SILENT PARTNERS: LEARNERS AND TEACHERS COPING WITH SELF-MARGINALISATION

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ABSTRACT

The teacher and learner in adult education may be distanced by some undeclared aspect of life. Self-marginalisation through internalising the prejudicial perceptions of society can divide and yet provide common experience. This paper, through personal reflection, case study, and literature review examines self-marginalisation and its impact on teaching and learning.

INTRODUCTION

Within that part of lifelong learning which is teaching and learning with mature adults, the teacher and learner have a particular relationship. The ideal of this relationship is based on openness, mutual respect, and equality, and on the connectedness of all concerned. Essentially, this reduces to a belief or feeling that a reciprocal relationship exists between all concerned (Shin, 2002).

Ideally, every teacher involved in adult education brings into the learning space their individuality, and their individual ways of making the space safe for all learners. This ideal is not always achieved. While "there is much that teachers can never know about their students" (Kumashiro, 2004, p. 7), the reverse may also be true. Adult education reaches out to, amongst others, those who for varied reasons may not have fulfilled their potential during compulsory school education. One reason may be marginalisation of the individual, but more pernicious is self-marginalisation. Here a silent – though not always secret – partnership may develop, since within this area of work "practitioners are often drawn to their vocation through empathy with common histories of marginalization or failure" (Stuart and Thomson, 1995, p. 3).

Self-marginalisation is invisible, and those to whom it applies are unlikely to volunteer the information freely. Here the focus is on those who self-marginalise through their sexual orientation or gender status, though others affected by aspects of their selves kept wholly or largely hidden also fall within the remit of this discussion. The discussion, although touching on *queer theory* does not move into this area, nor is there any attempt to offer political or strategic insights such as those given by Grace and Hill (2004), since here the subjects of the study are those individuals distanced from that very discourse. Many mature students are not involved in studying disciplines that give access to this discourse, and the examples here are of teachers and learners involved in science subjects. Here it is the individualised aspects, as they influence learning, that form the focus, largely sidestepping queer theory by employing the perspective that "politics only matter as they unravel in individual lives" (Pelias, 1999, p. 165).

SELF-MARGINALISATION

Marginalisation and self-marginalisation

Marginalisation can be summarised as the process through which groups and individuals can be "ignored, trivialized, rendered invisible and unheard, perceived as inconsequential, de-authorized or "other" (Tucker, 1990). The causes can be age, gender, ethnicity, and disability (Stuart and Thomson, 1995), or additionally – and less visibly – through sexual orientation, poverty, and unemployment (Booth and Ainscow, 1998), and mental illness (England and Brown, 2001). The discourse is of *otherness* as constructed by the majority, and the denial of opportunities by the majority acting as an oppressive force upon the marginalised minority. Direct oppression can, however, be replaced by "certain individuals and groups ... thus constructed as 'other' ... [who] internalize this definition" (Stuart and Thomson, 1995, p. 1). Internalised otherness can become invisible self-marginalisation. While marginalisation is a process (resulting in a status) imposed upon

others, self-marginalisation is self-imposed, though neither deliberately nor consciously. It carries no blame other than residing in the society and culture which encourages or allows its development.

Messiou (2002), working in English primary schools found that children experienced feelings of marginalisation because of the actions of others, which in being overt may be presumed to have been deliberately aimed at the individual. Where the actions of others, deliberate or not, are aimed at groups which may otherwise be indistinguishable from the majority – such as those with different sexualities, or the transgendered – the individual may self-marginalise without the knowledge or even the intention of the perpetrator. Wilchins (2004), writing from the perspective of the trangendered, employs the analogy of the incarcerated. He parallels the self-marginalised with prisoners who are aware of the potential for the constant monitoring of their activities, such that "over time, inmates would internalize the gaze of the jailer and learn to regulate their own behaviour, watching for the slightest deviation." This type of self-discipline may ensure the invisibility of the perceived otherness at the heart of the process.

At this stage it may be helpful to introduce the term *queer* under the specific definition of anyone who feels marginalised as a result of their sexual practices (Halperin, 1995) and then to broaden the term to view queerness as "based on an intersectional analysis that recognizes how numerous systems of oppression interact to regulate .... the lives of most people" (Cohen, 1997, p. 441). Within these two views it is suggested that queer may be defined through marginalisation and marginalisation through queer.

