort of group invoked is a free and voluntary gathering of individuals with shared goals and interests—of persons who have not so much been forced together as have chosen to associate with one another…(p. 15).

Harris’s description certainly fits many academic disciplines and professional career groups. Patricia Bizzell (1992) draws on and extends Harris’s definition by positing that a discourse community is:

a group of people who share certain language-using practices. These practices can be seen as conventionalized in two ways. Stylistic conventions regulate social interactions both within the group and in its dealings with outsiders; to this extent “discourse community” borrows from the sociolinguistic concept of “speech community”…The key term “discourse” suggests a community bound together
primarily by its uses of language, although bound by other ties as well, geographical, socioeconomic, ethnic, professional, and so on (p. 222).

For Bizzell, a discourse community is identified by the ways in which it uses language; she acknowledges that professional groups use language in ways specific to them.

Bizzell claims that “access to academic discourse is a prerequisite for social power, and that linguistically disenfranchised students can be helped by a writing-across-the-curriculum approach that seeks to demystify the conventions of academic discourse” (Bizzell and Herzberg, 1986, p. 347). Though Kuriloff (1996) later points out the negative pedagogical implications of such an approach, her statement that “learning discourse communities socializes students into the university” characterizes this first approach in university WAC programs, and exemplifies the early WAC “liberatory” model (p. 485). WAC becomes a method for initiating college students in the culture of the academy and of their future professions, through writing. This initiation is seen as positive and liberatory, because it gives students the discourse of “success,” both in college courses and in future careers. Familiarity with the language of academic discourse communities gains students entrance to those communities.

Minock (1996) and Kirscht et. al. (1994) opt, on the other hand, for a “rhetoric of inquiry,” based in “work in the social construction of knowledge” (Kirscht et. al., 1994, p. 369). Minock (1996) argues that the “…value of rhetoric [is] to provide transdisciplinary space for shared inquiry” (p. 503). Composition pedagogy and WAC …can be more resonant and meaningful to our interdisciplinary colleagues when they fall into place within…a series of dialogic understandings, where a
constantly shifting focus of attention allows a larger whole to be grasped in relationship to its parts (pp. 502-503).

In this approach, student writers learn that “scholarly writing is argument on behalf of particular knowledge claims” (p. 370).

The disciplines are introduced as centers of inquiry rather than as banks of knowledge, and disciplinary conventions are presented as emerging from communally negotiated assumptions about what knowledge is and about the methods for shaping it. The forms are conventions of the disciplines that become, in turn, tools used consciously to aid students in moving beyond the boundaries of previous belief systems and in exploring new perceptions (Kirscht et. al., 1994, p. 374). Kirscht et. al. maintain that this social constructionist approach in empirical research helps “students use a methodology instead of merely imitating a convention” because “they must struggle with both the demands and the constraints of that form” (p. 377). This struggle does not seem to include students’ examination of the underlying ideologies of the methodology. Though students are encouraged to be the “originator of questions, the selector and interpreter of data and the judge of significance” (p. 378) and “mov[e] into…temporary places beyond the boundaries of old beliefs and conventions that mark movement toward greater inclusiveness” (p. 378), it is not evident how they will do this without the questioning of ideological assumptions in the research.

Further, as Jones and Comprone (1993) point out, while “students should learn these conventions in ways that encourage them to fit their own intentions and the varying demands of rhetorical situations together in their writing” (p. 65), teachers have “yet to develop” these rhetorical approaches to making knowledge across the disciplines (p. 62).
The “rhetoric of inquiry” frame outlined here, while offering student writers wider possibilities for learning and writing across the curriculum, still, to my mind, does not offer students the intellectual tools for addressing foundational assumptions in disciplinary knowledge. I offer the following questions as a form of critique:

- If disciplines are viewed as discourse communities, how do students learn to recognize competing claims within a single discipline/discourse community? Are students exposed only to the dominant claims in that discipline?
- How do students learn to begin examining published texts as possible examples of dominant discourse within a discipline? How does this skill affect their understanding of how writing affects knowledge production within a discipline?
- How do college students learn to identify the subtexts of power, ideology, and gender assumptions in the research body of each discipline? (How can WAC teachers teach students to uncover and examine these assumptions?).

Kuriloff (1996) points out how unequal power relationships between professors and students negatively affect students’ understandings of themselves as full members of a discourse community:

Student integration into academic discourse communities would function more effectively if more exchanges took place between professors and students. Professors might think about learning their students’ language as a prerequisite for requiring students to learn theirs, Kuriloff argues. Not only are students not truly admitted to the discourse community of the academy yet asked to write like members, but, as Anson (1994) notes,
…many students do not share the beliefs and attitudes of their professors (qtd. in Kuriloff, 1996, p. 497).

Students may, as Kuriloff argues, “understand their discourse community as the community of students” (p 497).

**Critiques of WAC: “Zones of Acceptance” and “Cultural Reproduction”**

Harriet Malinowitz (1997), in “A Feminist Critique of Writing in the Disciplines,” holds that WAC programs do not even ask the important questions about the ideological/gendered assumptions of writing in the disciplines, let alone help students begin to answer them. While recognizing the claims of the WAC movement to a liberatory, egalitarian pedagogy, Malinowitz notes an aura of vagueness that surrounds most accounts of exactly what structures are being subverted, who benefits from these structures (and how), and, in short, just what sort of politics we’re talking about (p. 293).

Though she accepts claims that WAC approaches help students learn the discourse that will identify them as members of academic and professional communities, Malinowitz maintains that writing in the disciplines doesn’t help students critically assess how forms of knowledge and method are hierarchically structured in disciplines so that some achieve canonical or hegemonic status whereas others are effectively fenced out (p. 293).

Implicit, for instance, in the Bizzell and Herzberg (1986) definitions of “discourse communities” is the assumption that an academic or professional group agrees, whether overtly or covertly, that specific knowledge sets and ways of making knowledge are in
some way normative. The result may be (and often is) that individuals or the knowledge they bring with them to a particular discourse community may be excluded.

Offering the example of the interdisciplinary and political formation of knowledge-making in women’s studies and in gay and lesbian studies as fields outside conventional “zones and codes of acceptable scholarship” (pp. 291-292), Malinowitz (1997) emphasizes the importance of students’ abilities to critique “dominant knowledge systems” (p. 293). As students learn to examine “accepted” bodies of knowledge in disciplines, they can begin seeing how other forms of knowledge are excluded.

Students may also begin to see how they themselves are marginalized by WAC approaches that teach the conventions, research questions, and “accepted” ways of writing in academic disciplines. Malinowitz (1997) argues,

Lack of identification with the highest privileges of the academy and old boys’ networks has been central in cultivating a feminist methodological, epistemological, and rhetorical stance. To identify more with the object than with the subject of research, more with the viewed than with the viewer, to be one whose subjective interests are not represented in research design, is to feel inevitably distanced and uninvested in the pursuit of knowledge in its conventional form (p. 310).

Gay and lesbian students, for instance, may find that research topics of primary concern to them—possible biological bases of homosexuality, or family patterns and genetics in families of lesbians and gays, for example—will be excluded because some WAC professors find these topics outside the range of conventional discussion in the discipline. This exclusion may take the form of gate keeping—“No, that topic is outside the purview
of this field,” or “No, that topic is too political and this is a biology class.” This exclusion may also manifest itself, in the case of students of color, or of women, in presenting academic discourse conventions which students know to be white- or male- (or white/male-) dominated.

For Malinowitz (1997), when academic disciplines are approached as “centers of [rhetorical] inquiry” (Kirscht et. al., 1994, p. 374), students do not learn how the “center of a field’s inquiry is…negotiated...and established,” or “which voices are engaged in (or excluded from) communal negotiations about the acceptance of idea,” or “what makes any domain a community” (p. 295). Herndl (1993), in “Teaching Discourse and Reproducing Culture,” offers a theoretical model for examining how this inquiry is acquired and negotiated.

Herndl (1993) critiques WAC from a stance he calls “cultural reproduction” (p. 351). He argues that “research describes the production of meaning but not the social, political, and economic sources of power which authorize this production or the cultural work such discourse performs” (p. 351). From a basis in Freirean radical pedagogy, Herndl maintains that education must “bring students to the point of cultural self-consciousness in which they neither accommodate nor merely oppose the social order…but can actively reposition themselves within it” (p. 351). The mode for such repositioning is embodied for Herndl in a concept of “resistance” (p. 352).

Resistance and change are possible, according to Herndl (1993), when “we recognize that…discourse is inseparable from…disciplinary knowledge claims and interests…” (p. 352). We have to “face the fact that in teaching discourse we are unavoidably engaged in the production of professional and cultural power” (354). This
critique acknowledges not only Mary Minock’s (1996) point about the obvious inequities in power relationships between professors and students, but the ways in which WAC, valorized as “programs that work,” prevents students from examining how they can construct (rather than be told) their own positions of learning, writing, and thinking.

Herndl (1993) argues that WAC teachers must help students “see how discourse and the reality it constructs are shaped by the political, economic, and material interests of professions and the institutions they create” (p. 354). Herndl maintains that although students should learn academic and professional discourse, WAC teachers must “identify and explain the way discourse is conditioned by professional practice…and has ideological consequences” (p. 354). While Herndl does not enter into discussion of specific pedagogical means for transmitting these ideas, he feels that “if we describe the…conflicting sites…and multiple positions” of disciplinary knowledge, “we can open a space for students to recognize the range of positions negotiated and excluded from the dominant discourse” (p. 355).

Malinowitz (1997) agrees with Herndl (1993) that this involvement in cultural/professional power positions when we approach disciplines as “centers of [rhetorical] inquiry” (Kirscht et. al., 1994, p. 374) “does not help students learn how the center of a field’s inquiry is…negotiated…and established,” or how much “deviat[ion] from “rigid banks of knowledge” …is permitted,” or “which voices are engaged in (or excluded from) communal negotiations about the acceptance of ideas,” or what makes any domain a community” (p. 295). She argues that acceptance of disciplinary tests within a discipline “ends up shaping and controlling what will count as knowledge in their field” (p. 295).
A significant example of how texts become dominant in disciplines are studies both in composition research (Perry, 1970) and in developmental psychology (Piaget, 1932; Kohlberg, 1958; Erickson, 1968) based on the responses and experience of males. These studies became empirical models of knowledge, which were considered normative for both males and females, and continue to be uncritically cited and used in the rationales for first-year university composition programs, as well as in graduate programs for college student personnel and first-year university learning community and “freshman experiences” at my own university and at universities throughout the country. Carol Gilligan (1982), in her watershed research on women’s moral development, in a different voice, as noted earlier in this project, shows how this projection of male responses results in inaccurate and often dangerous assumptions about female attitudes and experience. Gilligan’s work, and those of other feminist scholars in many disciplines, have precipitated a major reassessment of assumed “dominant knowledge” in composition studies and in developmental and cognitive psychology. These reassessments are strong evidence, according to Malinowitz (1997), that “the supposedly communal assumptions of neutrality in objectivist data interpretation (which ignores the subjective experience of the investigator) permit sexist attitudes to infiltrate studies undetected and seriously affect results” (p.296).

If students are only made aware of dominant discourses, and other forms of knowledge and knowledge making are not recognized, Malinowitz (1997) claims, “students are confined to writing only across the curriculum and in the disciplines, and it precludes their writing out of the inherited order of things and into new forms of curriculum” (p. 300). Similarly, Judith Langer (1993), in her study of the differences in
the ways knowledge is theorized in a discipline and the ways that knowledge is taught in universities, notes that alternative ways of knowledge-making and thinking are reduced to matters of content and convention when transmitted to students.

For Malinowitz (1997), then, WAC approaches in the university that do not foreground the ideology and gender assumptions in the disciplines marginalize all students. Learners who do not have access to the ideological bases of their education cannot transform or subvert societal inequities:

The goal of feminist education has never been to prepare students to participate in the world as it exists; the goal, rather, has been to help them develop the skills to deconstruct and transform the world (p. 310).

Further, for Malinowitz, suppressing alternate forms of discourse also results in the suppression and “subjugation” of women of color. Malinowitz notes that early feminist research, for example, “universaliz[ed] theories of white middle class feminists” (p. 305). In doing so,

…white middle-class feminism had subsumed the diverse realities of women in its localized knowledge, thus distorting or erasing the experience of subjugated women, much as men had historically done to women (p. 305).

A parallel could be drawn, though Malinowitz does not explicitly do so, for WAC approaches. It could be argued that since in many places the presence of people of color in the academic disciplines is still very small and the acknowledgement of the presence of lesbian and gay teachers and students in the academy is very limited, the prevailing discourse domains and how those domains are transmitted to students are not accurate representations of “minority” realities or knowledge.
An integral concern for Malinowitz (1997) becomes the foregrounding of subjectivity in the discussion of disciplinary knowledge making and pedagogy. She views this subjectivity in terms of “hybrid identity”—“identity is not singular, but composed of multiple, interlocking strands” (305)—and “hyphenated knowledge”—“Marxist/socialist feminism, radical feminism, women-of-color feminism, lesbian feminism” are a few examples (p. 307). “Canonical knowledge” (and it could certainly be argued that composition studies has already solidified such a body of knowledge) is displaced in favor of these subjective, hyphenated forms of knowledge (p. 307). In this way, Malinowitz argues, the “foregrounding of process makes manifest rather than effaces feminism’s discontinuities and internal disruptions” (p. 308).

Malinowitz (1997) holds up this model as a way of reconfiguring WAC: Students should be helped to examine the extensive, though largely hidden hybridity of disciplines…. Faculty members in the disciplines [should be] direct with students about how disciplinary conventions and belief systems are structured, ...introduce students to the work of non-canonical as well as established members of the field, and…provide various frameworks for evaluating the reasons existing disciplinary margins and centers contain the particular inhabitants they do (p. 309).

If the critiques of Malinowitz (1997), Langer (1993), and Herndl (1993) are intended to help teachers make university WAC approaches more inclusive for all students, and help students become more aware of the nature of ideologies undergirding disciplinary knowledge, then ideological implications must be explored, and possibilities, proposed.
Implications of ideological critiques of WAC

When the programs intended to “liberate” students marginalize them, then the critiques of Malinowitz (1997), Herndl (1993), and Langer (1993) have important ramifications for WAC. University writing programs—significant scenes of our work as compositionists—if they are to be liberatory for our students, must facilitate knowledge-making activities which evidence our often-repeated humanistic principles of discovery, open inquiry, and real knowledge-making.

If gay and lesbian students encounter teacher or university resistance to their choice of topics, they learn the covert agenda: the academy is not, in fact, the place where it might be possible to construct new positions for themselves in their future professions and in society. When gay and lesbian students graduate and enter the job market, they may decide to accept the strictures on sexual orientation in their professions and discourses. But they can only do so critically and still maintain their “newly constructed selves” as well as those professional “selves” if their university education has been a site for examining underlying ideologies, for understanding differing power relationships, and for permitting divergent views. If they are able to write and use their voices in academically and personally meaningful ways in the academy, lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender students will make intelligent and informed choices in their future professions, rather than be forced to choose between lesser evils. Only if lesbian teachers are able to locate and articulate the ideological geography of their own subjectivities and levels of identity in the composition classroom, can lesbian, gay and straight students begin to articulate and examine their own subjectivities, identities and ideological positions. This is a project, I argue, which will lead to real and transformative education.
in the ways that Malinowitz envisions. In addition, the cultural geography of disciplinary conventions can be truly articulated in a way that will allow marginalized students to make full use of their academic work.

If students of color are taught the hegemonic boundaries of disciplinary thought—boundaries that may also be racially drawn in terms of “occupied territory”—those students may learn significant means for transforming those territories. If “learning the academic discourse” of a predominantly white field is, indeed, an important “career move” for students of color, WAC professors must be willing to expose disciplinary boundaries and epistemologies. Teachers who offer students of color the opportunity to critically assess what constitutes knowledge in their respective fields, provide real skills beyond learning the surface conventions and forms within disciplines. As WAC programs enable women to examine how knowledge is generated and fenced by masculinist assumptions and generalizations, women students can begin to write in ways that make new forms of knowledge.

WAC programs begin to address these critiques when “what works” is no longer a strong enough rationale for perpetuating the ways in which WAC university programs are designed, the ways WAC teachers are trained. The exigency for WAC programs from the beginning—the need for a liberatory, equipping education for all students in a pluralistic society—is liberating now only as WAC university programs, administrators, directors and teachers are able to show students the deep structures, ideologies and power relationships in the education they carry with them into their writing, careers and lives. As we have seen in this section, Writing Across the Curriculum programs, when unproblematically examined, were viewed as a liberatory pedagogy. And, if Herndl
(1993) and Malinowitz’s (1997) analysis of the unmasking, so to speak, of these disciplinary projects so that students can critically examine their ideological assumptions are undertaken, the possibilities for transformation and liberation are still viable. In the next section, I wish to examine pedagogies that employ critique in such an effort.

**Critical pedagogies emerge**

This section seeks to situate earlier and more recent critiques of empowerment and critical pedagogies in the historical context of Freirean and other positivist empowerment agendas. “Empowerment” pedagogies and “critical” pedagogies are used somewhat interchangeably here to refer to educational theories (Freire, 1970, 1987; Giroux, 1997; McLaren, 1996; and Shor, 1987) and classroom practices (bell hooks, 1994; Berlak, 1994) which seek to place responsibility and authority for students’ education in their hands, which call for decentering of teacher authority, which follow inquiry-based, student-generated methodologies and which work toward negotiated curricula.

Later writers—Berlack (1994), Ellsworth (1992, 1994), Malinowitz (1995) and Gore (1992, 1993)—critique empowerment/critical pedagogies for the ways in which these approaches serve to further “othering” and entrenchment of superficial student perceptions of difference, and fail to articulate the substantive issues of difference. Lather (1992), Villanueva (1991) and Malinowitz (1997) argue for pedagogies that truly empower students in their recognition of the political exigencies of students’ lives and the political and institutional restraints on teachers. These more recent views articulate the need for transformation of power structures both within and without the academy as
recognition of the inequitable way education and other societal structures limit and
disempower students.

Feminist writers—Lather (1992), Gore (1992), and Ellsworth (1992, 1994)—draw
helpful distinctions among strands of thought in feminist, critical and empowerment
discourses. This discussion of ideologies and modes of language is helpful in sorting
through the underlying assumptions of words like “empowerment,” “student voice,”
“teacher authority,” and “student agency.” If examining these foundational assumptions
provides a clearer picture of the real choices lesbian, gay and straight students and lesbian
teachers can make in their authority and subject positions, we may be a step closer to the
transformation of education and culture projected by Freire (1970) and later in more
radical terms, by Malinowitz (1997).

A history of empowerment and critical pedagogies

 Teachers of first-year composition courses began incorporating, in the 1970’s, the
liberatory pedagogies of Paulo Freire, and in the 1980’s and 1990’s, the work of his
and Giroux (1997). Beginning in the 1970’s, and continuing into the 1980’s and 1990’s,
practitioners of liberatory pedagogies, and then critical pedagogies, took steps to
integrate, into composition studies and in first-year composition courses, issues of
difference. Race, ethnicity, and gender in the early years of emancipatory pedagogies—
are revisited and reconstructed in later years to include class and sexual orientation, and
to envision a shift in understanding from difference as victimization to a stance of
difference as identity.
Definitions and review of the literature

I will use the terms “liberatory,” “empowerment,” and “emancipatory” to refer to those educational theorists, Freire (1970), Giroux (1997), McLaren (1996), and Shor (1987), and classroom practitioners, bell hooks (1994) and Ann Berlak (1994), who seek to place responsibility and authority for students’ education in their hands, who call for decentering of teacher authority, follow inquiry-based, student-generated methodologies and who work toward negotiated curricula.

In Freire’s 1970 book, *Pedagogy of the oppressed*, teachers and students are co-learners in the inquiry process; each teaches the other. For Freire, this “reconciling” of inequitable subject positions is crucial to the students’ and teachers’ ability to be transformed in their education. If the teacher retains her/his position of power in the classroom, s/he is reproducing the oppression of our culture, and reducing the chance of both teacher and students for critical thinking. For Freire, “Liberating education consists in acts of cognition, not transfers of information” (p. 60). This kind of thinking happens through “problem-posing,” in which students ask real questions and work together with the teacher to make knowledgeable answers.

Shor (1987) reinscribes the Freirean (1970) agenda and definitions for American composition studies. Liberatory education includes: the politics of teacher and student situatedness in the classroom, students’ ability to make knowledge when authority is decentered, education as a “political act” (p.13), the necessity of student resistance, negotiated learning and curriculum as empowering for students and teacher, and the central place of teacher-student dialogue. Shor and Freire (1987), in *A pedagogy for liberation*, usefully and clearly outline the Freirean “agenda” for liberatory education: the
politics of teacher and student situatedness in the classroom, students’ ability to make knowledge when authority is decentered, education as a “political act” (p. 13), the necessity of student resistance, negotiated learning and curriculum as empowering for students and teacher, and the place of teacher-student dialogue.

