

November 2008

Book Review: Literacy, Sexuality, Pedagogy: Theory and Practice for Composition Studies

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Recommended Citation

Blackburn, Jessie (2008). Book Review: Literacy, Sexuality, Pedagogy: Theory and Practice for Composition Studies. *Journal of International Women's Studies*, 10(2), 226-230.

Available at: <https://vc.bridgew.edu/jiws/vol10/iss2/18>

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Literacy, Sexuality, Pedagogy: Theory and Practice for Composition Studies.

Jonathan Alexander. 2008. Logan, UT: Utah State UP. 225 pp. Endnotes, bibliography and index are included. \$24.95 (paperback).

Reviewed by Jessie Blackburn¹

In *Literacy, Sexuality, and Pedagogy: Theory and Practice for Composition Studies*, Jonathan Alexander brings sexuality into conversation with critical composition pedagogy. Alexander opens his text with an introduction aimed at defining what he calls sexual literacy and unveiling the organic connections between feminist pedagogy, sexual literacy, and all other acts of literacy. The text is divided into three sites of praxis: (1) sites of theory and writing, (2) sites of pedagogy, (3) sites of resistance. Alexander's thesis is transparently identified as a critique of feminist pedagogies for failing to include sexuality in the mode of difference through which feminist and liberatory pedagogies address literacy acts; furthermore, Alexander argues for a need to queer the composition classroom in an effort to better authorize our literacy students in writing/reading their entire identities—not just those identities often legitimized in the public sphere.

In his introduction, Alexander defines sexual literacy as “the knowledge complex that recognizes the significance of sexuality to self-and communal definition and that critically engages the stories we tell about sex and sexuality to probe them for controlling values and for ways to resist, when necessary, constraining norms” (5). He argues that sexuality is one of the most basic—if not the most basic—acts of identity, and the sexual illiteracy that Western society encourages in its citizens is responsible for the lack of critical knowledge surrounding issues of HIV/AIDS, marriage rights, reproductive rights, contraception, sexual safety, and sexual diversity. This sexual illiteracy, Alexander posits, is merely symptomatic of the many other critical illiteracies plaguing our 21st century. Calling on the liberatory and feminist pedagogies of bell hooks, James Berlin, Patricia Bizzell, Lester Faigley, David Bartholomae, Richard Ohman, Ira Shor, Paulo Freire, and others, Alexander explains

literacy itself is a product of culture...A critical *multicultural* pedagogy seeks to make a space in which *different* truths cannot only be articulated but can assume *critical* efficacy—a space in which differences become the lenses through which to examine the structures that keep us separate, isolated, and often powerless. (8, emphasis in original)

Put plainly, Alexander reminds feminist pedagogues of our commitment to opening up the writing space to explorations of difference and of our commitment to critical literacy as liberation from the ideological and political confines of rhetoric. He asks, then, why we use our classrooms to critique issues of race, class, ethnicity, nationality, and gender but not sexuality. Situating ideology at the center of the composition and rhetoric classroom, Alexander posits our reluctance to discuss issues of sexual difference as suggestive of our larger reluctance to and discomfort with truly queering our vision of

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dominant societal norms—not simply our sexual norms. Indicating his experience with collegial resistance to sexual literacy, Alexander addresses the pedagogical concerns over classroom practices that may only benefit the marginalized. Answering this concern by pointing to queer theory, Alexander reminds us that “...queer theory is designed to provoke consideration of the construction of *all* sexualities in our culture as sites of identity, knowledge, and power” (14, emphasis in original). Specifically, Alexander argues that along with the sexual ‘minorities’ in the classroom, the dominant sexualities desperately deserve critical exploration of their heteronormative literacies that naively and falsely divide society into tidy sexual binaries. Moreover, Alexander charges us with a responsibility to prepare our students to participate fully in their own identities and to navigate with fluency their own civic membership in a society that places so much public power/lessness at the feet of our seemingly personal sexualities.

Given the powerful ways in which we name each other and our relations through the languages of sex and sexuality—we’re men, women, transsexual, gay straight, married, partnered, sleeping around, etc., etc.,--a failure to become literate in the languages of sexuality alienates us from our world, inhibiting us from naming it—and from the possibility of *renaming* it as we question received values and norms. (63, emphasis in original)

Essentially, Alexander charges all compositionists with the responsibility of teaching critical (re)reading and (re)writing skills that transfer into the critical thinking skills necessary to navigate all modern rhetoric. Our sexual literacy, in other words, must be included in the requisite skills for modern agency and identity. Relying heavily on Michel Foucault and Judith Butler, Alexander threads his theory of sexual literacy into the literacy classrooms of Western colleges and universities and into the pedagogies that shape those classrooms.