When a person recognizes or initially perceives his or her otherness, one coping strategy is to retreat as far as possible into silence and self-imposed isolation: "I don't want people to know me, because if they do, they'll find out" (Tierney, 1997, p. 107). From the first recognition of being queer the "closet" takes shape which in turn shapes the behaviour, attitudes, and responses of the individual. To the invisible queer child the actions of others are interpreted as being relevant without the knowledge of the perpetrators. As one of the teachers involved in this study offered:

> [The] sort of responses immediately start to colour the way you feel about yourself. People seeming to be giving me the feedback that I shouldn't be having these feelings. You learn to keep them hidden.

The child (and later adult) thereby self-marginalises; an *othering* which may remain invisible, even to close family. Such children do not, except in rare and more recent instances, grow up with the support of queer families (Sedgwick, 1991). Invisibility may therefore rely on not always telling the truth, and this can further undermine self-esteem. But why should many youngsters, and adults, feel the need to retain their secret? Whereas "identities as straight people ... are affirmed and celebrated in every facet of the culture" (Macgillivray, 2004, p. 12) it is not long since the opposite was true for anyone or anything queer. The queer activist who may be visible and confident in their identity has been a hopeful development over the last few decades. However, there are many others who lack this confidence and, at the extreme, those amongst whom "our internalized homophobia can be so great that we may actually be willing to die rather than admit we are queer" Tierney (1997, p. 78).

The degree to which an adult queer person feels marginalised, or remain self-marginalised, is as individual as all other characteristics of the person. There are those, who through their understanding of queer theory, remove self-marginalisation and challenge other manifestations of marginalisation. Others, whether or not actively or openly challenging imposed marginalisation, may still have feelings or relict effects of self-marginalisation which influence their self-esteem and through this, their confidence. For many, feelings of otherness remain through later life. As a mature professional who describes himself as gender-fluid reported: "As a student I was very much feeling that I was the only one" and later as a professional person in midlife, "some people might not take you seriously if they knew. It's there in the back of my mind."

Considering the silent individual

"Attempting to define what queer is .... would be a decidedly un-queer thing to do" (Sullivan, 2003, p. 43). Entering the discourse of queer theory, where the identities of individual's are at

stake, is often an unwise thing to do. There are many who would classify themselves as within the group encompassing gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgendered, or intergendered (GLBTI) but would be uncomfortable with the label of queer, since this can suggest a radicalism which is not essential to being other. The critique of queer theory by Green (2002) helpfully stresses that "scholars of sexuality must not assume that subversive intentions or effects come married to sexual marginality" (p. 540). Many GLBTI people may be neither activists, familiar with queer theory, nor consciously part of any queer community. These are the people who may be silent on these issues within adult education classes. The alienation of the silent GLBTI person from the queer theory constructed around the ideas of Foucault (1980), Halperin (1995), and Butler (1993) may stem not only from lack of confidence, but also from the way the radical deconstructionism employed challenges self identity, and the belief in the possibility of being inherently GLBTI. The inadequacy of sexual and gender binaries in nature has been catalogued and discussed by Roughgarden (2004) and Bagemihl (1999). That the "normality" of heterosexuality and the simplistic view of two distinct and biologically defined genders is not supported by evidence from the non-human natural world tends to contradict the similarly simplistic view that all sexuality and gender is socially constructed. The radical subversion aspect of queer theory invents the "transcendental queer that exists outside of culture and social structure" (Green, 2002, p. 523) but with which the silent GLBTI person cannot identify. That sexual orientation and gender may be socially constructed is an argued position, but for those who have felt *othered* from early childhood, being born GLBTI would only be problematic if they believed that in some way this was less valuable than being born heterosexual. From this perspective, it is the value of the self, rather than the essential self which is socially constructed.

Ralph Bunche, the black activist and diplomat, referring to the political struggle for black civil rights in the United States at a time when many black Americans faced deprivation and imminent starvation, included in a speech made in 1940 the statement: "They cry for bread and are offered political cake" (Brogan, 1999). In the GLBTI context the "cake" of rights and empowerment are essential, but so is the "bread" of increased confidence, raising self-esteem and being able to make the most of the educational opportunities which are available. This is not in contradiction to queer theory and activism, but is an essential complement to them. "To follow theory into individual consciousness. This is the messy realm of how we actually feel and what we can do about it: practically the only thing of interest if you're a living, breathing person" (Wilchins, 2004, p. 104).