Villanueva (1991) advocates the acknowledgement and articulation, with students, of the forces of hegemony in their lives, in teachers’ lives, in their education, and in their university settings. He also encourages the development of students’ critical skills, both for their own educational and life purposes, but as a means for their own resistance and knowledge production. At the same time, Villanueva (1991) argues against teachers who subordinate students’ own expectations and desires for their educational to their, the teachers’, political agendas. Villanueva recognizes the limitations on teachers and pedagogy of institutional desires and constraints. In this way, Villanueva, in his own words, a “Freirista,” stands against some of the concerns of critical theorists.

Women's studies theorists—Elizabeth Ellsworth (1992), Jennifer Gore (1992) and Patti Lather (1992)—draw helpful distinctions among strands of thought in feminist, critical, and empowerment discourses in three important articles. Ellsworth (1994) argues that “key assumptions, goals and pedagogical practices fundamental to the literature on critical pedagogy—namely, “empowerment,” “student voice,” “dialogue,” and even the term “critical” are repressive myths that perpetuate relations of dominance” (p. 91). She notes that when she and her students attempted to activate these goals in a course she taught in response to incidents of racism at her own university, the problems of “Eurocentrism, racism, sexism, classism, and “banking education” worsened rather than resolved (p. 91). Further, Ellsworth (1994) charges that proponents of critical pedagogies
have not shown whether their practices actually change power relationships “outside or inside schools,” that these pedagogies often seek public funding for personal agendas, and that “code words” are used which mask their subversive stances (p. 93). She problematizes student voice as “partial and partisan,” while “taking them at their word”: “…they hold implications other social movements and their struggles for self-definition” (p. 97). Ellsworth (1994) interrogates also the assumptions of empowerment with regard to teacher-student subject positions, noting that in many Freirean theorists, the teacher, covertly or overtly, holds the power, and shares with his/her students, implying the superiority of the teacher. An important critique here, too, is Ellsworth’s argument that empowerment projects have removed teachers and students from their historical and political contexts, which clouds the reality that our own prejudices and agendas oppress both others and us.

Lather (1992) defines “critical pedagogy” as “that which attends to practices of teaching/learning intended to interrupt particular historical, situated systems of oppression” (p. 121). She claims that these pedagogies have too often not problematized empowerment as “something done…”to” or “for” the as-yet-unliberated, the “Other” (p. 122). Her discussion is contextualized in a historical discussion of liberatory discourses and what she terms “post-critical pedagogies” (p. 122), centering on an analysis of Ellsworth’s “Why Doesn’t This Feel Empowering? Working Through the Repressive Myths of Critical Pedagogy” (1992). Ellsworth’s strength, according to Lather (1992), is her postmodern reflection about pedagogical theory and practice: “Making the workings of pedagogy more apparent,” increases the possibilities for finding truly liberatory practices (p.127). “Post-critical pedagogies” seek to shift the emphasis from, in Alcoff’s
(1994) words, “speaking for others” to reflexively examining conflicts and sites of resistance that arise from the use of those pedagogies (p.131).

Gore (1992) usefully examines of definitions of “empowerment” in a variety of discourses—she labels these as “conservative,” “liberal humanist,” and “critical and feminist” (p.54)—and also argues the relationship between “empowerment and pedagogy” (p.55). Gore delineates two distinct “approaches to the question of pedagogy…one strand emphasizes the broad (and shifting) social and educational vision while the other shows greater concern for instructional practices in specific contexts” (p.55). She puts Giroux (1997) and McLaren (1996) in the first category, and Freire (1970) and Shor (1987) in the second. Similarly, Gore (1992) presents two schools in feminist pedagogy, those emerging in women’s studies and those from education. For Gore (1992), within these various discourses and pedagogies:

…Empowerment presupposes: (1) an agent of empowerment, (2) a notion of power as property, and (3) some kind of vision or desirable end state. (p. 56)

Gore (1992) critiques the agency of teacher as “empower-er,” noting our situation within contexts of patriarchy (e.g. university settings) and by the “historical construction of pedagogy as, and within, discourses of social regulation” (p. 57). She also critiques what she views as Giroux’s (1997) establishment of a binary between teachers and students which “others” students. Gore (1992) posits that much of empowerment theory has served to empower academics, rather than students (p 68).

bell hooks (1994) in her discussion of a “liberatory pedagogy” acknowledges her indebtedness to the work and person of Freire (1970) and also to the pacifist Buddhist monk Thich Nhat Hahn (The raft is not the shore, 2001). For hooks, such pedagogy
consists in disrupting educational practices that allow only one way of knowledge making, in which the teacher is the gatekeeper to knowledge-production. The teacher, for hooks, is one engaged in her/his own process of "self-actualization," crucial if the classroom is really intended as a "safe" site for "education as the practice of freedom." hooks also examines what makes a classroom a "feminist" one for students, especially for those marginalized by current traditional educational practices. The feminist classroom frees students from replicating the inequities of power endemic in our society, allows the "construction of an identity in resistance" (p.46). hooks (1994) reinvents and re-vision Freirean liberatory theory and practice from the stance of a feminist teacher of color.

The term “critical pedagogies” is meant to describe the work of later theorists—Berlak (1994), Ellsworth (1992, 1994), Malinowitz (1997), Gore (1992) and others—who critique empowerment pedagogies for the ways in which these approaches serve to further “othering” and entrenchment of superficial student perceptions of difference, and fail to articulate the substantive issues of difference. Truly critical pedagogies, argue Lather (1992), Villanueva (1991), and Malinowitz (1997), empower students in their recognition of the political exigencies of students’ lives and the political and institutional constraints on teachers. “Critical,” for these theorists, applies to pedagogies that articulate the need for transformation of power structures both within and without the academy as recognition of the inequitable ways education and other societal structures limit and disempower students. In the classroom, critical pedagogies often take on issues of gender, race, class, and sexual orientation as a means of interrogating students’ assumptions and formulas.
Ann Berlak (1994), in her narrative/critique of a humanities course, which she, a white woman, co-taught with a woman of color, articulates the goals of a pedagogy that seeks, through the deconstruction of race and racism, students’ increased understanding of their own subject positions with regard to oppression. In turn, Berlak’s course examines, as social constructs of oppression, “racism, sexism, heterosexism, adultism, and anti-Semitism” (p 41). Berlak notes that this approach, which was effected to enable students to “cross areas of difference,” served both to perpetuate and to liberate students from those differences. By foregrounding each social construct, Berlak feels that students’ labels became more deeply ingrained, rather than freeing them to understand each other’s positions. In assuming a “critical pedagogy” stance toward her own critical pedagogy, Berlak (1994) illustrates both the possibilities and limitations of a truly “critical” pedagogy in terms of student learning.

Ellsworth (1994), writing from an educational foundations viewpoint, addresses important concerns for critical pedagogies. For example, how does “speaking about” marginalized groups lead to “speaking for” them? (p. 105). How does that “speaking for,” in turn, affect the subject relations between teachers and students, and the learnings that occur, both overt and covert? She uses the term “representation” to illuminate the ways in which teacher and student subject positions are constructed through “curriculums, teaching practices, and school policies” (Ellsworth, 1994, p.105). “Representation”—the “processes that people and social groups use to interpret and give meaning to the world, and to the mediation of those meanings by and through language, stories, images, music, and other cultural products” (p.100)—as social construct (rather
than as essentialist) speaks to questions not only about privileged and marginalized populations, but also to privileged and marginalized bodies of knowledge.

McLaren (1996) posits the transformative possibilities of pedagogy as a “form of social and cultural criticism” (p. 125). For McLaren (1996), the teacher’s subject position is necessarily a politicized one: “the role of the educator [is] as an active agent of social change” (p. 125). Teachers must recognize that language practices—a central theme for those of us in composition studies—implicate us in the oppressive discursive practices of our culture. Like hooks (1994), McLaren (1996) argues that if we do not disrupt or challenge the ways in which these practices oppress students’ means of knowledge production, we also oppress. True liberatory/critical (for he collapses the meanings), for McLaren (1996) is articulated through a “politics of difference,” illuminated through dialogue (p. 143).

Giroux (1997) posits that schools are sites of contested power and ideology, which a critical pedagogy should articulate and transform. He cites the work of Mikhail
Bahktin (1981) and Paulo Freire (1970) as the theoretical basis for a model “in which the notions of struggles, student voice and critical dialogue are central to the goal of developing an emancipatory pedagogy” (132). Giroux (1997) also collapses these definitions. Subject positions of both teacher and students are directly related to and mediated by the way language is infected with power relations. Giroux would have us investigate how the power relations which oppress in our society are reflected in our school practices (“discourse of production”), develop “critique capable of analyzing cultural forms as they are produced and used in specific classrooms” (“discourse of textual analysis”), and examine how both students and teachers make meaning in our historical/cultural contexts (“the discourse of lived cultures”) (1997, pp.134-140).

Malinowitz (1995) critiques the empowerment pedagogy first espoused by Freire: For people who are relatively powerless in society—such as workers, people of color, and women—there can be a contradiction in the idea that writing is a tool of empowerment (p. 679).

Malinowitz argues that a writing process pedagogy, which does not seek to articulate with students how inequitable power relations in our culture are reflected in our educational practices (and vice versa), does not empower. Class differences between students and teachers often underscore this gap, particularly because these differences are not addressed in the classroom setting. If there is no connection made between students as writers and students as people, with real lives, we teach writing processes that put students in danger in the “outside” world, because we do not recognize the political implications of our pedagogy. Necessary to making those connections, for Malinowitz, is
the teacher’s relinquishing of authority, for “using language to reshape authoritative structures in the world” (p. 682).

Malinowitz (1995) constructs a critical pedagogy in which gay and lesbian students can “confront the ways that they function as social metaphors for their audience…classroom peers and teachers,” that acknowledges rather than silences these students’ choice for an openly gay subjectivity. Through an “identity” themed course, both gay and lesbian and straight students are given space to construct, through their writing, an understanding of their own and others’ subject positions. Malinowitz argues that such a pedagogy, which foregrounds a queer, rather than “mainstream” discourse, offers lesbian and gay students the opportunity to “[write] different texts, [be] different sorts of readers, [be] differently constituted as audiences, [have] different sorts of intertextual relationships with their peers’ writing” (p. 144). In this way, Malinowitz (1997) combines both liberatory and critical approaches so that gay and lesbian students are empowered to write from an openly gay subjectivity—not, admittedly, a common stance in composition classrooms, though certainly increasing since 1997—and, at the same time, encouraged to critique that subjectivity.

**Implications of ideological critiques of other empowerment pedagogies**

This approach, for many lesbian composition teachers, may provide the most pedagogical viability. The queer geography, if you will, of such classrooms, provides the space both for lesbian teachers’ personal and professional subjectivities to be articulated and allows, thus, examination by all students—GLBT or straight—of those subjectivities. The usefulness of this articulation of subjectivity extends beyond teachers’ disclosure of our sexual orientation as lesbians. I contend that since students accurately and actively
read their teachers as open texts regardless of our openness or closeting as lesbians it is a useful pedagogical and professional strategy to articulate our subject positions as teachers as a means of opening space for the sexual and personal subjectivities of our students. “Queer geography” in the classroom means for me a pedagogical landscape that allows many intersecting identities, that makes open space both for conflict and for the hope of its resolution, and that permits the resulting cognitive dissonance which results in real learning for all students. To consciously and purposefully close off the opportunity for examination and articulation of teacher and student subject positions in the composition classroom, where we encourage students to write for academic, professional and real world purposes, seems, to my mind, to limit that queer classroom geography in ways that also limit students and teachers learning from each other. “Opening the playground,” a term I’ll use again in the final chapter—the uncovering, articulating, and critiquing of academic discourse and disciplinary conventions with students is a worthy pedagogical strategy with the goal of reshaping and transforming those disciplines to allow new knowledge-making. Writing across the Curriculum pedagogies can be empowering to students if, as Malinowitz suggests, we uncover and expose the disciplinary conventions and the academic discourses to examination and transformation. This strategy exposes the workings of academic disciplines in ways that invite students into a common ground, a geographical space of learning, with us, their teachers and that will enable students to employ academic discourse in new epistemological projects and new fields that we currently know little about.
Chapter 4: Subjectivities of lesbian teachers: A case study

In this chapter, I will give a brief review of the use of the case study approach and present the preliminary findings elicited in my conversations with lesbian professors of composition and, in the next chapter, examine the case studies of students in writing courses I taught. The use of case study methodology in composition studies began almost concurrently with the beginnings of the field. Composition studies and women’s studies have confluent chronologies and histories, and women’s studies scholarship has influenced composition studies, particularly the work of women scholars in rhetoric and composition (Alexander, 1999; Burns, 1996; Caughie, 1995; Davies, 2000; Enos, 1996; Kates, 1997; Peck and Mink, 1998; Rhodes, 2001; Ritchie and Boardman, 1999).

An additional confluence, important in the history of composition studies comes from feminist psychology, emanating from the work of Carol Gilligan, who significantly articulated in her ground-breaking study of girls’ moral development, In A different voice, Gilligan (1982/1993) argues that earlier psychological studies of male subjects had been unproblematically generalized to “human subjects” without any reference or examination of female subjects. For example, William Perry’s (1970) study of college student development, extrapolated from male only subjects, was extensively used in previous composition studies scholarship as foundation for ideas about “developmental writing development” in under-prepared college writers (Bizzell, 1984, 1992; Capossela, 1997; Dinitz, 1991; Henderson, 1992, 1994; Holt-Reynolds, 2000; Kieddaisch and Dinitz, 1989; J. Martinez and N. Martinez, 1987; McCarthy, 1987; Tedesco, 1991; Villanueva, 1997). Gilligan’s (1982/1993) own scholarship developed the use of case studies
involving female subjects, which then drew conclusions about women based on her findings.

Her articulation of her own position as researcher, first as a student of Lawrence Kolhberg in his male subject-only studies (1958, 1981), and then in her own studies of female subjects, also foregrounds the situated (and interested) position of the feminist researcher (Gilligan, 1982/1993). Gilligan’s (1982/1993, in Larrabee, 1992) work also disrupts and problematizes the work of Perry (1970, and in Arnold and King, 1997), whose work in the psychology of human development was also based on male-only subjects. This point is crucial, because writing programs throughout the country took to heart Perry’s (1970) view that adolescents, including college students, develop intellectual reasoning and thinking in stages. Composition teachers at the time, who were used to integrating their understandings from psychology into their work in the classroom, did incorporate these stages into their practices. Thus developed a widespread “legend” (as used by North, 1987) that all students should be only assigned writing topics correlating to their developmental stage.

This type of research by Kohlberg (1958) and Perry (1970) reflects the earliest models of the teaching of “rhetoric” (writing) in the twentieth century in this country that follow a sort of “developmental” approach. Teachers started students on narrative-writing (self-referenced writing), moved on to descriptive writing (a movement to outside oneself in observation, profiles, and personal reflection), began then on expository writing to produce and synthesize information, and ending with persuasive writing: rhetoric. This approach continues in very many places in the academy, and is inculcated in most public and private schools, evidenced in the longevity of such texts as John
Warriner’s (et al.), *Guide to English grammar and composition*, long called “Warriner’s” by teachers of writing, and in composition studies. The book was used in my high school composition class (circa 1968) and is still used at my son’s junior high school (circa 2002).

Gilligan’s (1982) work with girls and women disrupts this linear formulation of critical thinking skills and indicates the recursive and relational possibilities for students in our writing classes. Thus it opens possibilities for feminist research and for the interested researcher in this dissertation and for the subjects of my case studies. When, as a lesbian feminist teacher and researcher, I view my first-year students as able to write in ways that illustrate their ability to think critically with sophistication, creativity and strong logical reasoning, they gain an opening to make their own knowledges, to build their own history of ideas and skills.

In this way, students show that they can use writing to explore different subject positions, to self-generate an amazing array of topics, even societally “risky” topics around lesbian and gay issues, and to examine new modes of thinking since their transitions from home community to the culture that is college. The culture of the academy is sometimes more “liberal,” oftentimes more challenging to unified belief systems, ideologically humanist, or socialist, or Marxist, or socially constructionist, or feminist (depending on the institution), and many combinations of these positions.

When students become vested researchers and, in the case of my students, vested and invested participants, they assume their own voices and authorize the use of their voices on the traditional taboo on speaking of marginalized lesbian and queer issues and ideas in a very public way. In the next chapter, I introduce the use of their cases—both
written responses to the questionnaire and their public (public because these essays are usually traded in a group for peer review) essays—as a way for first-year students (at this institution mostly 17-19 year olds) to begin to explore and to claim their own knowledge production and public thinking and writing voices.

*Voice* is also important for the lesbian teachers who have participated in this study. I have chosen, in this study, to employ the strategy of quoting their full responses to the project’s questionnaire in order for them to say what they will, rather than what I will. Their longer responses indicate their desire to talk finally about what they have so often not been given the place to do.

**Composition studies’ historical use of the case study approach**

In composition studies, early “landmark” (this word resonates, for composition scholars, with the famous *Landmark Essays* series) scholarly projects using qualitative methodologies such as case studies, and often involving teacher-research include: Carol Berkenkotter’s “Conventions, Conversations, and the Writer: Case Study of a Student in a Rhetoric Ph.D. Program” (1988), Donald Graves’ “An Examination of the Writing Processes of Seven-year-old Children” (1975), and Barbara Walvoord’s “Thinking and Writing in College: A Naturalistic Case Study of Students in Four Disciplines” (1986). Graves (1975) supports his use of the case study, noting,

In recent years new focus has come to the case study approach as a means to investigation of the variables involved in new areas of research. Indeed, the case study approach in the field of comparative research is most often recommended when entering virgin territory in which little has been investigated (in Perl, 1994, p.23).
While the idea of “virgin territory” may make some of us momentarily digress from the idea at hand, Graves’ (1975) point that case studies are useful for knowledge production in areas of research previously unstudied is certainly relevant for this dissertation project. Barbara Walvoord’s (1986) study of four college students offered a methodology for the most basic and important levels of teacher-research—the generation of previously unstudied observation of subjects. Lesbian teachers’ subjectivities in the composition classroom have remained, for the most part, unexamined, particularly in connection with student writing and student subject positions, and thus generate fruitful possibilities for research.

Glenda Bissex (1990) argues for the case study as an “appropriate methodology” for teacher research (p.70):

“Appropriate methodology” echoes the concept of “appropriate technology”—tools compatible with their contexts. For a teacher to teach one class by an approach he believes in and another class by an approach he is at least less convinced about, in order to have a control and an experimental group, is inappropriate methodology. For a teacher to observe and inquire into and reflect on the events and persons in his classroom is to use methodology in keeping with his role as an educator—methodology that does not alienate him or intrude on his teaching (p.70).

Bissex here initializes a standard of “apropos” for teacher research in the classroom that rightly argues against using one group of students as a control group and thus possibly hindering those students’ education. On the other hand, I take issue with her use of the word “intrude” with regard to the use of teacher research methodology. Teacher
research, as I have earlier pointed out, necessarily, through its inherent subjectivity and as a site of complication, intrudes upon our teaching. Teacher research is shot through with intrusion and disruption whose creative use can lead to transformative understandings of the subjectivities we bring to teaching and to research, and finally, to our students. They, in return, necessarily intrude, disrupt and complicate our lesbian teacher subjectivities.

Bissex (1990) does not extrapolate in this direction with regard to teacher subjectivities, but does acknowledge, in her definitions, a “case” as a special project as viewed through a close observation of responses from the individuals involved in it…The persons studied are regarded as full human beings, having intentions and meanings, not merely behaving. The researcher includes those intentions and meanings in the meaning that she makes of the story, and, as interpreter if not also actor, is herself a character in it (p.71).

I will go a few steps further, to argue that teachers may not find it possible to fully understand the “intentions and meanings…of the story,” particularly if a LGBT student, who often feels he/she must use code words and/or hide the “real story,” has written that piece. If our lesbian subjectivities are not necessarily apparent to us in our classroom teaching, those subjectivities and ourselves as lesbian teachers will be apparent as texts our students will read.

Newkirk (1992) agrees with Bissex (1990), noting that

…The case-study writer draws on a core of mythic narratives—deeply rooted story patterns that clearly signal to the reader the types of judgments to be made…. By using these narrative patterns, the account can move beyond the particular or “idiographic,” and come to embody a set of cultural beliefs (p 135).
This view of Newkirk’s seems somewhat problematic in that, while stories do embody often multiple cultural subsets of beliefs, his idea that these are “enduring cultural myths…and conventions” may not be helpful in their interpretation, particularly in a feminisms-saturated and queer-studies saturated context.