Moving smoothly from theory into practice, Alexander examines the sexual content in composition textbooks that dominate classrooms today. Referencing a study that he and Martha Marinara, William P. Banks, and Samantha Blackmon presented at the 2006 Conference on College Composition and Communication, Alexander writes “[o]f the 290 readers examined, only 73 texts included readings with identifiable queer content” (90). Furthermore, writes Alexander, “college-level composition textbooks, particularly readers, offer an increasing spate of texts on race and ethnicity, complementing diverse readings on gender, but readings on queer lives seem relegated to periodic ‘coming-out’ narratives and debates about gay marriage” (91). Alexander’s larger point here is that while topics of coming out and marriage rights are extremely useful in bringing queer sexuality into public discourse, relegating sexual diversity *only* to LGBT issues simply reifies heteronormative presumptions. For sexual literacy to spread across the sexual continuum, all forms of sexual ideology—LGBT and heterosexual— must be critiqued. “This is a queer pedagogy, then, that invites students to begin thinking beyond simply tolerating lesbian and gay existences and instead interrogate more fully how sexuality functions in all of our lives” (104). Alexander—invoking Judith Butler and Michel Foucault— suggests that all sexualities must be internalized simultaneously as different and legitimate; decentering the self enables empathy toward the other and provokes a plural vision of (sexual) identity. This empathy

and critical consciousness is the very goal of feminist and liberatory pedagogies, and it ultimately is the foundation of diplomacy and democracy. Alexander reminds us of our objective as feminist pedagogues and holds us accountable for failing to actively recognize the presence of sexuality within the fabric of identity and culture (and, therefore, within our classrooms)—the very multiculturalism that our pedagogies claim to forward.

In its theoretical capacity, *Literacy, Sexuality, Pedagogy: Theory and Practice for Composition Studies* is long overdue on the shelves of composition theory and literacy studies. However, the shift from theory to practice does not happen nearly as organically as it should for Jonathan Alexander. He is beyond convincing in his exhaustive—bordering on redundant at times—explanation of the linkages between sexual literacy and society. He leaves the reader with no doubt about the power and agency driving sexual ideology in Western society, and the unquestionable relationship between public discourse=sexual literacy and private discourse=sexual illiteracy leaves literacy scholars prepared to incorporate topics of sexuality and difference into our pedagogies. Where Jonathan Alexander's text falls short is in his chapters on practical application; after all, we are accountable—and so are our pedagogies—for meeting the mechanics-based needs of our students. Undoubtedly, critical thinking skills (i.e., sexual literacy) transfer solidly into our literacy skills, but the critical thinking of our students will never be fluently communicated if their mechanics are left unaddressed. Furthermore, Alexander does not redress the likely potential for classrooms devoted to writing and reading about sexuality to turn into spaces that simply replicate, reproduce, and rewrite our students' sexual identities—sans genuine internal critique.

As a literacy scholar who has written extensively on sexuality and pedagogy, Alexander is careful to acknowledge the fine balance between theory and praxis that any groundbreaking pedagogue must espouse. A quick browse through any library holdings covering liberatory and feminist pedagogies will find the likes of bell hooks, Paulo Freire, Pat Bizzell, Henry Giroux, Ira Shor, David Bartholomae, Victor Villanueva, and others. All of these pedagogues share one common theme: pedagogies aimed at critical literacy skills that authorize the students in their ability to deconstruct dominant hierarchies and gain access to civic freedoms. With this in mind, Alexander's latest work is sure to earn a central place in critical pedagogies devoted to narrowing the divide between illiteracy and agency. Alexander's luminous rhetorical critique of sexual literacy is compelling, undeniable, and astute. Where this text fails to find its hallmark success is in its praxis, for *Literacy, Sexuality, Pedagogy: Theory and Practice for Composition Studies* clearly drains its pedagogical capital in its first two chapters devoted to theory.

Once Alexander moves out of theory and into the realm of application, he begins to frustrate his own thesis. At this point in the text, Alexander has us enthusiastic in our agreement that we *must* bring topics of sexuality into our feminist pedagogies; however, he leaves us asking *how* this is to be done. Unfortunately, the answer to this question is never fully tended to by Alexander. In chapter three, "Queer Theory for Straight Students," Alexander does offer a sample activity that he utilizes in his own classrooms. Alexander, in an effort to disrupt the heteronormative narrative, designed a hoax website for his students—who believe the website to be authentic—to critique. In this website, Alexander creates a homepage for a fictional character, Dax, who is a closet Nsync fan.