Many gay men, even those who are open to various degrees about their sexual orientation, still feel themselves outsiders to some extent. This is a feeling expressed by many such men engaged in teaching in higher education (Skelton, 1999; Skelton, 2000). Even those people who are very open about being gay or transgendered may still keep this hidden from specific individuals or institutions (Sedgwick, 1991). Prior to the nineteenth century, homosexuality was regarded as something that, potentially, all people could indulge in or "fall" into practicing. During the nineteenth century, homosexuality came to indicate a "species" of person rather than an activity (Foucault, 1980). Hence the silent GLBTI person is not protecting the secret of an activity, but of who they are in the perception of others. The real secret is their true self.

Attitudes towards different sexual orientations and gender statuses have changed over the last several decades. However, there are still many societal and cultural references antagonistic to such differences. Many of today's adult learners and teachers may have had their own self-images influenced by the more overtly hostile culture of several decades past rather than by present day circumstances.

Effects on learners

Savin-Williams (1998) describes the sequence of realisations which may occur as the gay male youngster (in this example) moves from his initial recognition of difference, through to identifying his attraction to other males, then understanding the term homosexuality and, finally, recognising his feelings as homosexual. This can be a secret and traumatic journey, taking place largely throughout the school life of the individual. Within the same sequence, the labeling of the self as gay or bisexual, and with it

the final acceptance that the cues for othering broadcast within the societal environment (conversations within the family, with friends, overheard remarks, media broadcasts, and representations) are relevant to, or even directed towards the self, may occur only after the first experiences of sex with another male (in this example). This can result in a significant collapse in perception of self-worth and confidence at the very stage in an individual's educational career (late teenage and early 20s) that is deemed vital to future success.

GLBTI people who keep secret an aspect of their selves, commonly "bifurcate their existence" (Woods and Harbeck, 1992). Even if life is not compartmentalized, there can be a feeling of "twoness" and inner conflict between the outward role and the true self. "We are continuously aware that we are queerly swimming in heteronormative waters [which] ... can create a sense of double consciousness" (Evans, 2002, p. 139). Giddens (1991) defines the fractured or disabled identity as the lack of a feeling of biographical continuity, the creation of a state of anxiety, and the failure of the individual to develop trust in themselves and their identity. With this comes a collapse in confidence and self-esteem.

Retaining a secret requires the navigation of all relationships: "Every encounter ... exact from gay people new surveys, new calculations, new draughts and requisitions of secrecy or disclosure" (Sedgwick, 1991, p. 120). Macgillivray (2004) writes of the skills learned though time which allow lies to be avoided, as continually monitoring thoughts and actions to fit in with the heterosexual majority. Evans' (2002) concept of "emotional work" is useful to describe these calculations and navigations. While all who interact are involved in some level of emotional work, the GLBTI person may be, through being both self-identified as other and yet invisible, subjected to a burden of emotional work of a different order of magnitude to that of the privileged majority. This work takes time, concentration, and energy, which distracts from other functions, including learning. It is not therefore surprising that some have found their time in compulsory education challenging; failing or gaining lower grades than expected as a result of lowered self-esteem and excessive emotional work. This is summarised in a statement offered almost as an aside by one of the adult education teachers interviewed. He said, "I had a fairly difficult sixth form but I would have said that it would just have been growing up as a gay person and not really being able to be helped." The significance here is not in the sentiments expressed but in the suggestion of the inevitability of the situation.

A significant number of GLBTI people who have the potential to succeed in education may not achieve this initially. Therefore, some may seek to access adult education at a later stage in an attempt to regain their confidence and voice, and to improve their self-image. While self-marginalisation has no impact on the inherent ability to learn, it can distort the relationship between learner and tutor and peer relationships with other learners, influence the engagement of this ability to learn, and inhibit confidence in the existence of learning. The last of these effects may extend to the point where the student attempts to read failure even into success; being unwilling to recognise that they can have learned, or that if "even they" can have learned something, it must be of little worth.