I provide these longer citations as they present a fuller grounding of how I see myself and in this project, how I view my position as an invested and a vested teacher-researcher. With Bissex (1990), the ways I use case studies in this project are “a way of learning, not a method for proving” (p. 71). Thus, the employment of the case study approach in teacher-research in composition, education, and many other fields, is a methodology, though not a strictly empirical one. Bissex (1990), notes the use of case studies can allow for a wider view that allows for difference:

Statistical studies cause differences to appear as one-dimensional, as differences in degree, blurring the qualitative differences between individuals which teachers confront daily in their classrooms (p.73).

In terms of this project, then, I use case studies of students and teachers as a means to creating learning, and for recognizing and theorizing (not proving) about difference, student and teacher subject positions. Students, teachers and I work in a multi-valenced, relational, interconnected and connecting context, constituted in the socially constructed, conflicted, in Bahktin’s (1981) word, ideologically “infected,” called the composition classroom.
Part 1: The case study: Introduction to the problem

The methodologies for this case study suggested themselves in the exigencies surrounding the “rhetorical moment” from which this subject emerged. In a conversation, I told Dr. Kristine Blair about the many student papers I received after the murder of Matthew Shepard in 1998 and also after outing myself to my students. She suggested that studying such essays might provide a rich source of material for the questions about lesbian teacher subjectivity about which I was currently thinking and encouraged me to do this work. This case study and teacher-research approach, foundational to and integral to the field of composition studies, appeared a valid method for a dissertation which examines the effects of out lesbian teachers on student choice of topics, student writing and student subject positions in the first-year composition programs, as it allows for an entrance into both the examination of and interaction with student and teacher texts.

While this approach has many obvious limitations—small number of student and teacher respondents, less possibility to project to larger populations, selected rather than randomized subjects—the attempt here is not to provide a wide-ranging empirical study. Rather, a qualitative study—one of the very first done with strictly lesbian teacher subjects and with first-year composition students, straight, bisexual, lesbian, and gay – is appropriate in providing a beginning examination through close reading of student essays and responses and lesbian teachers’ responses to assignments.

By “close reading,” I mean readings generated by the ways in which lesbian teachers read student essays, evoked by the lesbian teachers’ own appropriation of disclosure on the scale from closeting to complete outness, necessarily influenced by the constraints of the administration and the writing program. As teachers, we all produce
readings of our students’ essays, based on our training as educators, both in college and graduate school as well as in the fire of classroom experience, on our individually and socially constructed ideas of self and of roles as teachers, on our understanding of writing practice and of our students. In this paradigm, students also disclose and conceal, problematize and disguise, reveal and testify.

To my teacher’s mind, this is a manifestation of my hope for an egalitarian education, one which embodies and complicates difference, ethnicity, class, and sexual orientation, one in which students educate teachers and, hopefully, teachers, particularly lesbian teachers, educate students. In thinking through and reporting these comments, essays, and responses, I hope this project will serve as an opening for further research in this field, with increased numbers of first-year composition students and of out lesbian teachers involved.

**Methodology: Background of the problem**

Noting the limitations and constraints as well as the possibilities for this piece of teacher-research is fundamental in approaching the research problem at hand: **How do out lesbian teachers and lesbian teacher subjectivities affect student choice of writing topics, student subjectivities, and student writing in the first-year composition classroom?** In regular searches during the last six years, only a very few research articles have surfaced specifically about lesbian teachers, and even fewer about students of such teachers.

Institutional constraints around this subject area have, I believe, helped limit the available research. The Human Subjects Review Board at my own university, a large Midwestern state university, following federal guidelines, includes sexual orientation as
part of a list of other “socially controversial stimuli or potentially questionable procedures or materials such as (but not restricted to) the following”:

- Shock or other forms of punishment
- Sexually explicit materials or questions
- Handling of money and other valuable commodities
- Extraction of blood and other bodily fluids
- Questions about drug use
- Administration of substances to subjects
- Questions about sexual orientation or sexual experience
- Purposeful creation of anxiety, or
- Any procedure which might be considered an invasion of privacy


While the need for protection of subjects in the research and in university settings, and the need for clear Human Subjects Review Board’s policies are completely understood, I nonetheless posit that the rhetoric of placement of sexual orientation in such a list is indicative of institutional views of research like my own, as well as our society’s continuing homophobia. The Human Subjects Review Board at my university did become more open to my entertaining this topic once they understood the nature of the research proposed.

For instance, the application (appended) clarified that no one would ever be asked her/his sexual orientation, and that students who agreed to participate were only to address their reactions, responses, and writing to any issues they might have surrounding
their teacher’s/researcher’s (my) orientation. Students could choose a level of disclosure, as they desired. Students in my classes were only asked to participate after their grades were reported and the semester was finished. They had complete freedom at that point to participate or to decline participation, as some did. Student participation included one or both of these documents: a consent form allowing me to use their essay(s) in the form of quoted sections, and, in some cases, their responses to a short questionnaire.

Lesbian teachers who agreed to participate were already out or chose the level of disclosure that allowed them to speak with some measure of frankness and comfort. I chose the vehicle of a web page as a means of providing the questions and ideas in as close a form of non-self-disclosure to which I hoped lesbian university composition teachers might respond. For example, lesbian teachers could, without identifying themselves initially, cut and paste the survey for their own perusal before deciding whether to participate. My thinking at the time of the construction of this web survey was that it might provide a level of disclosure and comfort necessary to providing any views at all from a lesbian teacher population long used to invisibility, erasure, physical and job threats, silence, and silencing. In other words, lesbian teachers are a very large professional group who are, in coming-out rhetoric, “in the closet.”

The web site was carefully prepared as a “Community for Lesbian and Inclusive Teachers,” which could only be accessed in total by my invitation to join. While the web page CynthiaMahaffeyProjects@groups.msn.com is on the World Wide Web, I purposely excluded total access, expecting that if I did so an influx of others who might not truly be lesbian teachers, or even lesbians, (or even women) could attempt to participate or harass. In addition, the inclusion of the word “lesbian” in any website, even
those educational and informative, seems an open invitation to unwanted inclusion on most Internet pornography sites—an added problem in research around issues of sexual orientation.

I made the decision to use Microsoft’s “MSN Web Communities” web builders’ program to construct the web site. The Human Subjects Review Board approval and necessary documents, including consent forms for students and teachers and questionnaires for each populations, were included (see [http://groups.msn.com/CynthiaMahaffeySProjects](http://groups.msn.com/CynthiaMahaffeySProjects)). Also included were pages for sending suggestions and lesson plans; a journal where members could contribute thoughts, questions, and ideas; a forum for discussion; and my personal home page to build the necessary rapport to increase participants’ knowledge of my purposes in this research and of me. To say that trust within the lesbian community is of central importance is an understatement. The honoring of confidentiality within lesbian circles is central to each community’s code and fosters the basis for further communication and community respect.

Also intentionally and as required by the university, full documentation was provided in the site, including my university’s Human Subjects Review Board for approval, consent forms, and questionnaires, as well as links for suggesting possible assignments and personal, anecdotal experiences. For the purposes of increased security, respondents were asked to copy and paste their responses to a Word Document which could be sent by email or by United States mail, instead of hitting a “submit” button, offering, hopefully, a wider set of options for security concerns.
Respondents were always offered the option of receiving paper forms and questionnaires by United States mail. Participants were then asked to send their completed forms on by post or by email, whichever was most personally convenient. Consent forms were then sent by post for participants’ signatures. Only responses with signed paper consent forms in my files were used for the study.

The idea for presenting this as a “community” was an obvious one. Not only does MSN offer these sites for web creation, it apparently views these rings of knowledge, expertise and common experience as most useful to its members. The idea of “community” as shared lives, experiences and knowledge also resonates with lesbian teachers, out or closeted. For most of us, the inter-linking circles of friends and colleagues who are lesbians (and/or gay men) are our social and emotional support groups, as are our straight/supportive friends and families. In most of the circles of lesbians to which I belong, encompassing areas in Northwest Ohio and southwestern Michigan, a high percentage are teachers. This seems disproportionately large, given the widely varied socio-economic and geographic areas from which lesbians come to socialize, and the fact that several of these circles are not members of the local university communities. Gay psychologists Lippert and Russell (1988) argue that because of the many forms of social prejudices that LGBT persons face, many enter the helping professions.

An amendment to the study was approved which permitted the use of the snowball effect, which further extends the implications of community for lesbians. Teachers who initially responded sent the site on to friends who were also lesbian teachers of college composition, then notified me that a person would contact me in the
near future regarding the questionnaire. The implications of this chain of knowledge extension and knowledge making must be articulated here. Because of the need for confidentiality, and the refusal of any member of the lesbian community to out another teacher’s sexual orientation to a stranger, teachers who answered the page accessible on the Internet referred the request to other lesbian teachers known to them personally. This second line of respondents could choose whether to contact me.

Additionally, lesbian and straight academic women who knew me referred me to various scholarly list serves for queer research or list serves that included queer research. One psychologist attached my call for participants to a preface she wrote identifying and certifying me as a serious academic researcher/doctoral student and vouched for me personally to the American Psychological Association’s Women in Psychology list serve. In addition, the project’s call for participants was accepted for inclusion and forwarding through a graduate student LBGTLGBT list serve [put site in here], through a national directory of LGBT scholars (The E-Directory of LGBT Scholars), and through a screened list serve of the national LGBT organization of the Episcopal Church of the United States.

This last organization represents a separate level of disclosure. The list serve itself requires that prospective members be screened before admission to the LGBT Episcopal list serve; thus, a measure of safety is provided—i.e., the list is not available on the World Wide Web, though the organization Integrity is. While many of the list serve members are out, some are not. A strong contingent of lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender teachers from elementary through graduate education, graduate students, and Episcopal priests make up this list. In addition, straight, gay-positive persons from all walks of life,
who often also have LGBT children or relatives, are members. The group tends to be very well educated, including many with doctoral and master’s degrees.

Another list on which my call for participants appeared, the The E-Directory of LGBT Scholars http://www.LGBTstudies.umn.edu/edirLGBT/, is constructed so that members can choose to be listed, but available only to other members, or to be out as queer scholars. In the latter option, LGBT scholars are listed on the World Wide Web.

The Lesbian and Gay Research Interests Group (http://www.lgbt-research@yahoo.com) also screens members. The constituents are mostly doctoral students working in LGBT-related dissertation projects who submit calls for participants. This sometimes has the effect of the group members participating in each other’s research, a pattern that, though a bit self-referential, again underscores the community nature of the LGBT community. Doctoral students on this list forwarded my call for participants to LBGT persons known personally to the members.

As a means for judging the responses from groups of lesbian teachers who are, for the most part, completely undisclosed, I sent a request for the inclusion of the call for participants in a paper-only lesbian teachers’ newsletter in the Midwest. This group consists of elementary through high school lesbian teachers, with a few college teachers. Teachers belonging to this group send stories of their experiences, but usually only sign with initials or “Name Withheld.”

**Description of the data collection process for teacher participants**

As proposed, I constructed a web site which asked teachers to answer a short questionnaire intended to elicit personal experiences as out, as semi-closeted or semi-disclosed—for example, out in the lesbian community, in their neighborhoods and in
their towns, but not in the university or in the classes they teach, or as closeted, undisclosed with regard to their sexual orientation -- for instance, not out at school or in their home locales, often not out to their closest friends and university colleagues or to their families.

The web site construction was, in itself “a contested site,” intersected by straight homophobia, lesbian teachers’ internalized homophobia and their well-founded fears of material consequences – loss of jobs, financial security, physical safety, destruction homes and other personal property – as well as my own fairly steep learning curve, and institutional constraints about the nature of the study.

Feeling (correctly I know now) that paying a web-savvy student to construct the web site would be much more cost-effective given my inexperience, a student was hired. While informed about the nature of the project and very eager to accept the work from the beginning, this student refused the project when materials for the web site were submitted. Since the study is built on the precept that those involved have the freedom to choose their level of participation and since, as a teacher, I understand that students are at very different levels of understanding regarding sexual orientation, the student’s withdrawal was accepted respectfully and a cordial acquaintance is maintained. I only mention this incident as one of many blockades that occurred in the course of this project.

Despite the community nature of the lesbian/gay greater family – the word “family” is a central word with heavy connotations in the LBGT community, both with regard to the place the community has taken for many of us who have been excluded from their families of origin and by societal, institutionalized homophobia—which enabled the snowball effect that routed my call for participants, very few lesbian teachers
were willing to submit responses from an online source. This result both illuminates not only the problems and fears lesbian teachers face, but in a tactical error in the design of my study.

The reasoning behind the construction of the web page (see “HSRB rationale,” http://groups.msn.com/CynthiaMahaffeyProjects) was that lesbian teachers would find such a vehicle more accessible and secure for sharing their thoughts and experiences. I was not Internet-savvy enough in the early construction to understand how completely non-confidential most of the Internet is. Additionally, lesbian teachers who saw the web page did not know me personally. It was not enough for me to merely identify myself as a lesbian teacher at a named university with the phone numbers and email addresses of the Human Subjects Review Board and my dissertation chair.

Blair (1998) has argued for the many ways in which Internet users reinvent, refigure, disrupt the cues of personality, gender, sexual orientation, race, age, multiple subjectivities and ethnicity; for many, such multiplicity may result in a healthy skepticism of the “true” identity of web sites and the people who design them. Many of the exigencies we face as lesbians, wherever we fall in the spectrum of out to closeted as subjects, often precipitates and encourages personal knowledge of one another that endows trust among members of our community and protects us from homophobia. In some, those exigencies lead lesbians to further retreat to the closet, even from other lesbians. While it is an almost iron-clad code in the LBGT community not to “out” any other person, that fear is always present—whether it emerges from a painful or scary personal experience or from fear of reprisal. While my office number, name, and other
identifiers appeared in the web page, without a “real face’ on the site, many lesbian
teachers did not appear to feel safe in responding to a web-based questionnaire.

The difficulties in finding lesbian teachers who were willing to participate in this
study generated through the list serves and from the Internet web page provide a strong
case for a premise of this project: lesbian teachers, whether completely out
(remembering, of course, that coming out is a lifelong process as new people are met),
partially out or completely closeted, are constantly, as lesbian teachers and “teacher
texts,” reconstructing and reinscribing their subjectivities between negotiation, non-
disclosure, partial disclosure, outness, compromise, isolation, support, fear, courage,
despair, conflict, and hope.

I received three initial responses from the original publishing of the web page.
These three emailed me and two requested the materials to complete. One did finish and
send in the consent forms and questionnaires. Later I received a request to join the
community by an avowed straight male, and a fourth from a person who identified herself
as a lesbian teacher. I answered the straight male, who seemed to be sincerely inquiring,
via my university email, but did not admit him to the community. The last respondent and
I were in the earliest stages of communication as this project drew to a close. She did not
seem to be able to spare the time for the project and is not a participant.

A lesbian administrator who is a friend offered to send the call for participants to
four lesbian composition professors she knew. One responded immediately, and her
responses were collected and consent forms signed. No others responded. Another
colleague, a lesbian professor, also sent the call to a list of her lesbian teacher friends
around the country. No one responded to this call. This same colleague also offered to
participate in the study, and her responses were collected and permission forms signed. One other lesbian instructor at another university heard of my study and enthusiastically participated, sending in consent and questionnaire. In all, four lesbian teachers responded in 2001 and 2002 and their ideas and responses appear later, in the analysis section of this chapter.

The screened Episcopal list serve produced only one respondent, but what a participant! Dr. Louis Crew, Professor Emeritus of Rutgers University, is a founder of the Episcopal LGBT national organization, Integrity, and founder of the Integrity list serve. He is a long-time writing and literature professor, now retired, who, because of his scholarly and gentle personality, offers much in his long-experience as an out gay man and professor of college students. Though he is a gay man and not within the specified scope of this project, his responses and extensive class notes and assignments are offered at because of his very viable and certainly transferable approach to his classes, of his own consciously held subjectivities and of those of his students. His long-time committed relationship to an African American man adds layers of race to those of sexual orientation in his own subjectivities and approaches in the classroom. Examples of his prolific writing and his work over the years as an out gay professor with students can be found at http://www.rci.rutgers.edu/~lcrew/pubd/teachinggay.html, http://www-rci.rutgers.edu/~lcrew/pubd/thunder.html and his homepage, http://newark.rutgers.edu/~lcrew/index.html. The four lesbian teachers offered class assignments or approaches in their responses, rather than under separate cover, which was perfectly acceptable, given the very high time demands on women composition instructors. I am extremely grateful for these women, who have chosen to participate in
the making of new knowledge about lesbian teacher subjectivities. My assumption here is
that the brevity of the questionnaire was squeezed between their own consuming
scholarship, teaching tasks and constant student and family demands. Eileen Schell
(1992) in her article “The Feminization of Composition,” notes that women professors
spend an overly disproportionate amount of time, as opposed to men, in mentoring
graduate and undergraduate students, junior professors, and instructors, often to the
detriment of their advancement in the academy and in their scholarship. These four
women’s courage and willingness to offer very precious time to this project accomplishes
several important tasks: they open a long-closed window into the professional lives of
lesbian teachers, lesbian teacher subjectivities and about their interactions with students,
they provide new knowledge which will make a way for further research and
understanding of our personal and professional lives as lesbian teachers, and they make
an easier professional, psychological and personal path for lesbian teachers who follow.
Their voices are named as they specified, either by full name disclosure or as fictitious
initials.

My experience with the most “non-disclosed” group, the paper newsletter, was
interesting. While I am listed in the newsletter with full name disclosure, email address,
university address and phone number in their directory of “contact persons,” the
newsletter neither acknowledged my request for inclusion of a call to participants, nor
printed it, even though a check for the inclusion was accepted and deposited. This last
point I have come to view as non-judgmental support for lesbian teachers who feel they
cannot disclose their lesbian subjectivities as teachers and for a publication that appears
to serve such teachers. I received, obviously, no participants from this group. The most
recent newsletter I received contained three stories from retiring lesbian teachers who asked that their newsletters be cancelled as they were, in one retiree’s words, “turning my back on a long career that has caused me deep personal and professional pain.”

**Analysis of lesbian teacher responses**

I begin with an analysis of the teachers’ responses, followed by an analysis in Chapter 5 of the students’ essays and responses, providing a juxtapositioned view that may begin to illuminate an understanding of both groups. This approach originates in the reality of power relations (see Foucault, 1972) that permeate and are disrupted when teachers are also lesbians—i.e., in society’s view, sexually and morally transgressive. Teacher-student relationships are necessarily power-laden inequitably. Teachers hold the power of the grades and some form of authority over students’ behaviors, deportment, writing, work ethic and attitudes in the classroom space—also, by the way, a culturally and geographically conflicted space (Friend, 2002; Gill, 1998; Gunter, 2000; Mason, 1994; McClure, 2001; Ruzich, 1995; Seidl and Shor, 1996; Wallace, 1994; Warshauer, 1993). I employ here a set of thematic groupings as a way of inviting these lesbian teachers to a “dinner party,” if you will, where they may discuss their ideas. Though these individuals have not all met each other and live in widely distant areas, be assured that these dinner parties go on in actuality wherever lesbians—and therefore lesbian teachers—meet, as do these women’s ongoing lesbian feminist critiques.

When I asked this group of lesbian professors, all of whom are or have been composition and/or literature professors, these women discussed the levels of disclosure in their own personal/professional lives, giving their own definitions for each positional subjectivity. I want to forestall or at least question the assumption that the ways in which
each person requested name identification for this project also indicates his or her own level of outness. This assumption is based in a binary of “out” and “closeted” when, as Harbeck (1992) argues, this is a spectrum of choices. These women have the right as participants to present their responses in an identification most suitable to the material conditions of their professional/personal lives, which often are difficult and conflicted. Additionally, lesbian professors are often out in their personal and professional lives, publications, and in political activism, but choose a level of anonymity in a project like this one. As a researcher, I tried to provide in the study a context from which lesbian teachers could so speak. Catherine Green, Caroline McKenzie, “J.D.” and “C.D.” are the lesbian composition professors who agreed to participate in this study.

Self-disclosure and closeting

J.D., a composition professor at a large eastern university, defines being closeted as being willing to go “to the point of lying” if confronted with the question, “Are you gay?” Caroline MacKenzie, an instructor at a midwestern regional university, leaves less room in her definition. For MacKenzie, being closeted involves “refusing to publicly acknowledge your sexual orientation.” She addresses the Foucaultian issue of power by adding,

I suppose some might think of this as being professional, which supports the elitist notion that we need to maintain a hierarchy with our students in terms of not getting personal.