His site, Straightboyz4Nsync (<http://www.geocities.com/straightboyz4nsync>) is designed to provoke classroom queries about "...the ways in which 'straightness' is 'performed,' is narrated, is constructed and maintained as an identity...What might teasing out that story tell us about the politics—and rhetoric—of heterosexuality in our culture?" (109). Relying heavily on Judith Butler's theory of gender performance and social constructionism, Alexander brings this website into his classroom—and brings Dax's identity along with it—as a safe subject (or object) of critique. Alexander admits that students' responses spanned from inattentive to Dax's sexuality to supportive to homophobic (112). Alexander includes excerpts from students' papers, suggesting that Alexander did succeed in getting his students to write about—and therefore think about—sexuality; however, he does not explain how this project addressed his students' mechanical writing skills and challenged their overall internal ideological assumptions. In other words, besides not dealing with basic writing skills, Alexander does not suggest that this sexual literacy in any way transfers beyond the assignment or beyond the walls of the classroom. How, for example, are the sexual literacy outcomes of this assignment teaching the students to disrupt the dominant power structure in play *outside* of the Internet? Sure, the ability to read the cultural codes and cues of Dax's homepage will transfer into the social networks of Alexander's students, but, most importantly, how does it embolden the students—especially those who benefit from the status quo—to desire any tangible socio-political change, and in what way does it equip the students with the technical literacy skills that are requisite to toppling the dominant hierarchy? Put plainly, is this assignment fun for the moment but brushed aside by the students? Do they internalize this sexual literacy, or is it tossed aside like much of the literacy skills gained in more traditional research assignments? To be just, Alexander himself reflects upon assignments such as his "...opening up not new possibilities for thinking about gender, but a much more sexist and stereotypical can of worms" (133). Alexander moves us through other sample writing exercises—largely surrounding student-led fiction writing—as he addresses some of the possible ways of teaching sexual literacy. For example, hoping the students will come to understand gender as performative, Alexander has his students imagine and write fictionally about an alternate sexual identity. He describes this as a "virtual gender swapping" (144). If our students write the Other, how can we guarantee their genuine internal acceptance of the Other, and how can we determine if their writing of the Other is not done so simply by relying upon internal stereotypes and ideological assumptions? Alexander concludes *Literacy, Sexuality, Pedagogy: Theory and Practice for Composition Studies* with a chapter devoted to resistance. He suggests that sexuality is such a contested topic in the classroom due to it being intrinsically imbued with issues of power. It is Power's resistance to critique that manifests itself in the academy's—and in some students'—resistance to sexual literacy. Furthermore, Alexander concludes that "...one of the most important assumptions we can examine with students, particularly at the beginning of any term, is the assumption that a classroom is a value-free or neutral space. Let me be clear: inasmuch as possible, our classrooms should be relatively 'safe spaces'...but they are never neutral. Honesty about that is essential" (196). By acknowledging our own identities within the classroom—both as members of the academy and as members of society—we teach our students to critique the presence of ideologies and politics in any given situation. While Alexander's pedagogical strategies do not explicitly redress these concerns, Alexander's pedagogy

does speak directly to the feminist pedagogical desire to teach issues that are relevant to the students and that collaboratively rely upon the cultural capital our students bring with them into the academy. For this, Alexander is to be commended.

Feminist pedagogues, queer theorists, literacy scholars, and critical compositionists will find this work theoretically indispensable. Alexander's breadth of attention to cultural studies and composition theory is impressive and insightful. His command of the conversations in play surrounding identity politics and literacy is refreshing. Most specifically, his commitment to queer theory and pedagogies of difference is inspiring and rousing. However, the lack of pedagogical implementation or practical application renders this text impractical for graduate training in composition pedagogy, for seasoned compositionists looking to expand their pedagogical practices, or for institutions seeking quantitative justification for queering the classroom. Including substantial evidence that "...students write better because of...inviting them to think about sexual literacy" would have inestimably supported this contentious topic (185). Had Alexander omitted the words "pedagogy" and "practice" from the title of his text, the book would earn colossal acclaim for its theoretical addition to emerging discussions on critical queer theory and literacy theory; its considerable lack of pedagogical application is its only disappointment.