Effects on teachers

GBLTI people who become teachers in adult education may also represent the same spectrum of secrecy to openness about aspects of their selves as encountered with learners. While each teacher brings his or her uniqueness into the learning space, the empathy engendered with the marginalised learner, as well as the process of self-marginalisation (being othered), may provide the GLBTI teacher, amongst others, with particular strengths and skills. The experience of bifurcation of the biography, of offering differing identities to different constituencies, and of navigating and identifying acceptable selves provides the GLBTI person with an experience of performance. But performance does not only represent the self to others. Where deriving from the actions and reactions towards others and the world, the self may be constituted through this *performativity* (Butler, l993) or at least further modified by it. Whether they had developed two distinct biographies for at least a portion of their lives – providing a choice of selves to inhabit, or whether the skills they acquired through the additional emotional work required from growing up as a GLBTI person, those teachers

interviewed for this study all referred to teaching as performance. This is a common perception amongst many teachers. However, one teacher not only stated that he saw "an awful lot of teaching as a performance", but more tellingly that he saw "a link between performance and my inner self."

A further aspect of raised awareness in the GLBTI teacher is of the potential presence of others within the classroom or lecture theatre. One teacher, when asked whether he felt there might be learners in his classes who also felt other responded, "Oh yes, the antennae are out all the time". He explained that his experience had made him intensely curious about people and that "if there was ... somebody very uneasy about their gender identity, I could pick up on it, and if there was any way in which I could help that person then I would like to do so." Another teacher drew attention to a drawback in the very "silentness" of the relationship between the GLBTI teacher and the GLBTI student. He suggested that at times he "overcompensated ... in the public domain [for recognising the GLBTI student] by almost treating that person worse than you otherwise would do" in order to avoid the risk of others in the space recognising any commonality between the two.

The life experience of the GLBTI person may encourage development of those empathic and reflective skills, certainly not unique to this group of teachers, that are particularly valuable in adult or higher education (Skelton, 2000). Growing up as a GLBTI person and keeping sexuality of gender feelings secret, relies on the development of specific skills. This element of learned deep-seated reflexivity, and an almost subconscious monitoring of the reactions of others – though developed as a defence, can also be a valuable attribute. A gay teacher talked of picking up on which learners were having difficulty understanding elements of his teaching by "hearing it in people's voices." Another similarly acquired skill may be the learned habit of anticipating the next question; something vital in giving the queer child time to think through responses in order to retain the secret.

Other forms of self-marginalisation

The source of anxiety for silent, self-marginalised teachers and learners that results from them either protecting the undisclosed or anticipating the discomfiture that exposure of their secret might cause to themselves, or to others. The same anxiety and the same sense of marginalisation can apply to more than those who are GLBTI. Dissonance through not understanding what is expected within a particular culture may have a self-marginalising effect. Two students who have contributed to this study have talked of very similar feelings of self-marginalisation, and both, though very able students, felt low esteem and displayed low levels of self-confidence, especially at the start of their studies. One student was transgendered; the other had, as a young person, suffered acute illness and cultural dissonance. Each felt othered, both through the existence and protection of an undisclosed aspect of their lives. The student who had experienced cultural dissonance talked of the emotional work of "forever looking to see whether what you are doing matches with expectations."

SAFE SPACES AND SILENT PARTNERS

Within adult education, do queer teachers have an obligation – for fundamental educational reasons – to be open about their queerness (i.e., "out") to their learners? The measure must be whether or not such action makes the space less or more safe for the teacher and learners. It would be remarkable if none of the teachers who ever taught me had been GLBTI, and yet I have never knowingly been taught by such a teacher, therefore emphasising my own feeling of otherness. It could be argued that self-marginalisation is resolved through disclosure. A study of learners using computer-mediated communications by Guy (2001) found that while black students disclosed their ethnicity, white students did not, and that this disclosure often led to "strategic silence" from others. Disclosure may therefore reinforce rather than remove the feelings of otherness. It is also important to recognise that while one or more GLBTI learner may wish to be visible, the teacher must ensure that this is supported without alarming any invisible self-marginalised learners with the prospect of being challenged or "outed". The individual's control of the knowledge of his or her secret should not be threatened. GLBTI teachers should also be in control of their own visibility, and the decision to be out may depend on their individual life stories and their present positions within these stories.

Increasing awareness and acceptance of difference within the educational system could be expected to improve the chances of achievement of the less confident GLBTI person. Ellis and High (2004) revisit and replicate aspects of earlier research (Trenchard and Warren, 1984) into the experiences of gay, lesbian, and bisexual teenagers at school in the UK. Although between 1984 and 2001 these students reported more mentions – and positive mentions – within the classroom, of homosexuality, the same group also suffered increasing problems of isolation, verbal abuse, teasing, physical assault, and ostracism. Raising the visibility of homosexuality (in this case) in schools has also raised the level of persecution of those willing to be visible. The same authors report that even today the reactions of some teachers to the recognition of a queer student is still part of the problem.