This idea of what teachers commonly call professional distance” harks back to what is still prevalent in many foundations of education college textbooks. Such distance is supposed to provide the fictionally “neutral” teacher subject position that is most fair to
students. As MacKenzie points out, many out lesbian professors think of this position as rationale for “hiding in the closet” with regard to their sexual orientation. MacKenzie’s position is one she and I would identify as an out lesbian identity that is also a political stance.

Echoing J.D.’s definition of “closeted” as “lying,” MacKenzie argues that being closeted includes avoiding answering questions about your sexuality or outright lying about your sexual orientation. I think it can also including leading people to believe you are heterosexual or bisexual, when in fact you are not. This may also include a fear of associating with queer people.

I encountered this conflict myself in the year marked by my coming out to myself at the age of 45 and closeting myself as a lesbian composition teacher. My vestedness as researcher must show here, primarily because none of the teacher respondents mention this situation. I had been married to a man for more than 20 years and have a son from that relationship. That particular year in the closet was fraught with internal debate and self-homophobia as I struggled, not only with a divorce, but also with students’ knowledge that I had been married and therefore, their assumption that I was heterosexual. After my divorce, students assumed I had been married, because I had a child and, therefore, must be heterosexual. My work as a teacher has always been to tell, at the beginning of class, little stories pertinent to the assignment, and I cannot help but be fairly open with students. While they heard details of little but my son’s escapades as a little boy, I was a text to them, a text read as heterosexual. The stakes seemed high to me at the time—the possible loss of or danger to my son.
From a different stance six years later, I see that year of internalized homophobia as one in which I was learning how to “be a lesbian” and learning how to face my own homophobic demons. This is not an uncommon process for anyone coming out, except for women who come out in mid or later life. Many of us grew up in the 1950’s and 1960’s, when the expectations for women to automatically marry were pervasive and assumed, when lesbianism was the “love that dare not speak its name’ (the term comes from the famous trials of the British queer author Oscar Wilde). Coming out for younger women is not necessarily easier in the twenty-first century, but it is different.

Another professor of literature and composition at a large eastern university, C.D., identifies “closeted” as “attempting to keep one’s LGBT etc. sexual identity from others’ knowledge, either completely or in certain areas.” In describing her own subject position as a lesbian teacher, she defines “outness” as:

Primarily, (1) having made a statement that I am a lesbian in a specific class; and to a lesser degree, (2) have stated that my research focuses on gay and lesbian sexuality, and (3) having made such statements in enough classes over the years that I assume that students to whom I have not specifically come out will know or assume that I am a lesbian.

The first item in her list illustrates for this professor, “explicitly out,” while the second and third items represent “implicitly out.” (terms from Harbeck, 1992).

Catherine Green, a composition professor who recently finished her Ph.D. at a large east coast university and now resides in the Midwest, illustrates very powerfully the varying subject positions many lesbian teachers assume in the course of their careers because of the material conditions of women, and specifically lesbian women in the
power structure of the university. This is to say, the tenuous nature of women in low
status and low paid jobs which has been very common over the course of composition
studies history (Shaughnessy, 1977; Schell, 1992). She writes:

I have not been explicitly “out” as a composition teacher, although students often
assume or come to know somehow. I would like to give a little speech about
being a lesbian at the beginning of each semester. In this speech I would explain
what it means (to me) to be a lesbian personally, politically, and pedagogically. I
have not done this because I have felt all my employment to be tentative.

Green further extends her idea of outness by noting that her students’ “close reading” of
her as “lesbian teacher text” emerges from her professional stance:

Because I am “out” in other aspects of my life and discuss issues, such as civil
rights issues of all kinds, heterosexual and white privilege and so on in classes,
students often realize or hypothesize that I am a lesbian, although I’ve never been
asked directly. This is all to say, that I think to be out as a teacher is to be very
clearly out—to say, “I am a lesbian and that means….“ I would like to invite
questions and conversation. I believe very strongly in being “out” but I have not
been explicitly “out” as a teacher of composition.

Green acknowledges, though, that she

may be implicitly “out” because I am not careful. In other words, not only do I
discuss issues such as het[erosexual] privilege, but I try to challenge students
around construction of gender, sexuality, race. I do things like go to events
around school with my partner and sometimes spend time around campus with
other lesbians openly. I support gay and lesbian students and use the pronoun
“we” in class. I still feel somewhat closeted because I am not fully using myself in my teaching…. I am expecting to “come out” in the classroom soon, although I really, really, really need to work.

This comment represents a central issue for lesbian teachers at all levels—we “really, really need to work.” In order to do that, every lesbian professor has to make decisions, beginning at the time of the call to interview at a new university: “Should I be out in the interview? Will this jeopardize my chances of getting this position? Can I find out in the pre-interview lunches or dinners if I might have allies, or other lesbians in the department? What is the culture of this university? If I don’t come out now and the department head finds out later, what will happen to my job or chances for promotion and tenure? What will the administration do? If I get the job, will my partner feel comfortable around my colleagues—will she be accepted? Will we be comfortable in the lesbian community, assuming there is one?”

**Passing: Teachers “performing lesbian”**

For lesbian professors who are completely out in their scholarship, in their dissertation work and in their public service—all visible on the academic vita—many decisions are made without our knowledge by the respective departments and institutions to which we are making application. If our applications are rejected, we wonder if it was because our dissertation topic included issues of sexual orientation, or if our scholarship in lesbian studies is considered “not properly academic or scholarly.” And probably we will never know. Issues of passing also apply. I define “passing” here as is commonly used in the lesbian and gay community—someone who passes is someone who embodies heterosexuality in outward appearance and manner.
“Passing” as a social construction is a significant factor in many academic hires, and also implies, in the lesbian community, the hint of closeting. If a lesbian wears dresses, nylons and heels to her work and presents in “feminine” fashion—her outward appearance may presume a cast of heterosexuality that is not really there. In essence, she can “pass.” The assumption is that for such a lesbian, a “femme” or “lipstick” lesbian, job interviews may be more successful and jobs more likely, since she does not pose, in her body, a disruption of closely held collegiate and societal norms of dress performance (Nestle, 1984). This is not to imply or assume that this is a belief that is always or even ever true. Many femme-presenting lesbians are out in their university jobs. But it remains a strong belief in the lesbian scholarly community that jobs will be harder to find if we present in less “feminine” ways—for example, presenting with short hair, slacks and blazers instead of dresses, and short fingernails.

Two of the participants refer to issues of lesbian presentation. In her recounting of experiences she has had with students since coming out in the classroom, J.D. reports that one student called her “a fucking dyke bitch.” While this is not a direct statement with regard to passing, the construction of this derogatory and undoubtedly redundant statement reveals this student’s perception of how a lesbian presents in her body. A “dyke” for this student is the text of a man hating, sexually constructed, non-normative, non-woman. Caroline MacKenzie says, “I can tell some of them [the students] are shocked by the visual reactions they give… since I look like a stereotypical lesbian…” MacKenzie does not attempt to pass, and students read that text of her in her refusal to pass. She writes,
I often come out to my students in a matter of fact way, especially if I want to use a personal example to make a point. For example, I had a male student last semester who declared that some work was for men and women. He used himself as an example and talked about how challenging the work is at UPS. My girlfriend at the time actually worked there, so I replied, “My partner works at UPS and she could lift you over her head.” I often try to use humor, because some students are so uncomfortable over queer issues.

MacKenzie, in this instance, points the way to a kind of queer pedagogy that opens the geographical space of the classroom for both queer teachers and their students, some of whom may be lesbian, gay, bisexual or transgender. She consciously employs her always-ready sense of humor as a useful teaching strategy here, a pedagogical practice, anecdotally, that I have witnessed in most lesbian professors who are fully self-disclosed. In sixteen years of teaching, I find students’ willingness to listen increase in direct proportion to their teachers’ refusal to take themselves so seriously.

Additionally, MacKenzie disrupts stereotypical gender roles by providing an illustration of a physically strong woman in a traditionally male field and sexual roles by acknowledging this woman as her partner. She reports almost no instance of student disrespect, implying her control of the classroom interactions are based on an articulation of classroom respect. It is upon this foundation of respect that MacKenzie conducts the class, not on the fact of her lesbianism. This theme shows up repeatedly in the students’ responses in a later section.
Coming out as purposeful pedagogy

This thread of inquiry, “Upon what foundation is the classroom based?” includes, for the teacher participants, appropriate ways of coming out to students. The teacher participants identified several teacher strategies for coming out. J.D., in response to the question, “How have you revealed your subject identification as a lesbian teacher to your students?” writes,

It depends. Sometimes I come right out and tell them, if it feels appropriate to a discussion we may be having about a piece of writing or a current event. Sometimes I write about something I did with my partner in letters I exchange with students.

J. D. articulates here two possible teacher strategies. The first I will tag “relevance”—in other words, J.D. comes out when the context demands or implicates her subject position as a lesbian. Students may view a teacher who discusses homosexuality in the classroom, or works by LGBT persons, without self-identification as a lesbian as deceptive or refusing to stand by her own subject position, when students are expected to verbally express their views. C.D. also employs this strategy of ‘relevance’:

In classes where gay/lesbian sexuality is explicitly at issue, I mention that I am a lesbian and/or that I do gay/lesbian research. This is usually in the context and discussing students’ personal investments in intellectual issues; it’s part of the reminder that there are no neutral or objective positions and that what we do in the classroom is inextricable from who we are outside it. Usually but not always this is the first class meeting of the semester.
C.D.’s “reminder” of the fiction of “neutral or objective positions” is an important explication of her view of coming out as contextualized relevance and foregrounds the discussion, appearing later in this analysis, of teacher and student subject positions. She also articulates here the fictive nature of “neutrality” and objectivity” in the geographical space of the classroom (Clarke, 1996, 1998), and a point central to this project: the classroom is not a neutral space, nor are its inhabitants.

J.D.’s second, and very interesting strategy, which has also been effective for me, is to write with and to her students, setting up a relationship of teacher as a literate responder to students’ comments and concerns. In the back and forth of student-teacher writing, whether in journals, on essays, in conversation, or online, literate responding contextualizes the teacher as someone who listens in an educated and intelligent fashion to the real meat of students’ writing, rather than directly to their grammar and mechanics (Graves, 1975). In this manner, the teacher provides possibly the first example of an educated person who respects and answers that student’s question, and secondarily an example of a polished writer by her own writing. Outside of Graves’ (1975) model, the teacher also integrates her own subjectivities in an authentic professional-personal response.

Catherine Green, in her discussion of her implicit outness, articulates a teacher strategy I have not seen before in the limited research on teacher subjectivity, or the even more limited research on lesbian teacher subjectivity. Green argues,

In other words, not only do I discuss issues such as het privilege, but I try to challenge students around construction of gender, sexuality, race… I’ve often felt that one of the most important roles for me as teacher is to return a difference,
although I’m not always sure what that means in a particular situation. I guess I believe that for me, in most situations, a pedagogical return of difference is to be fully, explicitly out.

I understand Green’s strategy of “returning difference” to mean a view of the teacher text as “different, Other,” someone who embodies in her person the idea of “difference” (Mohanty, 1990). Caroline MacKenzie also employs this approach in her teaching:

I deal with identity politics in particular…we always discuss subject positions, and since Comp. I at my university focuses on audience awareness, it’s easy to incorporate into writing assignments. I constantly make references to queer culture in terms of audience and/or as a way to give examples from popular culture. The writing assignments are pretty much standardized, so I do what I can!

Her implementation of difference here references a minority, queer culture, rather than the hegemonic culture. Her disruption of automatic reference to the “normalized” culture serves to provide the opportunity for both LGBT and straight students to reconfigure their perceptions of that hegemonic culture, and, necessarily, of lesbian teachers as texts, inhabiting a range of identities and subject positions.

**Lesbian teacher/feminist teacher**

Lesbian teachers’ views of their own identities and subject positions proved very interesting. I asked the teachers how they mediated their subject position as lesbian teachers with their subject positions as feminists, as a specific ethnicity or race, as women, and as authority figures with students. This is obviously something each teacher
had spent time thinking about and analyzing. J.D. illustrates something of the issues that face lesbian professors at the university level:

When I teach, I try to incorporate ideas of mutual respect. I try to see students as valuable resources with their own stories to tell. The older I get, the more I notice they see me as an authority and I see myself pushing them harder and putting up with less silliness (talking in class, coming late, blowing off assignments).

This emphasis on respect is a central one for these teachers. MacKenzie, for instance, argues,

…As a white lesbian feminist, I feel ethically obligated to: #1 make my classroom a safe space for all students (to me this includes declaring the first day that no hateful speech will ever be acceptable).

J.D. identifies a problem I have also encountered, but none of the others mention:

I hate situations when they want me to be their mother.

I’m guessing this may be a function of our similar ages, as none of the other (and younger) participants mention this. This issue centers, for me, on issues of respect and also, or more accurately, of disrespect. While J.D. does not elaborate on her comment, I feel I know what she means. In my experience, some 18 and 19-year-old girls attempt to reenact with me their often-toxic relationships with their mothers. This can range from behaviors of outright surliness and discourtesy to extreme neediness. I make it clear at the beginning that I am in the classroom as their teacher, not their parent. I will say, “I am not here to be your mother as you already have one. I am here to teach you what you need to proceed in college, to write academically and clearly.” I find this behavior very much less in young men, for reasons unknown to me. I speculate that this has to do more
with J.D.’s and my personal presentation as texts to our classes rather than with issues around sexual orientation, as many older straight teachers also report this assumption by students of their relationship and resulting subject positions. J. D. alone mentions her position as a woman:

And there have been times when I feel that some treat me differently than they would a male professor. (I think that’s about being a woman, not a lesbian). So it is a balancing act.

I have experienced this only with regard to very rare instances of disrespect from young men. C.D. addresses this also:

…I know that coming out as a lesbian teacher can invite challenges to one’s authority, though I have not been aware of any such challenges in my own case. And I feel that lesbianism and feminism are frequently conflated in ways that feed the phobic image of an aggressive woman; but again, I don’t have particular instances to describe what would illustrate this.

C.D. makes an important point here—the idea of “lesbian” as “man-hater” may be employed by some students in ways that equate feminism and lesbianism and are inaccurate or uninformed. Sometimes I encounter this “phobia” with my emphasis on feminist approaches and in discussions of gender in my classes which I teach from what I will call here a cultural studies approach—teaching which helps students be more critical in their thinking, reading and academic writing by centering around issues of race, gender, age, class, beauty ideals, sexual orientation, and ethnicity. J.D. sees her feminist teaching focused on introducing students to this cultural studies approach:
As a feminist, I think it’s important to represent women writers and thinkers in the classroom; composition textbooks are becoming more inclusive, making this easier to do. I also think it’s important that a variety of racism religions and beliefs are represented. When students make homophobic or ignorant remarks about differences, I try not to “punish” or “ridicule” them, but I do try to make them ask questions and think harder toward something deeper than surface, stereotype, and what they’ve been told.

Green also uses this approach, which she discusses earlier in terms of her own outness, as do I. Green notes,

I try to get students to analyze privilege and, as I try to train them to openly look at their own privilege, I use myself as a complex example. I am particularly interested in visual representation and we explore issues around subject position in terms of representation.

MacKenzie also employs this strategy of discussion of representation and cultural studies approaches as well, enacting her feminist teaching through discussions of identity politics:

… As a white person, I am ethically obligated to help end racism. Regardless of what class I am teaching, we ALWAYS discuss white privilege. I deal with identity politics in particular…we always discuss subject positions, and since Comp. I at my university focuses on audience awareness, it’s easy to incorporate into writing assignments. I constantly make references to queer culture in terms of audience and/or as a way to give examples from popular culture.
Such an approach seems to work for these teachers as a way to open a wider discussion with their students in areas of sexual orientation, as well as race, class, gender and age. Further discussion of the cultural studies approach will appear in Chapter 6, where I will examine current pedagogical projects in the composition classroom.

When I asked the participant teachers how they have incorporated their subject positions as lesbian teachers in the class discussions and/or writing assignments, they responded with answers in which the theme of relevance reappears. J.D. says,

If we are reading material from our text about gay and lesbian lifestyles or argument papers about gay marriage, for instance, I talk from my own experience (my partner’s and my civil union).

Green, who earlier identifies herself as “implicitly out” and moving toward “explicit outness,” makes the very important point that a useful teaching approach can be to “problematize her identity”:

…I think that I am quite vigilant about challenging assumptions but I think that this question gets at what I was thinking about earlier in thinking about a “return of difference.” Not really being out means that I can’t use myself in a certain way, but also I could say, well, “What if?” which is something AnnLouise Keating writes about—problematizing her identity.

Two women who are not part of the group of lesbian teacher respondents came to mind here because they are colleagues and friends—and because although self-identifying as straight women, they purposefully use the strategy of problematizing identity with their classes. Their stories will appear in Chapter 6 where I will examine classroom strategies for a queer pedagogy.
C.D. also points to relevance with regard to employing her subject position in her pedagogy:

I did not come out to students while teaching composition… I don’t explicitly link my coming out to writing assignments in literature classrooms…. In classes where gay/lesbian sexuality is explicitly at issue, I mention that I am a lesbian and/or that I do gay/lesbian research. This is usually in the context of discussing students’ personal investments in intellectual issues….

Relevance describes an important strategy of these lesbian teachers, which is to devise conscious and appropriate rhetorical and pedagogical approaches that are authentic in the sense used in Chapter 3. Authenticity includes revealing “real” selves and identity which both allow these teachers to bring their whole, integrated, personal and professional “texts” to their students and to spend considerably less time losing energies in closeting maneuvers, in the hope that students will observe integrity and courage in us.

The participants picked up this theme when I asked how they sought to help students articulate their subject positions as lesbian, gay or straight. I also asked how they feel this articulation supports or hinders the classroom climate and the writing students in their classrooms. J.D. replies:

I always include writing assignments that ask students to examine and explore their identities. Who are they in the world? How did they develop their belief systems, etc.? Most of my gay/lesbian students are too nervous to write about their experiences if they feel their classmates will read it. But some do. Gay/lesbian/questioning students often seek me out to talk or to express some campus concerns.
J.D.’s students undoubtedly find courage in her openness in class discourse—this is evidenced by the resulting function of a sort of de facto “unofficial advisor” to LGBT students, an experience common to many of us whose students are aware of our “gayness.” Her discussion of the anxiety of her queer students toward writing assignment points out the problematics of many first-year composition assignments, which were discussed in chapter 3.

Green addresses the subject positions of students from an equally useful pedagogical stance, by employing student-made art:

I try to ask all students to explore the ways they construct themselves. I try to build group and create a classroom climate that encourages risk-taking. I have students make photomontages, for instance, that answer the questions “Who are you? Who aren’t you and Where do you live?” Before students do the assignment I show slides of photomontage made by students as well as by professional artists. Some of the most interesting of this work is by Hanna Hoech. Much of her work involves what might be described as looking like it represents androgyny. I show work by former students who dealt with/represented lesbian/gay issues. This assignment very often brings up some interesting assertions regarding complexities of identity.

MacKenzie also tries to enable all students to examine their own subject positions:

I seek to help students articulate their subject positions in terms of all identity categories I can think of (race, sex, sexual orientation, class, ability) so that they become aware of themselves as having these identifications—I often ask them which aspects are most important to their identity. More than anything I want
white students to know that Caucasian is a racial construction just like African-American or Black American is; and, similarly, I want privileged students to recognize that white/male/heterosexual is not “the norm.”

MacKenzie introduces to her students, in this way, an internal dialogue about their own assumption of identities, and, with the concept of social construction, that students can alter those identities over time. This process of challenging long held and often unconsciously held identities can serve to provide the sort of cognitive dissonance, that recognition, in Green’s words, “of difference,” that can result in real learning and reexamination for students.

C.D. articulates this concept of students’ understanding of their own subject positions as a learning strategy:

I regularly assign weekly response papers in literature and theory class at both undergrad and graduate levels, and these papers are where I often see students expressing their own sexual subject positions. Response papers never specifically ask students to discuss their own sexualities, but they do ask for a personal response to our readings. Particularly in…gay and lesbian literature and criticism, that often means discussion of students’ own sexuality as it relates to the texts. In classroom discussion as well, I strive to create conditions under which students feel comfortable articulating their sexual identities, but I never explicitly ask them to do so. I feel that when this is possible, whether in writing or in discussion, it benefits students’ learning (a) by helping them to see literary or critical texts as relevant to their own experience (2) by helping them to recognize the ideological,
personal, and political assumptions that they bring to reading and thus to deconstruct the notion of a monolithic or universal truth.…

This point is so important to this project in these lesbian teachers’ repeated emphasis on student learning and on helping students to bring to the surface their own and societal assumptions about sexual orientation as well as other cultural issues. Students’ views about these pedagogical approaches will appear in the discussion of student participants in Chapter 5.

**Conclusions**

In this section, I offer a very preliminary set of conclusions, a narrative of observations based on this small sample of teachers. Since this is a small sample I do not claim or even suggest that the experiences and responses of these four lesbian professors and my own represent or can be extrapolated to the experiences or responses of larger numbers of lesbian academics in composition studies. But it could be argued that scholarship must begin somewhere and this is my somewhere. My hope is that this rudimentary beginning can be the basis for much further exploration and study of the professional lives of lesbian professors, because it is clear from these four participants that as lesbians, we have much to offer our students in a greater understanding of LGBT issues, of teacher and student subjectivities with regard to sexual orientation, of the viability of each of us, teacher and students, GLBT and straight, in educating the other in composition skills and in a college education that can open a way for the right of each of us to take our unique places in the world.

The distinctly queer pedagogy offered by these participants, regardless of their level of personal disclosure, is intensely interesting. In dealing with the personal issues
of passing, dress performance, personal appearance and presentation, the participants acknowledge both the difficulties and the pedagogical openings arising from their negotiation of classroom territory, a negotiation often now and certainly, in the past, fraught with all kinds of danger. In their common desire to teach their students the cultural significance of issues of sexual orientation as well as race, class, and gender, these lesbian professors constantly and daily assess how their personal subjectivities can and will be used to ground the lessons in the geographical real-time context of the classroom. These teachers are united in that aim—recognizing that coming out for its own sake is secondary to the integrated pedagogical approach; several of the women observe that their self-disclosure of their sexual orientation is apropos of the topic at hand and that to not do so seems dishonest. By openly answering within the context of classroom discussions their students’ questions about who they are as teacher texts, these lesbian professors help those students to gain new life experiences, to encounter and to respond to “the Other” in educated ways that may eventually serve to widen the views of their families, community and society. By articulating difference in the classroom, these teachers manage educational and often verbal conflict, the kind of risky pedagogical disruption that can lead to real new knowledge-making for students. Additionally, by being willing to meet students at the pedagogical point where their earlier education leaves off, these teachers, most of whom teach primarily first-year college students, offer students the respectful space to produce new, more adult responses. In many ways, a queer pedagogy must accomplish just that—open articulation of lesbian, gay, straight, bisexual, questioning and transgender subjectivities in the composition classroom—in order for fairness, respect and an adult negotiation of contested and difficult issues to
work as a means of educating. In the next chapter, building on the discussions of lesbian teacher subjectivities in composition history (Chapter 2) and in empowerment and critical pedagogies, I move in the next chapter to a preliminary examination of the ways students perceive, write, and position themselves in “lesbian-taught” composition courses.
Chapter 5

In this chapter, I report the results of my students’ answers to questionnaires, interwoven with close readings of relevant pieces of their essays. As I did in chapter 4, I organize this chapter thematically and in response to the lesbian teachers’ concerns and responses. This chapter is designed in a qualitative case study format, using the descriptors of the components of the study as subtitle headings as a way of providing clarity for readers about the progress and results of this project.

Description of data collection from student participants:

Student voice and student agency

Sixteen sets of explanations of the study, consent forms, and requests for permissions to use students’ essays were sent out from 2000-2003 to former students who had written essays surrounding lesbian, bisexual, and gay issues from 1998-2003 (large portions of these essays are included later in this chapter). I should note here that this number represents a sharp increase in the production of such essay topics resulting, I think, from my coming out in class, at the time of Mathew Shepard’s 1998 murder, as the daughter of a gay man and then as a lesbian. All participant packets were sent out after their course with me was concluded and students had received their final grades. At the time of data collection, no participant was in any course I was teaching.

Five of these students did not respond to the requests to participate and their work is not included here. Four indicated interest but never returned the questionnaires or consent forms, though in some cases sent their essays. These pieces are not included here, since no consents were signed. Seven students completed the consent forms, permissions to include their writing, and the questionnaires. Portions of their writing and their
responses are included in the analysis portion later in this chapter. These 18 and 19 year olds speak, as you will see, with honesty and courage about topics with which they previously had little or no contact, coming from communities with strong homophobic cultures.

A final note concerns the importance of permissions and the use of student voices to this project. Lensmire (1998) defines “student voice” in ways that resonate with my construction and presentation of this case study of student writing about lesbian and gay issues in the composition classroom:

We need a revised, alternative conception of student voice—one that affirms workshop and critical pedagogy commitments to student expression and participation, but also helps us student voice as in-process and embedded, for better and for worse, within the immediate social context of the classroom…. I propose that voice be conceived of as a project involving appropriation, social struggle and becoming (p. 279)

Lensmire thus envisions and places student voice in the geographical space of the classroom project, as he says, “as developing across time and situation” (p. 279). Additionally, for him,

‘Project’ has something of the smell and feel of school to it, the sense of a task or problem taken up by the actual students as part of their everyday school. Imagining voice as a project, then, might help us keep our thinking about voice closer to the ground, closer to the struggles, victories, failures, of [our students] as they respond to the challenges and possibilities of complex social situations in the
Issues of student voice have been and continue to be a major concern in the field of composition studies. Early studies in composition, coming from a focus on active teacher research, often fictionalized student names or eliminated them entirely (see Berkenkotter, 1988). Such studies seem to focus on the research question at hand, rather than on the representation of its subjects. Composition scholars within the past fifteen years have come to see that such erasure does not do justice to the students and graduate assistants who most often are the source of our composition studies and teacher research (Fosen, 2002; Meloy, 2002). The elimination of study subjects’ identities without the subjects’ choice also decreases the validity of the research (Bloom, 2003; Hood, 2003; Wallace, 2003). Mutanski (1998) argues that when we, as researchers, particularly within the gathering of data in sexuality research, permit subjects to choose their level of disclosure, there is the presumption that their comments will be more honest, though some have questioned this (Mutanski, 1998)

In this project, I have been very surprised by students’ willingness to claim full name identification—all but one of the student participants chose this full disclosure. While I will acknowledge that their lack of reticence may have more to do with other factors—perhaps their individual strength or independence, their knowledge of my intent to use their information with respect and in context, their personal knowledge of me—nevertheless most students opted for complete name identification. In the homophobic atmosphere at this university, and in this part of the Midwest, I commend their courage.
Student comments are labeled here as the students specified—either as full name disclosure or as fictitious initials.

Students who agreed to participate in this study gave permission to quote parts of their essays on lesbian and gay issues and answered a short questionnaire that addressed issues surrounding the idea of “subject position,” how they see their own subject positions and those of their teachers. With brutal honesty they answered questions about their choices of writing and their understanding of their own subject positions in relationship with me as a lesbian teacher. They also examined their own perceptions of issues of power—my authority as a teacher and their relative position as my students with regard to my coming out as a lesbian teacher. In my own first-year composition classrooms, I use a cultural studies approach where issues of sexual orientation, class, race, gender, and ethnicity are central, use small group and class discussions, and writing assignments, hopefully to contextualize the students’ subject positions and mine in a larger frame of uncovering these critical issues. In the final chapter I present this course design as a possibility for others interested in a pedagogy that is more “queer-centric”.

**Rationale and description of the instruments:**

**Student questionnaires and student essays**

In the course of several years of such composition classes, students’ knowledge base of readings and learnings about cultural studies issues and their sense-making of their teacher’s (my) sexual orientation grew. Students in my classes who chose to write about gay and lesbian issues were noted. Once the classes were finished and they received their grades, these students were asked if they wished to participate in this project. They were provided consent forms giving me permission to use and to analyze
their writings for evidence of awareness of their own and my subject positions by means of a written questionnaire. While these questions were listed in the abstract for this chapter in Chapter 1, I want to place them again here for easy reference.

I chose these particular questions in a very experimental way, not knowing ahead of time how the students would respond, and I freely acknowledge, in hindsight, that certain questions might have been better worded or more fully explained to the students. The questions arose from the “fire” of classroom discussions about the cultural study issues of sexual orientation, identity, class, race, and gender and from individual conversations I regularly have with students in my classes, as well as with students and colleagues in the university learning community where I teach. I hoped to discover, by asking these questions, how students understood the academic discourse of this approach in the cultural studies composition classroom, how they related this discourse, both in my pedagogy and in their learning, to their beliefs and cultural knowledge about sexual orientation and identity. I wanted to know how they understood their own identity, and levels of identity, and how these were directly and indirectly impacted by my self-disclosure as a lesbian teacher. Additionally, I wanted to begin to understand how this self-disclosure affected their perception of authority and power issues in the classroom. Finally, I wanted to know if it was possible for my self-disclosure to coexist successfully with their freedom to write about topics of sexual orientation in any ways they chose—in other words, if a queer pedagogy indeed provided the geographical space for open discussion by all students, regardless of their sexual orientation. Questions I posed to the former students who participated in this part of the study included:
• What do you understand the term “subject position” to mean, based on our class discussions and interviews over the course of this semester?

• How do you understand your own multiple subject positions? In what ways have you chosen to write about these positions, and why? In what ways have you kept silent about them, and why?

• How do you understand the subject positions of your teachers—either now or in the past? How do you understand/perceive my “subject position” as your teacher? How have you—your subject position as a student and your writing—been affected by what you have come to know about me as a teacher and as a person? Has your “subject position” changed during this semester?

• How have your perceptions of the issues of power—my authority as a teacher, your position as a student—been affected by my coming-out as a lesbian teacher? What constraints have you felt as a student writer, given my subject position as “lesbian teacher”?

• How have you negotiated class discussions about subject positions around the issue of sexual orientation in ways different than those discussions around race, ethnicity, class, and gender? Would your negotiations have been different if your teacher had been a man rather than a woman? If I had been African-American rather than white? If I had been young rather than middle-aged? How do you understand the multiple facets of subject positions—“I am not only gay/lesbian/straight, I am black/Hispanic/white, I am married/single/divorced, I am child/parent/adult”?

In addition to the questionnaires, students permitted me to include samples from their essays, written as regular assignments in my first-year composition courses. Answers to
these questionnaires and analyses of the writing assignments will be made available to students, as a conscious effort to include them as fellow-researchers in this study, both complicating and clarifying the information gathered.

**Analysis of student participants’ responses**

These students took these questions and these issues very much to heart, “letting fly” with very deeply held feelings, beliefs and ideas yet with very little concern for my own feelings or authority as their teacher. While I am fully cognizant of power differentials between my position as teacher and theirs as students, the students who agreed to participate were under no compulsion, since their work and participation was requested after their grades had been decided, and they had complete autonomy with regard to denying my requests for use, as some did. I am also not a teacher who collects “groupies” and in some cases, these students were not “fans” in any sense. Their wide range of topic choice may speak to this most directly—these students took very seriously my stated principle that they could write on any topic from any viewpoint as long as they supported their claims. As a reminder of the methodology mentioned earlier in this chapter, students were at no time asked their own sexual orientation, although sometimes they did state it. The students whose statements and excerpts follow are identified as they themselves wished, either with full name identification or with fictional initials. All have contributed with courage, kindness and grace to the making of new knowledge in this study. The ideas and themes they raise are their own and I have tried to stand aside and let them speak for themselves, letting them choose and thus organize what to them was most important. While this has not always been easy—as teachers, many of us have a compelling urge to comment on everything—it is my hope that their answers and writing
will provide a new understanding of how our composition students view us as lesbian teachers. I have not changed or edited their writing, except when it was necessary for readability (these editing changes are marked by brackets), feeling that presenting their voice as it appears is more important than any minor grammar or mechanics issues. Their essays are dated parenthetically as are their responses from the questionnaires to provide readers with their chronological history in the context of my courses.

“Normalizing” homosexuality

In the following section, two students talk about the uses and effect of media on societal acceptance and understanding of lesbians and gays. Jenny Wuerth, in “Solutions for a Better Future” (2000), sees television as a channel for making homosexuality more understandable to children:

Television is a very popular thing in today’s world. Children sit down to watch hours of T.V. after school. If children are not taught about homosexual lifestyle at school or church then they could be taught by television. If homosexual lifestyles could be portrayed on a television show I think that children could get a better understanding of their lifestyle. The television show should portray the facts of homosexuality and not the stereotypes…. The increase in gay television shows will hopefully open up the doors to homosexuality. Children will become familiar with the lifestyle of homosexuals and will be more comfortable with it.

Mary Cavano (2002), in her essay, “PlanetOut—Out or In?” further approaches the topic of stereotypes our society holds concerning homosexuality in an evaluative essay of the PlanetOut.com website. PlanetOut is a website geared to GLBT people with sections for news, personals, shopping, and chat rooms. She addresses the use of the stereotypes
of gays often found in our society and critiques PlanetOut for adding to that stereotypical representation, arguing that “not everyone feels the need to fit in with the gay subculture” and “a good website should not stereotype.” She points out:

The website is good because it gives gay people somewhere to turn for support. Not being part of the mainstream is definitely a struggle, and it is nice to have some sort of web page especially geared toward people like yourself, however, the people and lifestyles depicted fit the gay stereotype all too well.

At the same time, she sees the depiction of shirtless, well-built young gay men as objectifying and stereotypical, and argues that all gay people don’t look like that:

Physical appearance plays an important role in the PlanetOut website. The men are buff and good looking. They are smiling wide, toothy grins and wearing tight clothing. I have printed up pictures of muscular men in tight tie-die tank tops matched with a pair of skin-tight jeans. One very young looking man is shown lying on satin sheet, shirt-less, with a cupid’s arrow in his hand. I find this highly inappropriate (p. 1).

Cavano (2002) employs a rhetorical strategy throughout “PlanetOut or In?” of comparing the “gay lifestyle” portrayed in PlanetOut.com to what she describes as a “heterosexual life”. In her discussion of “gay lifestyles,” she argues:

What kind of lifestyles do gay people live? When you look through the pictures on PlanetOut it looks like the half nude men get pretty touchy-feely with one another. Is the life of a gay person really that different from the life of a heterosexual? I saw numerous references to venereal diseases and AIDS throughout the website. This was implying that gays like to have promiscuous
sex and “party down.” Surely, this is a choice lifestyle for some gays, just as it is for many straight people. The website makes it look as if the gay population is having enough sex for the entire country. Not all homosexuals have crazy diseases and wild sex lives. A straight person looking at this website would be mislead into believing that gays are “dirty” or “slutty.” What a nice first impression (p. 3).

Cavano (2002) argues against what she views as the common heterosexual assumption that lesbians and gays are, first and foremost, the inhabitants of a primarily sexual “lifestyle.” As a rebuttal, she claims that this promiscuous sexuality is a choice of many heterosexuals as well, but feels that Planetout.com perpetuates this stereotype about gay and lesbian lives. As an antidote to this, Cavano (2002) believes that

What would help is if viewpoints and pictures of people who weren’t so obviously gay were added to the site. Show some photos of middle-aged average looking men and women, instead of only beautiful scantily-clad young people. Make the website cater to gays and lesbians of all ages and lifestyles. If one did not know anyone who was homosexual before visiting PlanetOut, they would end their session with a head full of stereotypes and false impressions (p. 4).

She is working here at a stance that attempts to “normalize” homosexuality by pointing out that lesbians and gays aren’t generalization and stereotypes, but exhibit as many differences as do straight people.
Gay and lesbian “dress” performance: 

Representation and performativity

Elise Fitzsimmons (1998), in one of the earliest essays I received, writes about what I will call gay male and lesbian “dress performance.” By “dress performance,” I mean both the outward appearance and clothing stereotypically associated with some gay men and lesbians in our society, as well as the dress and appearance consciously adopted by some gay men and lesbians as proud statements about our sexual orientation. Caroline MacKenzie’s discussion in the previous chapter touches on this issue of performance and “passing”—“looking like a lesbian.” Fitzsimmons addresses the stereotype of “butch” (more masculine-appearing) women:

There are so many stereotypes that supposedly dictate what people’s sexual orientation are. Most of these are appearance, which is why I focused on this topic. Most people believe that women who look a little more masculine than the rest are lesbians, which is not true. I have met many women who are not lesbians, but they look more masculine than the rest. It was said in my survey that, “Women should look like women and dress that way if they do not want to be mistaken for a lesbian.” Women should not have to feel this pressure that they have to look feminine and prissy. Each woman knows what she wants and if someone wants to place judgment on her then they just aren’t good enough to know her.

Fitzsimmons also argues against the idea that women who are interested in sports—and therefore interested in athletic pursuits traditionally “masculine” are necessarily lesbian:
Some people whom I surveyed believed that women who like to watch and play sports are lesbians. I, as a woman who lives to watch and play sports, do not like the stereotype that just because I hang out with the guys, I am a lesbian. I enjoy the company of men. You get so much less gossip with men than you get with women. It was said [in her survey of other students] that women should not be involved in sports, because it is not feminine. It was added that everyone knows all women in sports are lesbians. Women should not have to worry… if they play sports whether or not they are going to be perceived as lesbian. Girls should be able to enjoy some good competition. I would like to add that not all gay men are feminine; I know plenty of guys that are the big sporty type and they aren’t straight.

In examining these stereotypical attitudes about gender and sexual orientation, she then works to explode another stereotype, arguing that society’s view of “beautiful women as heterosexual” (what I would describe as “femme”) is also skewed:

   On the contrary, not all beautiful women that take care of themselves are heterosexual. Where do you think “Lipstick Lesbians” comes from? They are not just a figment of people’s imaginations. “Lipstick Lesbians” are women who are not defined under the masculine lesbians: they are women who take pride in their appearance. Some people think that “Lipstick Lesbians” were hypocritical and were trying to deceive straight people and other lesbians…A prime example [of a lipstick lesbian] is Ann Heche; she plays all these roles of a great straight woman but she is not one.
In this passage, Fitzsimmons takes on the idea of the “femme” lesbian as a form of lesbian performativity and argues that such women, who may “pass” as straight are performing is such a way because of personal preference—“taking care of their appearance”—rather than as an attempt to pass as straight. She also addresses what I will call “gay male dress performance” in her 1998 essay:

Men believe that the men who talk with that supposed “Gay Talk,” you know, the lisp, that those men are gay. Men can’t help what their voices end up like: they happen to be like they are for all kinds of reasons. Speech impediments are an example; voices can not be controlled. In my survey, one guy said this about the lisp or “Gay Voice”: “Men should talk like men—they are choosing to use that “Gay Voice.” I do not like the stereotypes that guys who dress well and like to shop are gay. Why is it wrong for a guy to take pride in the way he looks? It was said also in my survey, “Men should not be fussy about what they wear, ‘Real Men’ just wear jeans and a T-shirt.” Men don’t have to wear just jeans and a T-shirt; they should be able to take pride in what they look like. Although I do know that many great clothing designers are gay men, you don’t have to be gay to like the way you look. Everyone should take pride in what they look like and not have to worry about what is going to be said about them.

Her discussion here about fellow students’ perceptions of gay male dress performance points out her belief that stereotypes are not always true representations of sexual orientation. This essay worked experientially for Fitzsimmons as a method for dealing with her strong interest in being nonjudgmental, and her refusal to stereotype. She writes:
I know I have stated many of my personal opinions in this paper. I feel I have the right to. You may ask, “Why does she care about this?” I have had these stereotypes put on me that involve what I am stating. I am not a lesbian, but people saw me as one because for one I was very affectionate with everyone, I played sports, and loved to hang out with the guys. People need not to place judgments on others: they should not try to play God with their assumptions. I was told by one of my friends once that, “You know when people assume things, it makes an ass out of you and me.” I believe that saying if you assume and state what you think, without thoroughly thinking about what you say, that you do make yourself look foolish.

This statement of her own subjectivity as well as seeing acceptance of lesbians and gays as a justice issue arises later in this chapter in more developed ways in other students’ comments and essays.

Cavano (2002) also writes, in “PlanetOut or In?” on the issue of gay male dress performance in her assessment of the cultural issues implicit in the PlanetOut website, and makes an interesting comment on the ways that gay male culture as depicted in the website mirrors our society’s infatuation with youth and beauty:

True, a good many gay men do look and dress in this fashion, but a good many also dress like an ordinary heterosexual man. I suppose it is not really too different from a heterosexual website in the sense that young attractive people are used as models. The fountain of youth sells in our society, therefore, what homosexual man would not want to see another good looking man in an advertisement? It is a shame that people have become so accustomed to seeing
young, beautiful, fit people splattered all over the media. Why would gay people not want to see the same?

In another essay, “Stereotypes—Keep Them or Lose Them?” comparing PlanetOut.com to Vogue magazine, Cavano (2002) argues that PlanetOut.com as equally objectifies gender performance as Vogue:

PlanetOut is nearly as bad as Vogue, when it comes to placing emphasis on being stylish and wearing what is “cool.” Though this website the user has access to gay shopping networks where they can order tight muscle shirts with dragons on the front or thong underwear. Looking for your everyday sweater and Levis? No, not here. Gay men are depicted as “feminine” and “sexy” (p. 2).

Further, Cavano notes, with regard to lesbian representation, in “PlanetOut or In”:

Not all gay women are boyish-looking with buzzed haircuts. This widely depicted image is so stereotypical. Where are the middle-aged women with long hair? Apparently, nowhere to be found on PlanetOut. The “gay culture image” may seem appropriate to have on a gay web page, but is it really when not all gays look the same? Just because someone has a different sexual preference does not mean that they want to stand out or make a statement.

In this statement, Cavano addresses both issues of age and personal appearance for lesbians. She correctly argues that the demographics for this web site are geared to young lesbians and gays and critiques it for what she sees as the same sort of stereotypical representation that heterosexuals hold of lesbians and gays. Cavano (2002) notes that
Women are portrayed in the stereotypical “manly” fashion, however, there are not many female faces on the website. It’s primarily targeted to the male audience. PlanetOut only caters to “girly boys” who prefer more flamboyant styles (p. 3). Many of these students, in their choice of topic and in their writing, take on issues of gender and sexual orientation, as well as societal stereotypes, in ways that allow them to both think aloud about ideas that may be forbidden in their families or communities. That the place they do this thinking is an academic classroom at a public university disrupts the idea of the teacher as a neutral text, of the classroom as an ideologically and politically neutral geography and in fact complicates the gender / power / sexual orientation intersections in that space. In the next section, students speak about “difference”—another charged set of implications and arguments in the composition classroom. By “difference,” I mean that which delineates some person or persons as The Other, who are marginalized by our society, and who, by our presence, disrupt and transgress hegemonic stereotypes of “normativity.” These students proclaim from a stance of inclusivity and acceptance, tolerance and understanding and from a standpoint of justice.

**Justice issues: Hate crime, acceptance, and tolerance**

L.M. in her 1998 essay, “Respect Difference,” makes a strong case for tolerance of lesbians and gays in our society and for education for change:

This is the treatment of homosexual students in our society and in our schools. Our society is filled with homophobic people and we must learn to accept gay and lesbian people in today’s world; however, this may not be as easy as it sounds. Several people do not agree with homosexuality, and probably never will, but
people must admit that homosexuality is a part of our society, and they deserve to be treated with respect.

There is a lot of hatred aimed toward the gay and lesbian community, and this hatred is sometimes due to the one minded way that a lot of people think, or the lack of knowledge on the issue. Throughout life, people create morals and beliefs either from religion, parents, friends or other sources. Indeed, people should stand up for what they believe in, but if a belief is hurting a person or group of persons, then maybe that belief should be kept inside and not expressed.

The majority of people in society are against homosexuality and they think it is wrong, and some of these people even express their hate or disapproval through verbal or physical abuse. Homosexuality is a sexual minority, and like any minority there is discrimination. The disrespect and insensitivity portrayed to the homosexual community are wrong and should be put to an end. Homosexuals are said to have a different lifestyle, however, gay and lesbian people simply have a life, like everyone else in the world…. The fear of the unknown may result in a separation from the minority and as a result, homosexuals to feel isolated. If people would look past a person’s sexuality, and realize there is more to life, then this world would be a better place.

In this researched argument on tolerance and education for tolerance, written soon after the highly publicized murder of Matthew Shepard, L.M. builds a case on the concept of both the shared humanity of lesbians and gays and straights, as well as the idea of lesbians and gays as a marginalized, disenfranchised segment of society. As an education major, L.M. advocates for education to overcome discrimination and intolerance:
In the high school setting, homosexuality can be an uncomfortable and confusing issue. If there are gay/lesbian students attending a high school, then we as their peers may be hurting them without even realizing it. Several people may not be open with their sexuality at this stage in their life, due to the fear of other people’s reactions, especially in high school, where slang terms and name calling are heard every day.

She cites an undergraduate student senator at her university who was quoted in the university newspaper as saying, “Hate crimes should be enforced, only after homosexuals admit to their disorder” and counters:

Homosexuality is not a disorder, and should not be treated as one, and even if it were, would it be right to threat them with such disrespect? Hate crimes towards gays and lesbians will never be eliminated, unless people accept homosexuality as a part of our society.

She further cites this same student government senator as saying,

The first thing I thought when I saw that “gay” VISION sign in front of the Union was “I’d love to see that thing torched,” but I did not burn it, and I will not burn it because that itself would be sin.

She notes:

Comments like these are rude and full of hate. The thing that does not surprise me about most people that make comments such as this one, is that these people have probably never even really talked to a gay or lesbian person before.
L.M.’s view that personal knowledge of and acquaintance with lesbians and gays as crucial to acceptance is an important one and is borne out anecdotally in my experience with students as a lesbian educator.

DeLay (2002) extends this idea about the importance of education and articulates a process of education that poses the argument that sexual orientation is often discussed in ways very different than discussions around race, ethnicity, class, and gender:

I think sexual orientation is something that is still widely debated. Race, ethnicity, class and gender all seem to be issues that people have debated and have come to agreements on and have implemented solutions to. I’m not saying there is no discrimination in the world around those issues, but they seem to have a bit of settlement. Sexual orientation is still new to a lot of people and not many people take the time to know all the facts behind the issue. I think many people are still close-minded to learning how a girl could fall in love with another girl, or a man with another man. People are so caught up in the physical aspects that the emotions and feelings are just the same as when a man and woman fall in love. I think some of it is legally it is still “wrong” to be homosexual. There are no laws that protect a homosexual person in the workplace and it’s only legal in 2 states, I think, for gays and lesbians to be legally married. I think once people see it’s illegal to treat people differently, they begin to see the moral side.

She argues here for the acceptance of lesbian and gay relationships as equal to heterosexual relationships, an effort to strategize these relationships in a way I will call “normalization.”
Cavano’s (2003) strategy of normalization leads her to a critique of PlanetOut’s “gay news”:

A section of PlanetOut consists entirely of gay news. What makes a gay man being mercilessly slaughtered worse than any other human being slaughtered? Once you hear of one instance of injustice, you have heard of all of them. No reason exists to provide a myriad of instances. It is important to consider the fact that most “significant news” is sad or unpleasant. Do gay people find relief in knowing that the tragedy happened to “one of their own?” Does it even matter? Black man, gay man, white man, drug dealer, a man is still a man. Why categorize the hate that thrives in our world? All it does is cause more grief, anger, and hostility. Does anyone really care that the gay political donor faces fraud charges? PlanetOut specifically brings up issues of hate crimes committed against gay people when it needs to address the issue of hate crimes against the human race as a whole (2002,p. 3).

Cavano’s stance here is for civil rights for all and she views the category of “gay” as unhelpful to the cause of true justice.

True justice, for Jon Clipson, has its basis in First Amendment rights. He addresses this issue in his essay “Heather Has Two Mommies” (2000) when he cites the following example:

A federal judge rejected a local law that allowed petitioners to yank “objectional” books, “Heather Has Two Mommies” and “Daddy’s Roommate” from the public library. I agree with the judge that all books should be able to be found at the public library. The two books that were threatened to be yanked are about
children having gay parents. This apparently offended people, but what about the kids that may need to read a book like that to make them feel better? If a young child has gay parents and feels strange, then maybe they need something like this that they can relate to and help them to not feel alone.

He argues for the necessity of books available in the local library that will help the children of gay parents, based on the Constitution:

As to the best of my knowledge, it would be unconstitutional to pull the book from the shelves anyway. Due to freedom of speech, an author can write about whatever he/she wants to, no matter how many people it offends.

For Clipson, library censorship abrogates the civil liberties of everyone and as such is unlawful. He extends his argument in favor of books about gay issues by making reference to the recent visit of the Ku Klux Klan to his university town:

What really would piss me off is that it is ok for the KKK to have marches and protests and their rights are protected, but then people want to go and take this book off of the shelves when its not even hurting anybody. The KKK would sure as hell strike more fear into me than a book.

In this student’s mind, if the rights of one group, based on hate, are protected, then the rights of another group, lesbian and gay parents and their children, should also be protected. For Clipson, the establishment of civil rights specifically for lesbians and gays is a justice issue.

Cavano (2002) advocates for tolerance and inclusiveness without labels as a positive course of action:
We are all in the world together and we cannot change who we are, men, women, friends, teachers, fathers, mothers, lovers, sisters and brothers. We cannot escape the inevitable. If you are gay that is perfectly okay. I am white and I would prefer not to be stereotyped as a “honky” or a “redneck.” It is probably safe to assume that a homosexual would not be pleased to be called a “fag” or a “flamer.” Discrimination starts at segregation, so we should be more hesitant to slap a label on different groups of people. Accept the differences of one another, but ultimately aim for unity, as it is the only solution (p. 5).

L.M. (1998) and DeLay (2002) also see gay rights as a human issue. DeLay sees herself as someone who “has a very open mind”:

I pride myself on being a humanist more than anything, because rights for all people is what we should strive for. I believe strongly in the power of friendship, and am willing to love anyone who I connect with, whether they are male, female, Black, Hispanic, Asian or white, gay, lesbian or straight. I am focused on the person, not what they look like but what they are. I think a lot of that comes out in my writing and it is evident how I feel about people and how attached to people I get. I think that all my life I have been open and accepting from my young days of learning about slavery. I’ve written spoken and acted against oppression of all minority groups.

Like L.M. (1998), DeLay connects gay rights to the oppression of minority groups, mentioning the issue of slavery as a beginning part in her understanding. L.M. (1998) reiterates her stance of humanity and education in her argument:
The only way to end the violence is to congregate as a society and not as heterosexuals and homosexuals. Regardless of anyone’s sexuality, everyone is human and deserves to be treated with respect. Sometimes parents are afraid to expose their children to homosexuals, feeling that they might receive mixed messages about sexuality; however, if we begin teaching children at a young age about homosexuality, they not grow to hate these people later in life. In result of educating children about the issue, it may also decrease the amount of confusion, if they themselves, are confused of their own sexuality.

Children and adults should be taught those homosexuals are people, just like everyone else…. Homosexuals hold jobs, vote in elections and go shopping just as heterosexual people do. Sexuality is only one factor of a person’s life, and should not be the most important. There are several other qualities that create a person, and we should not discriminate against the qualities we do not agree with.

Parents sometimes associate gay and lesbian people with sexual child abuse. It is a proven fact that homosexual people are rarely involved in sexual child abuse…. Again, the fear, and lack of knowledge, plays a role in prejudging individuals.

The controversy over whether homosexuality is right or wrong, may never be resolved, however, the acceptance of gays and lesbians in our community is a must. Our population must open their minds, and explore difference. Individuals must give people a chance, by getting to know one another, before labeling them…. If we do not stop judging people for what they are assumed to be, instead of who they truly are, the hate in our world will never disappear.
Jenny Wuerth, in her essay, “Solutions for a Better Future” (2000), speaks further about the importance of tolerance for and the education of children about homosexuality:

Children learn about homosexuals from their parents. That’s not necessarily a bad thing, but if their parents are prejudiced then the children have a greater chance of being prejudiced. “The belief that same sex orientation can be learned or imposed on youth through exposure to homosexual adults has led to widespread concern about the sexual orientation of workers, teachers, parents, and guidance counselors” (“Religion”). This deprives the children of positive homosexual role models, and conveys the message to homosexual youth that they are wrong. It also excludes the wonderful and positive influence homosexuals could have on a child’s life. Teaching children about homosexuals is a great idea, but can cause a lot of problems. Some parents still think that homosexuality is contagious. They believe that their child should live in a sheltered world. That approach will not work for our future. Children should learn early on about homosexuals so they can form their own opinion and learn the facts, not the myths. There are many brochures, books, Internet readings and people that parents can talk to about teaching their children. It is essential for the future that children learn about homosexuals. If they do not learn the right way then the hate will come. Just remember that the children are our future.

In this passage, Wuerth focuses on idea that lesbian and gay teachers and other professionals can be “positive role models” for children. Implicit in this argument is that in order to be role models, those professionals must be out lesbian and gay professionals, visible to children and parents as lesbians and gays.
Laura Obrecht, in “Taking a Stand: Homosexual Rights” (2000), uses the rhetorical strategy of comparing the civil rights struggles of gays, lesbians and bisexuals to those of African-Americans:

If you are to look into any number of recent history books, you will most likely come across a section about the segregation of the black race. It will tell you that in our society, blacks were forced to drink from separate drinking fountains, attend separate schools, and were denied the right to certain jobs and privileges they were supposed to be entitled to. It may also describe the hate crimes aimed at them, the protests for continued separation, and the constant discrimination they had to endure. Then it will tell you the most disturbing fact of it all. This fiasco only happened thirty years ago. Boy, have we come a long way. Now we are faced with a new type of discrimination: the discrimination against homosexuals, and bisexuals. Like the African Americans, the homosexual people are enduring constant criticism and unequal rights. I am here to tell you that this is wrong! Equal rights and equal opportunities must be given to homosexual and bi people, or the principles that this country were built on might as well be lost forever.

In this passionate opening statement, Obrecht makes the case for gay identity politics—that lesbian, gay and bisexual persons should be accorded civil rights as a minority and marginalized people, just as African-Americans are a minority and marginalized. She furthers goes on to build her case by offering the argument that lesbians, gays and bisexuals are born into our sexual orientation:
“Homosexuality is a choice.” It is a statement that many religious and political leaders use to justify the unfair rights given to gays. To this statement I laugh. Gays no more chose to be attracted to the same sex than straights chose to be attracted to the opposite. It is a matter of our genetic makeup. Numerous studies have been done to both straight and gay people, analyzing whether or not a “gay gene” exists…. However, nothing specific has yet been identified. As far as the “choice,” a very close lesbian friend made a comment to me that kind of sums it up when she first told me of her sexuality. “Why would anyone choose to be the outcast of society? Think about that.

Obrecht also takes on religious opposition to homosexuality:

Many other times religion is used as the excuse for unequal rights. So many times I have heard the joke, “God made Adam and Eve, not Adam and Steve.” Maybe so but the Bible also says, “Treat your neighbor as yourself.” It doesn’t say that this statement was contingent upon your neighbor being straight. Who are we to judge another person? If you are truly concerned with God’s word and his/her ways then you will treat a homosexual person as if he or she were everybody else, and let God do the judging.

Wuerth (2000) also addresses religious animosity toward lesbians and gays:

After studying up a lot on homosexuals I have realized one big thing. The people that are “against” homosexuality are against it because the Bible is. That is the poorest excuse I have ever heard. We have a gracious God, and we all learned in Sunday school class that Jesus loves everyone. There are some churches that are coming to accept the idea that homosexual people are just like heterosexual
people and therefore should be allowed to worship just like anyone else and they are openly welcoming homosexuals into their church. This is true of churches in Australia and some in the United States. Politics have a lot to do with whether churches accept homosexuality or not. The pastor could have nothing against homosexuals but he could be excommunicated if he lets that belief know (“Religion”). The Christian faith is now realizing that if they continue to be homophobic then the “non-progressive” could lose its place in the community (“Religion”). The Jewish religion in America is accepting towards homosexuals (“Religion”). There are some things that people have to know about what the Bible says about homosexuality. “Thou shalt not lie with mankind, as with womankind; it is an abomination” (Lev. 18:22).

Wuerth, in this passage, employs several rhetorical strategies to persuade her readers that religious groups need to practice acceptance: she uses the language of conservative Christianity—“we all learned in Sunday school class that Jesus loves everyone.” She acknowledges that some pastors may be accepting but prevented from showing acceptance because of their religious superiors, and she observes that churches that do not change with the times may lose members to more “progressive” churches. She makes an interesting strategic move by valorizing Jesus over Old Testament scripture (the Leviticus passage) just as fundamentalist theology does. She also appeals to newer translations, as evangelical Christianity does:

There are some things to keep in mind though. Jesus has never spoken against homosexuals and translations have drastically changed in the Bible over the past 2000 years (“Religion”). Churches are slowly accepting homosexuality into their
lives, but we have a long way to go before it will be loved and honored in a church. Keeping the lines of communication open so people can talk about their fears and opinions is a good way to make the church comfortable with homosexuality.

Her closing move is to call on Christian charity —“keeping the lines of communication open”-- as necessary, which could be effective with a conservative Christian audience, one of the major sources of opposition to lesbians and gays, as well as gay rights issues, like the strong push in the gay community for the right to same-sex marriage. Obrecht (2000) passionately addresses this issue as a justice concern:

Same sex marriages have been a hot topic for discussion on the equal rights debate board. Should gays and bisexuals have the right to get married, and should states who do not allow same sex marriages acknowledge other states unions who do? Homophobics argue that the right of the states to make their own laws also apply in acknowledgements of same sex unions. On the other hand advocates for same sex marriages say that not honoring the unions of other states is a violation of the Full Faith and Credit amendment to the Constitution…. By not allowing homosexuals to get married the government is also taking away, not only the ability to be involved in a legally binding, monogamous relationship, but all of the benefits of being legally joined.…

Three years before the proposed Federal Marriage Amendment of 2004, Obrecht argues passionately here for the injustices of denying same-sex marriage. She concludes:

As we are now entering the beginning of the 21st century, we are faced with whole new challenges in the fight for equal rights. As our parents did for us, let us not
condone the hate, let us fight to make it stop. Let us not separate our two societies like the Blacks were separated from the Whites in the 60’s; let us bridge the gap between straight and gay society. Let us make the United States of America a truly equal place for all; not only for ourselves, but for our children in the next generation.

A further argument illuminates another aspect of same-sex relationships that are, in one student’s mind, poorly understood in our homophobic society. DeLay (1998), claims that her central ethos is friendship and makes the argument that our society often marks same-sex friendships as “lesbian” when they may actually represent influential and important relationships for women:

The affection that two people of the same sex have is a wonderful thing. Many people argue that it is considered a lesbian act to see two girls holding hands walking down the street, but from my own personal experiences, to see two girls holding hands is a sign of the bond that they have between their hearts. Maybe those two girls are lesbian lovers, but then again, maybe they are best friends that just love to show their affection for each other. The affection two girls have for each other is not meant to be taken as a gay act, but more as a sign of love. A hug is not meant as a sexual act, either, just a sign of the intimacy that two friends can have without having a sexual relationship…. Affection is a big part of the lives of every person, and it just depends on the level of comfort that people have with their friends (p.2).

She extends her idea of “humanism” by noting in the same essay:
It is my firm belief that same sex friendships are really essential to the survival of all people. I have found having girlfriends is pertinent to my life and I have also found that because of my girlfriends, I have gained a strong sense of who I am and what I stand for. It is easier for me to be myself, and with only girls there, I have no one to impress. I believe that all people should have this experience, whether they are male or female. Even though to some it may seem that two girls are lesbians or two guys are gay, it is so important to have human affection and contact of a friend of the same sex. I have always been told that guys will come and go, but that my girlfriends will always remain to love and support me. This statement is true in all aspects, whether you are male or female. So, if I had to choose between a girlfriend and a boyfriend, I would definitely choose my girl. DeLay’s statement that her same sex friendships help to affirm her own identity and sense of self is important here; she argues that they are more important than a concern such friendships may be perceived as lesbian or gay.

**Students speak on their own subjectivity**

Cavano (2003) touches on ideas of personal identity, public self-representation and self-disclosure in responses on the nature of subject position and subjectivity:

The term “subject position” is used to represent the way we react to others, especially those unlike ourselves. It is also used to represent the way we introduce ourselves to others and what aspects of ourselves we allow them to see and/or judge. When we assume a “subject position” we are allowing others to either judge us or accept us based on the way we present ourselves. We all hold
our own positions on the way we view the world and everyone we encounter. Our positions are subject to either approval or rejection.

She points out that such self-revelation can lead to others’ acceptance or rejection and that we are all texts to each other in this way. Clipson (2000) understands it to mean “one’s position on a topic,” as does Beth DeLay (2002), linking it also to ideas about marginalization and oppression:

I understand subject position to be how a person feels or believes about a particular subject, whether it be racism, sexism, discrimination of all kinds, or any political, religious or personal belief.

Elise Fitzsimmons (2001) reports:

The term subject position to me means the point of view that a person presents to be their own based on the beliefs we hold.

In this definition, there is an element of representation, that our subject positions are something we choose to “present” (or not) to a public audience. L.M. (2001) echoes this thought:

I feel that ‘subject position” is how one presents themselves to society and how he/she wishes to be viewed.

In thinking about the multiple positions/identities she holds, Cavano (2003) notes:

There are many aspects of myself I have yet to fully understand. If I am curious about something then I will make the effort to explore the subject at another level. Many things I feel passionate about and I don’t feel ashamed to let people know how I feel about certain issues. When something is important to me, I feel it is important to express my concern/feeling with others. Perhaps they will not agree
with me, but we can listen to each other, gain new ideas, and benefit in many ways. At least I got my point across.

She offers the very interesting point that subjectivity is bound up with interest and “passions”, and is also negotiable, something she can debate with other people in a dialogue that may work to change others’ minds and ideas. L.M. (2001) argues:

My own subject positions are varied. I consider myself to be a student, daughter, friend and an individual.

Clipson (2000) identifies himself this way:

I myself am a heterosexual, but I have no problem whatsoever with those that are homosexual or of other sexual orientations.

This student’s understanding of his subject position is as a straight man who is open to all persons, regardless of sexual orientation. Fitzsimmons (2001) is able to play with these identity/subject positions in her writing:

My subject positions are based on what I believe and are influenced by the people around me and experiences I have had in my lifetime. I chose to write about these positions in more comical ways to present common stereotypes and beliefs. I did this to make light of what people think and why it is wrong.

Fitzsimmons’ 1998 essay, “My Night with the Queens!” is a profile of a visit with her friends to a drag night at a local bar:

I was dancing around a little bit during the show and one of the Drag Queens noticed me and decided to take it upon him/herself to come up and start dancing with me. Along with the people that were with me, I shared the same view that it was great. It was interesting to look around the club; there were the people that
were there to enjoy themselves completely and then there were the people that were there because someone had forced them to come. They just kind of sat there perplexed about being there. I was one of the ones that was just enjoying myself completely. Looking around I also noticed the heterosexual guys in there. They were looking around, making sure they knew no one in there besides the people they showed up with. I think the Drag Queens had a special talent for picking those out while they were dancing because they would always go up to the guys that were hiding their faces and dance in front of them. The look of surprise and embarrassment on their faces with the Drag Queens dancing in front of them was hilarious.

In this section, Fitzsimmons clarifies her subject position as accepting of the show and the fun and illustrates how some straight men feel at the display of gender performance. She illustrates and identifies the origins of her acceptance with this story:

I was walking around enjoying myself during the intermission between shows, when one of the Drag Queens, Diedra, came up and said, “Looking good.” I said, “Thank you, you look good too.” We continued to talk for a little while and ended up exchanging names. Diedra was great, friendly and personable. I decided to go back in and dance for a while until the next show started…I was really excited for this one, because I had gotten to talk to a Drag Queen and had the other ones dance with me. The second show was so much more energized than the first one and I was all pumped up for it. Diedra came out to do his/her show and during the middle came up to me and said, “Hi, Elise.” I said hi back, and then he/she leaned over and kissed me on the cheek. Another one of the Drag
Queens came up and danced with me during all of his/her performances. I don’t know why, but I was all excited, because I love seeing stuff that is different than the normal. I admire Drag Queens from afar and was really happy when I got to talk to one…Most people find it weird that I was excited by my little excursion but I love these things. I grew up with this back in Rochester [New York]; it does not upset me in the least. I think it is great that they can be happy doing this. Watching this, I got to see a whole new culture, a way of living that is rarely talked about.

An additional reason Elise lists for her acceptance is

I have a friend who is homosexual and he used to dress up in Drag.

As a new college student from a large East Coast city, Elise approaches the performance of drag as observing and participating in a culture new to her rather than as a scary, taboo, or negative experience.

Students speak on teacher subjectivity

Clipson (2000) in writing about the subject positions of his teachers writes particularly about me:

My teacher is openly gay and she is very accepting of all people regardless of sexual orientation.

Cavano (2003), comments:

I usually just have to “read” them. I watch how they react to certain situations, words, and comments and use my best judgment on how to act with them. Most of my teachers in the past have not been very open about themselves, and merely presented themselves in a “respectable” manner. Perhaps “respectable” is a bad
word. They teach the lesson and that is about it. Very few of my teachers have opened up on a personal level.

In this passage, Cavano points out the implicit power relationship she understands in the classroom. She works at “reading” her teachers, so that she “knows how to act.” Students are undoubtedly at the mercy of their teachers with regard to issues of power and are usually, like Cavano, very skilled at coming to conclusions about how they will present themselves in order to receive the grade they want, the respect and the treatment they hope for, and their “place” in the classroom. By “place,” I mean the geographical / cultural / pedagogical space they fill in the structure of the classroom, with regards to their fellow students and to their teacher. L.M. (2001) agrees, noting,

When I was younger, I looked at my teachers as being much more superior. Now that I am in college at times I look at my teachers as friends, however they still hold an authority over students.

Additionally, Cavano (2003) contends here that her teachers have held to a position of very small self-disclosure, a subjectivity she first refers to as “respectable” and then amends to the teachers not “opening up.” DeLay (2002), who transferred to a small, private school after her first year at a large public university, reports:

Sometimes I’m way off on guessing how my teachers stand. There is a huge difference between a state school and a public school. Of all my teachers I’ve know personally at [the public university], about 75% were open and I knew it. The others I just didn’t know well enough on a personal level. But now that I’ve spent the past three years at small private school, I’ve had about two professors that I know are open and accepting. That’s sad to me. Most of the professors I
have had at a small, private Catholic university are so focused on what the doctrine of the church says, to realize that we aren’t about that in this day and age. I think it’s hard to know exactly what a teacher stands for unless you know them on a personal level.

DeLay was a student in my course before I was out, during 1998, the year I came out only as the daughter of a gay man. When she answers the question concerning her perception of my subject position as a lesbian teacher, she says:

To be quite honest, I didn’t know for sure you were a lesbian, until now. I suppose I had suspicions, but I guess since you never actually said it, I didn’t want to assume. I knew you were extremely open to it and accepting, but I also think you are like that about everyone.

L.M., a student in the same year, reports in 2001:

I understood your “subject position” to be as a caring and open minded individual wanting to extend your knowledge to your students

Fitzsimmons was also an early student in this project, also in 1998, and writes:

I think teachers are there to share experiences and educate what they feel, but in a non-pressing way. Teachers merely present the information; it is up to the student to make decisions on the subject matter.

In the following section, I want to present these students as they speak about having a lesbian teacher—in this case, me—with the focus on how they perceive this “text” in the educational geography we call the composition classroom. I see this as a rudimentary beginning to further study with students and lesbian teachers—as a piece of “teacher-research” emerging from the day-to-day of one lesbian teacher’s classroom experience.
Students speak on lesbian teacher subjectivity

When I asked students on the questionnaire to think about how their perceptions of the issues of power in the classroom—my authority as a teacher, their positions as students—were affected by my coming out as a lesbian teacher, their responses were illuminating. L.M., one of the students in my early (1998) classes, reports:

I honestly do not think of you as a “lesbian teacher.” However, your subject position exposed me to a diverse environment and I feel contributed to my education. As a person, I feel you are very straightforward and open-minded, which I feel are both positive qualities.

L.M., on the issue of power issues and teacher authority argues:

I do not feel this issue affects me. I am comfortable around homosexuals and look at them as people like everyone else.

Clipson (2000) agrees, noting:

I understand you are a lesbian and I don’t have any problem with it at all.

From another viewpoint, Cavano (2003) observes:

I felt you were on a “power trip,” like why would you talk about it? Who cares? I thought. We are all people, we need to work on unity, not on screaming out our differences and throwing them around for everyone to see. We need to accept our differences and not everyone is so accepting. Acceptance starts with understanding and we need to start somewhere.

For this student, my coming out was unnecessary, and if anything, divisive, based on the argument that speaking about difference doesn’t always lead to acceptance.
When asked about any constraints they may have felt as student writers, given my identification and subject position as a lesbian teacher, students took a variety of interesting positions. L.M. (2001) reports:

I feel that students may feel awkward stating their opinions towards the issue if they are against gays/lesbians. However, when I was in the class, I did not have a problem.

DeLay, who found out several years later that I was a lesbian, writes in her 2002 responses to the questionnaire:

I was encouraged to be honest in your class. I knew I was safe to write about how much I loved my best friend, without it being labeled as funny or not acceptable. I felt extremely comfortable to write about how I interacted with people and it was OK and understood.

I will argue that this student probably accurately “read the text” of my lesbianism before I ever started actually disclosing my subject position to my students. L.M., one of the early students from 1998, obviously did too:

I think knowing your sexual orientation affected the word choice and choice of feelings I would express on this issue. I feel homosexuality is still a fairly new topic and makes it a to be a harder discussion topic than race, ethnicity or gender.

Fitzsimmons, also a student in 1998, responds:

As a teacher, I understood your subject position as a person trying to educate students on different ways of life and presenting them as normal without forcing their ideals on others.
Our students, I maintain, minutely examine and research the “text” that all teachers are when we enter the classroom, and are extremely—perhaps for some teachers, frighteningly—accurate in their assessments of the ideological / personal / professional / subjective texts we are.

Clipson (2000) argues that my outness as a lesbian teacher has not affected his writing negatively:

My writing is the same as it has always been. If anything, it has gotten better because I do more free writing on subject positions than I ever have before which have made me more open and inclined to tell people how I feel about certain subjects. I actually feel more open to write how I feel in greater detail. I see it as a courageous thing to “come out” to your students. Therefore, if you have nothing to hide, then I don’t. I feel I can write whatever I want and not be afraid of offending anyone.

Fitzsimmons (2001) agrees:

I have felt no constraints as a student writer. I wrote about topics that I would have written about anyway.

Cavano (2003) disagrees, noting:

I felt I might offend you in some way, by writing about how it bothers me when gay people flaunt their sexuality. You could say it once, maybe twice and it would be okay, but that’s all.

Cavano argues the very important point that as a person with lesser power in the classroom—a student—she felt less certain about giving her real opinions about homosexuality, fearing her comments would “offend.” Clipson though, feels that my
disclosure as a lesbian teacher has opened up lesbian and gay topics for discussion and writing in the classroom: Clipson (2000) comments, with his usual dry humor, from a very different viewpoint:

  It doesn’t bother me because a teacher is supposed to teach and that’s exactly what you do. I wouldn’t give a hot damn if you were infatuated with monkeys because it has nothing to do with the way you teach.

For this student, there was no need for negotiation, because, in his mind, I did what I was supposed to do, “teach.” My sexual orientation was irrelevant to him—which was important was doing my job as it should be done. Anecdotally, of all my students, I have experienced the fewest issues around my sexual orientation among young men of a certain type—those who have as their code of honor the expectation and recognition of respect. Often these are young men who are in university ROTC programs, who are seriously and single-mindedly focused on their academic and physical achievements, who are the “straight arrow” personalities. This was initially a great surprise to me until a colleague, herself a “military brat,” pointed out that these young men understand respect, and as long as they are accorded respect, they give respect to me, regardless of my lesbianism. Another student who took my class in 1998 before I came out to students echoes this feeling that the teacher “doing her job” is of more importance than her lesbianism. In 2001, when I asked her to join this project, Fitzsimmons writes:

  My subject position has not changed at all of you as a teacher or as a person. You are a person who is using their life the way they want to and that should not affect your ability as a teacher or as a person it should not affect those around you.
DeLay (2002) emphasizes another aspect of “doing the job a teacher should do” in her comment:

I’ve honestly not felt much difference in power with you. I’ve felt more like I was writing things and you were more or less “proofreading” them for me and assigning a grade only because you had to. I never felt like I was being judged, which is what a lot of teachers do. I think you tried to be my friend, more than someone that had “control” over me. So, I really don’t think anything has really changed that feeling by you coming out. If nothing else, it would encourage me more to have you read things. I think its important to keep the levels of intimidation at an all-time low in order to encourage people to write what they feel, not what they think you want to hear.

She understands the work of the teacher as facilitative rather than controlling, as being open to all topics, and as being a literate responder rather than being “judgmental.”

When I asked the students if their subject positions changed during the semester they were enrolled in my course, Clipson (2000) answers:

Nope…but I now am more inclined to ask people “What’s up” if I have a different position on subject matter.

L.M. (2001) agrees, as does DeLay (2002), who notes:

I don’t think my subject position had changed at all during my year with you, but I felt much freer to write about it and talk it. I’ve always tended to be open and accepting of all people on many issues, but in your class I was always encouraged to write about them, not just think them.
Cavano (2003) makes an interesting point about being a student in a teacher/researcher’s classroom:

I never ever would have imagined that you were researching students’ reactions. I thought that it was just that you were very proud and maybe even oversecure about your sexuality. Now I realize that as a teacher, observing students’ reactions is an important thing to do.

Her remark resonates with the idea of the vestedness of the teacher/researcher in her students, first as students, and then, as research subjects. I must say, though, that during the course of a semester, I do little more than pay attention when essays on lesbian and gay topics appear—my major focus is teaching and with the case load of most writing teachers, there is little time for anything else.

**Students speak on negotiating identity and power**

I asked the students if their negotiation around sexual orientation in our classroom would have been different if I had been a man rather than a woman, if I had been African-American rather than white, if I had been younger rather than middle-aged.

Fitzsimmons (2001) notes, from a standpoint of inclusion:

I understand that people are people and each different part of them makes them more unique regardless of race, sex or age.

For this student, layers of identity make each person worth knowing as individuals, yet show their common humanity. DeLay (2002) emphasizes the importance of a comfortable classroom geography, reporting:
For me, none of those factors would have changed any discussion I would have had. I felt completely comfortable with you, and would have felt the same way had you been Black and held the same positions or a man and held the same position.

Cavano (2003) comments on the ways in which race and sexual orientation operated for her in our classroom:

If you were a man, I wouldn’t have been as intimidated. Women are much more intimidating than men, especially lesbians or women that are all about “girlpower” and whatnot. A black woman would have been even more intimidating. Being white, it was intimidating enough the way you talked about your sexuality so much, but if you were black you would seem even more standoffish because I would be wondering if you had race issues as well. If you were younger I would have been less intimidated. Young women are not as intimidating….

Clipson (2000) takes a different approach to Cavano’s, arguing again for the primacy of being a good teacher over any other issues:

No, because like I said, I would only be upset with you if you were a loony teacher, and the way you teach has nothing to do with your gender, race, religion, or sexual orientation.

We have all had the “loony” teachers Clipson mentions here and understand well the necessity of approaching teaching with professionalism and with student-centered pedagogies. The most important idea implicit in this student’s comment is that our subject positions as lesbian teachers should not be a matter of concern—what should be
important is our subject positions as good teachers. Fitzsimmons (2001) agrees, stating that her perceptions of the issues of power:

has not been affected at all because I feel that your sexual preference has nothing to do with your capability as a teacher.

**Conclusions**

In the following section, I summarize what I have learned from this small case study with seven former students. While I in no way attempt to make global conclusions which could be applied to the effects of all out lesbian teachers on student subjectivities and writing in the composition classroom, I do offer the results of this particular piece of teacher research as a basis for future research by and about other lesbian teachers and their students.

In this case study, the issue of student voice was central to the ways students responded to me as their lesbian teacher and in their choice of writing topics and the expression of their student subjectivities in our composition courses. Students repeatedly reported that the ways students responded to me as their lesbian teacher and in their choice of writing topics and the expression of their student subjectivities in our composition courses. Students repeatedly reported that the classrooms they and I shared were spaces in which they felt very free to discuss issues of sexual orientation. As reasons for this perception, they stated that I was nonjudgmental and willing to let them discuss and/or write about any topic they chose. As a result they wrote on an amazing array of topics, including normalization of homosexuality, lesbian and gay themes in the media, education for tolerance, friendship between women, drag queens, bisexuality,
lesbian and gay dress performance, and justice issues such as censorship, the First Amendment, gay marriage and the rights of gay parents.

These responses and essays were not always positivistic. One student questioned the purpose of my coming out as a lesbian, feeling that it was unnecessary and indeed unhelpful to the cause of lesbian and gay people. Several students reported that my coming out as a lesbian was uneventful to them and indeed, made no difference to them.

One of the more important findings of this project was the statements by several students that what really did matter to them was the fact that I understood my job as a composition professor and did that job effectively. In Jon Clipson’s words, it mattered that I “was a good teacher.” Their concern was for the quality of my teaching and this was a much greater concern than whether I was a lesbian. Additionally, many of the students, particularly those who took my courses before I came out as a lesbian, felt that being a lesbian perhaps was conducive to my effort to make the classroom a place where open debate on controversial topics could occur.

An unexpected finding resulting from the essays was the level of sophistication of rhetorical strategies which students used to make their arguments. While I only mention this briefly in this project, this is an area that I hope to write about in future publications. Students employed rhetorical stances originating in the African American civil rights movement, in gay rights politics, in humanism, in fundamentalist and evangelical Christianity, and in personal knowledge of lesbian and gay people to strategize their theses and essays. They take issue with societal stereotypes of and myths about the nature of homosexuality and of the representation of lesbian, gay, bisexual and
transgender persons. The students, many of whom have emerged from very conservative small town and rural communities, argue with passion and educated concern.

The students also addressed the power relationships inherent in teacher-student relationships, particularly around the issue of discussing sexual orientation when their teacher is a lesbian. The findings from this case study provide the preliminary results that when such a classroom is student-centered, rather than teacher-centered, the inequality of the teacher-student relationship is much less powerful. If students feel they can bring any topic of discussion into the classroom and the teacher does not feel the need to either squelch the topic or denigrate students’ opinions on the topic, power issues become less of an issue in the classroom dynamic. Further study around variables which were not part of this study, such as teacher age and gender, as well as students’ gender, may be fruitful in investigating this issue further.

Some positive results of the case study include that out lesbian teachers can bring a queer subjectivity to the composition classroom and to their students that empowers them to learn how to educate themselves in diversity and in diverse social environments. When composition teachers integrate their own lesbian subjectivities as pedagogical strategies, students may learn to widen their cultural understanding and responses. The articulation of our own ideologies and subjectivities can be a means for interrogating and problematizing the academic work we do with our students, whether it is the interrogation of disciplinary conventions, or of the means of their own education. If students begin to see the composition classroom as a cultural space alive with the intersecting planes of ideology, subjectivity, race, gender, class, sexual orientation, power, and competing epistemologies, we as lesbian teachers can also offer them the planes of community,
independence, and, dare I say, hope. Whether we are out or not, partially disclosed or fully disclosed as lesbian teachers in the composition classroom, what we truly offer is our real selves, and our students’ eyes are always open to us in this way.
Chapter 6: Implications of the research, future recommendations, and conclusions

Implications of the research for teaching

In the final chapter, I offer some possibilities for pedagogical strategies that utilize lesbian teachers and lesbian teacher subjectivities as means for opening the cultural geography of the composition classroom. I examine implications of the dissertation project for teaching and present a cultural studies approach for teaching sexual orientation in the composition classroom. Following this course design, I summarize the findings of the research project and look forward to the implications of the research for this project and for future scholarship. Finally, I discuss the idea of composition classroom as queer geographical space and think aloud about my learning during this project.

I want to begin by relaying a strategy used by two “straight but not narrow” teaching colleagues and friends. While they are not lesbians, by their pedagogical strategy, they disrupt heterosexist assumptions of teachers in the college classroom and help to open queer spaces for learning. By “queer” I mean spaces, which are not presumptively heterosexual and/or heterosexist.

Jeannie Ludlow, a women’s studies and American culture studies professor at a large midwestern university notes:

I use “partner” and avoid gendered pronouns. I have found that because I do this and because of my appearance (short reddish hair, mismatched earrings, etc), many students assume that I am a lesbian. If a student asks outright (and many have), I do tell the truth—that I am hetero. But I also tell them I am very proud of my identity as an ally.
Ludlow, though personally identifying as “hetero,” argues, in her body, identity as problematized by physical presentation—in other words, she does not “pass as heterosexual” even though she is. Her students read her in this manner as a “lesbian text”. She further disrupts students' assumptions with her conscious use of language:

I try not to say “gay people” or “lesbians” (as in the “the law discriminates against gay people”) but, rather, “those of use who are gay” or “those of us who identify as lesbian” or some such construct (I also say “those of us who are Latino” and those of us who are labeled “disabled’, so I do this for everyone). I do this not to claim or co-opt an identity to which I do not belong, but to create discursively an inclusive “use” that honors all of us—lesbian, gay, Latino, disabled, etc.

This language extends to other cultural constructs and assumptions. Here she emphasizes her language use with regard to the idea of family:

I am careful to use the word “heterosexual” to mark couples/families that are hetero in structure (for example, I would not say “in a typical family” unless I were referring to all family structures; rather I might say “in a typical heterosexual family”). I believe that constantly marking heterosexuality is one way to fight heteronormativity. Similarly, I try to use “white” as a racial marker as often as I can, so white is no longer so normative that it can go unmarked (or unremarked).

In employing what is actually more precise language, Ludlow is able to disrupt and reorganize straight students’ assumptions in a class setting that is both conflicted and transformative. Her work opens the cultural geography of her classes to the intellectual work of examining a wider range of gendered and sexual constructs, and at the same time
opens the discourse of the classroom to LGBT students—in other words, a space that is *queer* in the sense that is not heterosexist.

Deidra Donmoyer (2003), a professor of interpersonal communication at another midwestern university, also likes to problematize her identity for her students, in order to provide critique and discussion in her classes:

As a teacher it is important for me to be aware how I may be influencing others in and out of the classroom; therefore, I try to consciously construct my presentation of self and choice of language that may serve as teaching opportunities. One such case arises through sexual identity. It began with simple choices such as using the words/phrases “partners” or “significant others” when referring to a couple; this allows the couple’s identities to be ambiguous and open, creating space for heterosexual and/or homosexual reading(s). I realized that many students noticed this choice and asked questions that allowed discussions to arise. With this success (as I perceive it), I began to cultivate ambiguity in other areas and one of the most interesting and effective has been my own sexual identity.

One day in class we were discussing issues of identity and began to talk about sexuality. A few students stated that it was very important to *know* what a person’s sexuality was in order to “properly” interact with her/him. With this opening, I asked the class, “Who can say that they *know* my sexuality?” I looked into 20-some blank faces; I could see some wheels spinning furiously, some hitting bumps, and others screech to a halt. I continued, “I don’t think I’ve revealed to anyone in this room who I am involved with in intimate relationships.” Still blank they searched for words. “Now, I ask you, how has
that lack of information about my sexuality affected your ability to interact with me? From there we began to talk.

In her choice of a stance of “ambiguity,” Donmoyer neither inhabits the traditionally valorized stance of “teacher neutrality,” nor does she essentialize her sexual orientation, but rather uses this strategy to empower her students to think independently and critically about identity:

There have been some interesting results from the occasions when I used this strategy. Of course it opens a space to talk because it directly opposes many of the students’ heterosexual assumptions. Although my known heterosexuality may be more comforting for many students and this ambiguity may “offend” some students, it is a risk I choose to take, as I believe we learn the greatest lessons in spaces of tensions. In one class that I “opened” up to, after weeks of trying to figure me “out,” a student was sent on a mission by others to “find out what I was.” Again, I am fine with their own tensions as this continued questioning on their part offers spaces for them to think about these issues of sexuality, assumption, acceptance, etc.

Donmoyer recognizes here the minute examination students give to “teacher-texts” and notes that while this entails risk, she sees the geography of the classroom opening up as a result. Also, her strategy had another byproduct:

Additionally, another positive result has been that more students began to open up to me outside of the classroom about their own sexualities and questions after my own ambiguous statement.
Lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender students listening to such a professor will see the walls of the classroom open up for them, rather than close around them, as happens so often. This professor sees this as a viable pedagogy that permeates not only her students’ education but challenges her in her performativity as teacher:

I stumbled onto this praxis during a classroom conversation many years ago, but I realize that it does present a wonderful opportunity. It is not something I do with every class, but in order for it to succeed I must cultivate this ambiguity in all classes, in my office, on campus, etc. Therefore this has become part of my teaching persona and practice. Although it would be easier for me to present my heterosexuality or to keep quiet (I wouldn’t have to work so hard or wouldn’t lose some students (as I sometimes do)), I think it is important to challenge myself and my students in these many times tense areas. This continued presentation also works with my teaching philosophy as I think that it is important to raise such issues at times other than the two-week section on sexuality or in an overt activity. An ambiguous sexuality allows me to, potentially, prompt students to question their assumptions throughout the semester, even if on subconscious levels.

Another option for teachers in opening up discussion is one I have sometimes suggested to graduate teaching assistants and professors when I give talks on out lesbian teachers in college classrooms. Sometimes straight colleagues will ask, “What can I do?” I suggest they “come out as heterosexual.” While this usually draws an initial laugh, teacher soon see the possibilities when, rather than let students assume teacher heterosexuality, based on the teacher’s comments about children, or their wearing of a wedding ring, the teacher
“outs” herself, and thus foregrounds a stance that may lead to fruitful discussion and may, as Donmoyer notes, encourage the mentoring of lesbian and gay students.

Another strategy for opening up the “queer composition classroom” as a cultural space that educates all students includes conscious course design. In the following section, I sketch a brief outline of a classroom approach and assignment designed to acknowledge and use that open geography as a pedagogical strategy for teaching composition. During the past five years, I have begun using a cultural studies approach to teach first-year composition, particularly in the second semester of our university writing program’s two-semester sequence. In the second semester, the emphasis is on teaching researched arguments. I teach students about the cultural studies issues of race, class, age, ethnicity, sexual orientation, and gender and I employ several readings to introduce students to using these cultural issues as criteria to critically think through and write about what they have read. We work through these practice readings by collaborative effort—reading them aloud to each other in small groups and then deconstructing the article using the cultural studies issues as a set of criteria through which to propose new readings of the articles. Each group then gives a short presentation to the class about their group’s article and then a general class discussion ensues, in which students ask questions of each other and of me.

This is hard work—first-year students are unused to the vocabulary of cultural studies—but once they work and struggle and consult with each other in class, then come to me in frenetic twos and threes with frantic questions and avowals of confusion, and I ask them more questions and send them back to do more hair-tearing and intellectual work (Freire, I think, would call this “education”), these 18 and 19-year-olds quickly
catch on. Sometimes we work with media images and web sites—hypertext, television and advertising are areas of literacy for these students. I then ask the students to choose a research question of burning interest to them, which they can investigate using the cultural studies issues as criteria for critique and deeper understanding.

Using student-generated research questions has been very fruitful—there is a constant exchange between students and their peers and with me as we work through each stage of the research process, from topic generation to discussions of what makes a scholarly source to the sometimes-frustrating and always interesting search for relevant articles. I talk to them about the history of ideas and the importance of literature reviews, describing them as “doing your homework”—showing the work of people who contributed to the evolution of their topics and ideas in earlier years as a way of consolidating and informing the new research they do. And I tell them by doing this work, they are joining a community of scholars that stretches back to the dawn of knowledge. I assure them that they can do the real work of research and scholarship—that this is their job and their education of themselves.

As they struggle with the scholarly content of journal articles, the reading gets easier for them. First-year students can do this work—I have seen them do it for the past 17 years, semester after semester. They learn fairly quickly how to use the cultural studies criteria to address their ideas about sports, genetics, politics, families, careers, and social issues. I teach them APA documentation and I teach them the rationale for using APA—I try to deconstruct for them the ways APA is effective and the ways in which it is less so. I insist that they use it correctly, as part of their scholarly work, as part of being in the ongoing community of scholars. I teach them to use the cultural criteria to analyze,
synthesize and evaluate—and more importantly, once some figure it out, they teach to the ones who haven’t figured it out yet, and yes, those student peers are many times more effective at that teaching. I am not emotionally invested in who gets it done; I just want to see that it does get done.

They write beautiful researched arguments as a result—they are insightful and passionate and they take on topics many first-year composition teachers would be afraid to assign them. The students take on gender questions. Students have addressed racism at our university and, as this project shows, very controversial topics around sexual orientation. They are not afraid. And in the end, they have learned many valuable things, perhaps the least of which is the “school task” of writing an academic research paper. They have begun a preliminary and hopefully continuing exploration into the inner workings of disciplinary conventions and documentation. They have learned a scholarly language that extends their minds, their abilities, and their future independence as writers. They have walked into Gloria Anzaldúa’s “borderlands” of research, particularly with what is often regarded as the transgressive nature of discussion of queer topics.

**Summary of the dissertation project**

In this dissertation, I have sought to employ a lesbian feminist teacher-research approach to uncover the ideologically constructed subjectivities of lesbian teachers and to deconstruct and confront the idea of teachers as “neutral” ideological texts. The goal of this approach has been to erase the invisibility of lesbian teachers and to lessen homophobic responses, so that lesbian teachers can work openly to offer their best teaching selves to their composition students. In Chapter 1, I laid out this approach and
the accompanying methodologies of case studies of teachers and students, as well as close readings of student essays and questionnaires.

In Chapter 2, I provided a theoretical discussion of key terms, including “lesbian,” “teacher subjectivity,” “teacher as text” and “lesbian teacher performance,” using work from lesbian studies, women’s studies, rhetoric and composition studies. I also presented a literature review of composition history, as a means for providing a basis for synthesizing and correlating movements within composition history and subsequent lesbian teacher positionalities enacted in those movements. I discussed the socio-political context of composition teaching in American colleges for lesbian teachers.

In Chapter 3, I extended this discussion to an examination of lesbian teacher subjectivities in empowerment pedagogies, including the Writing across the Curriculum, and provide a critique of WAC ideology. In addition, I presented a literature review of empowerment and critical pedagogies and implications of ideological critiques of these pedagogies.

The report of my case study with lesbian teachers is filed in Chapter 4, with a discussion of the history of the use of case studies in composition studies and my use of it with my subjects. I outlined my methodologies for the case study, instruments used, a description of the case study, and my analysis of the teachers’ responses. This analysis was built around themes which emerged from the teachers’ responses, including self-disclosure and closeting, passing and lesbian teacher performance, coming out as pedagogical practice and lesbian teacher as feminist teacher.

In Chapter 5, I described the case study with former students, including data collection, rationale and description of the instruments, and an analysis of the student
participants’ responses. Themes emerging from student essays and questionnaire responses included: normalizing heterosexuality, gay and lesbian dress performance, and justice issues. I reported students’ conclusions that their writing choices seemed greater and more permissible in classrooms with an out lesbian teacher and that they felt freer to engage in class discussions on controversial topics with such a teacher. Perhaps most significantly, the students wrote that what really mattered to them was they experienced the out lesbian teacher as a “good teacher,” and that that quality was far more important than her lesbianism.

In this concluding chapter, I used the examples of two teacher show identify as straight as a means to illustrating other ways for teachers to present themselves as ideological texts in the classroom. Additionally, I presented a cultural studies classroom approach which permits students to discuss issues of sexual orientation in a queer geographical space.

**Implications of the research for this project and others**

When I posed the original research question for this project, “What is the effect of out lesbian teachers and lesbian teacher subjectivities on student choice of topics, student writing, and student subject positions in the first-year composition classroom?” I really thought of it in the same terms I ask my first-year composition students to approach research questions: as an avenue of intellectual inquiry I knew nothing about and was truly curious about—in effect, a **real** research question.

I surmised that my self-disclosure as a teacher who is also a lesbian would create a set of responses and reactions in my students that might not be predictable, indeed might even be materially dangerous. I worried that my students were busily and actively,
as a result of that self-disclosure, considering my sexual practices rather than listening to me when I was discussing their essays with them. I was first startled, and then fascinated by students’ repeated choice of lesbian and gay issues for their writing topics when I never suggested these to my classes. I believed, but could not prove, a correlation between the increase of essays on these issues and my initial coming out as the daughter of a gay man and my upset over Matthew Shepard’s murder. Essays on these topics only increased in number when I came out the next year as a lesbian, which strengthened that theory. I had also begun to suspect that my students were “wise to me” concerning my sexual orientation before I was ever out to them—that they were somehow “reading” me very closely as a “text.”

I began to talk with lesbian and also heterosexual women colleagues about this idea of teachers as texts read minutely by our students. (This idea is certainly not original to me—Heather Hartley (1999) reports her use of the “sexual orientation guessing game” with her students as a “feminist pedagogical practice.” Earlier in this chapter, I related the story of a colleague who employs this strategy as a way of teaching the rhetoric of communications theory and identity.) One friend, a long time professor with many teaching awards and stellar student evaluations over a lengthy teaching career, spoke of students who added to their high praise of her teaching little comments like, “You should change your earrings more often.” One woman student approached this friend in her office and made the statement, “I know you have a female partner, because you today you had on one blue sock and one gray sock, which means you got dressed in the dark, not wanting to wake her.” Very startled, my friend wondered how this young woman, who, it turned out, really needed to talk with someone about her own coming out issues,
decided on these grounds that her partner was a woman. Other women colleagues, both
lesbian and straight, reported similar anecdotes—about students asking questions
designed to draw out their marital status, age of their children, and age of the teachers
themselves, about receiving comments on evaluations about their personal appearance,
hairstyle and attire.

During the course of my research, I began to discover articles in rhetorical theory,
queer theory, cultural studies, and composition pedagogy about “queer geographical
spaces” and “the geography of the classroom.” Kathleen Kirby’s work in “Thinking
through the Boundary: The Politics of Location, Subjects and Space” (1993) was
particularly rich in this regard:

Space has the capacity to figure many of the different aspects of identity—the
psyche as volume, the body as container, discourse as spatial network, groups as
closed circles, and the aloof expanse of geography and nation. Space brings
together the material and the abstract, the body and the mind, the objective
interaction of physical subjects and the elusive transience of consciousness (or the
unconscious). Space is our environment, it links us to our environment and seems
to fortify a distinction between self and environment, girding (and guarding) an
interiority. As a metaphorical substrate, space provides the very medium for
measuring interconnection and difference, similarity and distance—markers that
become important in evaluating the possibilities of coalition or the desirability of
separatism. Space, then seems to offer a medium for articulating—speaking and
intertwining—the many facets, or phases, of subjectivity that have interested
different kinds of theory: national origin, geographic and territorial mobility
(determined by class, gender, and race), bodily presence and limits, structures of consciousness and ideological formations of belonging and exclusion (p.174).

Kirby’s words here define perfectly the cartography of the composition classroom. Students, within the intellectual, emotional and spiritual boundaries of the composition classroom, write in their bodies and in their academic work the means for personal and intellectual integration. They interact with their teachers and with their peers, they write in groups and singly, producing living and written collaborative and individual discourses. In the physical act of writing, they enact in their bodies identities and subjectivities. In this space, they try out new identities and subjectivities, individually and collectively in the subjective cultural discourse and “contact zone” of the composition classroom. The composition classroom in this way is a space where real work happens, in which the ideological positions and subjectivities of teacher and students intersect, clash, disrupt and act upon each other. It is my argument that this is a pedagogy with the potential for real education as lesbian teachers in the composition classroom articulate it and as our students are free to inhabit and co-opt these discourses.

Another fertile text is “Lost in Space: Thinking Geographically about Pedagogy in English” (Mahala & Swilky, 1999):

Geographical thinking focuses on the extrinsic meanings of work in English, the meanings extracted from that work, intended or not, through mediating institutional forces, relationships, and modes of spatial organization. It considers how the work of English educators are mediated by the contiguity of their courses with other courses and programs, by the proximity of their departments with other academic disciplines, professional schools and employers, by the multiplicity of
environments through which these educators and their students circulate. It addresses questions such as how do the distributive functions of English interact with the ideological functions, and how awareness of different spaces affect events in “the classroom,” which has long been the self evident spatial figure for curriculum and pedagogy…. One of the key tasks we face, then, is to displace both disciplinary and administrative discourses by transposing them into the realm of geography and politics (p. 3).

Mahala and Swilky’s text speaks to the institutional and academic constraints that composition professors face every day as we work to “interpret” departmental and institutional directives, expectations, mission statements, often at the lowest pay scale, even though there are more of us than in almost any other academic department and even though we have the closest contact with first-year college students. These authors propose a transformative change in our understanding of how these discourses of the academy are more useful when activated from a stance of politicized pedagogy, when the composition classroom is rewritten as a contextualized space for real, meaningful, transformative work for teachers and students.

Because of these words and because of my position as a teacher and a researcher, I have walked around now for seven years with this very “solid geometry” mental picture of the composition classroom, of the brilliantly colored and fast-paced intersecting arrows of the cultural/ ideological/ pedagogical/ subjectivities of this geography we call our work—the door we walk through every day as we greet our students and develop epistemologies about each other and the business of writing.
In the course of those years, here is what my students have taught me. They do, indeed, experience their composition classrooms as geographical spaces. They understand that their interactions with each other are intershot with the disruptive notions of sexual orientation, race, class, and gender. They realize that their ability to build new knowledge in that ideological/cultural space depends upon the flexibility of that geography to expand its boundaries to admit ideas ideologically and culturally new and different than those of their home communities, and that it also depends on their own courage. They acknowledge that their teachers’ willingness to entertain diverse ideas and discussion is crucial to their own willingness to debate transgressive—lesbian and gay—topics in classroom discussion and in their essays.

My students have surprised me in this research, perhaps this, most of all, in their common statement that what matters most to them is that I do an effective job of teaching them the writing strategies they have come to my class to learn. They have cared little, if not at all, that I am a lesbian, once they decided that I was doing the job they expected me to do. In the generosity of their 18- and 19-year old spirits, they have taught me that my initial fear of coming out in a very conservative Midwestern university was groundless, even when they found my sexual orientation counter to their moral and religious convictions.

Here is what I have taught myself in the past seven years. I am, indeed, a “text” to my students. They read me daily and minutely, as the subjective lesbian-teacher self I am. I have come to understand that my own textuality is an opening for pedagogical transformation and agency. If I continue to work at the job my students expect me to do, my lesbianism will teach them something they did not know before, chiefly, that an adult
woman can be a happy, evolved lesbian teacher. This gives hope to the lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender students in my courses, and in the courses of my colleagues in Chapter 4. This also educates straight students to the fact that that this is a big world and that we all have a place at the table, because we practice that policy in our classroom space.

I also think all the time now, when I am in the classroom, and when I confer with students in my office about their writing, that the composition classroom is a textually rich geographical space. It is, in the lesbian poet and composition scholar Minnie Bruce Pratt’s term, a “contact zone…a social space where cultures meet, clash, and grapple.” In this way, the composition classroom is a site of conflict (sometimes), discussion (often), resolution (maybe), and a multi-intersected space where both students and teachers learn.

I stand now at the end of seven years of doctoral work, knowing clearly that this work is a very preliminary contribution to an understanding of lesbian teachers of college composition, of our subjectivities, and of how we affect our students. I have argued within these pages that out lesbian teachers of composition inhabit various spaces that may be helpful to our students and that empower us to live more freely, openly and authentically. At the same time, I understand and support the lesbian college teachers who cannot be out or who do not choose to be out, either because of the institutional and material constraints of their universities, or because their way is different than my way. I do not in any wish to diminish these colleagues’ outstanding academic, scholarly and pedagogical work. They and those of us who are out are, together with many other women of other sexual orientations, the backbone of college composition teaching in this country. I also commend the universities and departments, particularly my own, who are
able to make their own “geographical space” for those of us who are queer in our lives and in our pedagogy, acknowledging that in these places a generous spirit resides that is in itself an education to our students.

It is my hope, in the future, to conduct more teacher research with students in the queer geography of my composition classes. I have long been interested in the realities of student resistance and want to investigate the ways in which queer and straight students pose resistance as a method for transformative change for their own education and in opposition to “banking” forms of education so often prevalent in our universities. Additionally, I am interested in a closer examination of the assignments we pose to our students in composition classrooms and begin development of assignments that might better serve the academic needs of queer students. I hope also to begin to form a viable network of lesbian professors of composition as a means for dialogue and information sharing, and also to track issues of self-disclosure for lesbian teachers as our society becomes more inclusive. I am also interested in the roles lesbian teachers play as mentors for LGBT students in our universities and how the academy can better foster, support and educate these students as well as reward the efforts of such teachers.

Conclusions

I hope, finally, that others will take up some of this research too. I will count it an honor when that happens. I am so indebted to those who have gone before me in LGBT research—all those who appear in the literature reviews of this project. This community of scholars has been the “great cloud of witnesses” who has made a way for me, both professionally and personally. I began this project hoping to make visible the lives, work and subjectivities of lesbian composition teachers, in the hope that by removing our
erasure I could honor and valorize the specific and particular contributions lesbian composition teachers bring to our pedagogy, to our scholarship, to our students, and to our institutions. As I travel to conferences, give presentations and talk to lesbian teachers, both closeted and out, I am heartened and encouraged by the passion with which all these women teach, with the heart they bring to their students every day.

Finally, I know now that I began this project with the desire to erase my own invisibility. As a woman who came out as a lesbian at the age of 45, at the same time I started my doctoral program in rhetoric and writing, I had already spent many years feeling invisible in a heterosexual marriage. When I started my doctoral work, I had scholarly interests in Writing Across the Curriculum and originally thought that would be the foundation of my scholarly work. I retain that interest, as is evident in this project. But I came to realize that if I continued my work of personal and professional authenticity, I would have to “come out” in my scholarship and in my teaching life. My “national coming out” occurred when my first scholarly presentation on queer pedagogy was accepted in 2000 at the National Council of Teachers of English Conference in Nashville. I realized at that moment that I was at a personal and professional crossroads: either I worked at the scholarship I loved—queer pedagogy—and came out, possibly suffering a reduction of future employment possibilities, or I chose WAC pedagogy, in the words of one professor, a “safer” course, in which jobs would be plentiful.

It seemed a scary decision at the time; I made it anyway and I have never been sorry. This work gives me the energy to enjoy teaching writing, to be with students every day and to love them. Because of this scholarly work, I can mentor LGBT students at a
critical time in their own development as successful and happy adults. I am no longer invisible.
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