For the GLBTI teacher there is the dilemma of remaining invisible and thereby limiting support to GLBTI learners, or becoming visible and risking the alienation of others. It is clear that any learners alienated would be displaying indefensible prejudice. Is it better to have a prejudiced student in the classroom, with the potential to educate them out of their beliefs, or to have them leave and not be challenged? This again is an individual judgment. The teacher is caught between empathy and alienation, resolvable only through the abandonment of empathy or through taking the risk of disclosure. There is the risk that "coming out" will become scandalous and distracting and be seen only in terms of the teacher's sexuality. Rather than demystifying difference the GLBTI teacher can "come to represent the exoticness of queer" (Kopelson, 2002, p. 19). However, this objection relates to the possible effect on the non-GLBTI learner, and they should not be prioritised over the visible or invisible GLBTI learners present.

Less threatening disclosure may be through actions, especially challenges to deliberate or inadvertent negative comments by class members. Where the intended or unintended target of the comment is invisible, the relevance of the challenge by the teacher may not be understood by other learners. Where marginalised individuals are visible, although challenging such comments or usages may be uncomfortable for a moment, the consequences of doing so are visible and understandable to all present. For the GLBTI teacher, revealing through action is a way of allowing knowledge of the teacher's self to be available, while not threatening others within the class with the fear of an environment which would force their disclosure. In the U.K. being an out GLBTI teacher in adult education is not problematic, though in other countries – as in the past in the U.K., the environment is not as favourable.

The teachers interviewed for this study felt that despite their queerness not being secret, some students didn't seem to recognise the fact. One talked of some of his students probably thinking of him as a "camp fairy" in some of his classes though he had never deliberately made public his sexual orientation. He did not fear "outing" but did feel that if he was to out himself or be outed by a student, "there would be people who would want to crawl underneath the desk". The gender-fluid teacher has "found out that the world doesn't end if you go out wearing a skirt". He added

> I've worn a skirt when I've been teaching a few times and there's never been any bother. People have never mentioned it, either because they don't care or they're embarrassed to ask or because they don't want to ask. Mostly they're OK.

CONCLUSION

For those who are self-marginalised, the reasons for this marginalisation may often not be visible to others within the learning space. It is in this way that these learners and teachers differ from visible minority groups. Although the pressures which may have caused this marginalisation have in many places (but not all) abated, the effects on self-esteem and self-confidence – and on the ability to recognise learning and achievement, may persist. All those who have experienced self-marginalisation are on an individual and, to a large extent, secret, journey. From personal experience and through the accounts offered by the teachers and students involved in this study, whether through being GLBTI or through some other part of their lives which they wish to remain hidden, self-marginalisation has impacted on the learning of all and on the teaching by those who have chosen this field.

Low self-esteem and low confidence, and the emotional work required – especially at times of

realisation – can be reflected in the GLBTI person's failure to achieve his or her potential, or feelings of having failed, in compulsory education. Even where it is clear that no failure was involved, those persons questioned reported that later years at school and student days in higher education were difficult in some way. Personal experience is of lower than expected achievement, but also a feeling that any achievement is unreal, accidental, or even a mistake. This seems to be a common feeling amongst self-marginalised students.

It would be a pity if the environment which allowed self-marginalisation to persist at school were to be replicated in the adult-education classroom. However, especially where the subject being taught is distant from those disciplines in which discussion of the self, of queer theory, or of individual biographies is seen as relevant, creating a safe space for those whose difference may be hidden from the rest of the class is a subtle process. While awareness should be universal, actions and solutions will be personal.

The experience of self-marginalisation in the person who has become the teacher provides a route to empathy and sensitivity toward the others who may be invisible in the class. How individuals teach is drawn from personal experience, and learning about teaching is mapped onto such experience. The tutors here felt that being GLBTI had a significant influence on their teaching styles, but it is easy to overemphasise this. Non-GLBTI individuals will also have aspects of their lives and experience which inform their approaches to teaching, and the commonalities are likely to be as significant as any differences.

Several years ago a very successful, though clearly less confident student, asked to talk to me prior to moving on to further study. Only on completing her studies with me, and therefore not having to return to the classroom with her student contemporaries, did she reveal that, through fear of being detected as transgendered, her occasional overlong absences at coffee breaks had been due to her being physically ill with the stress of remaining hidden. Anything that can be done to ameliorate this secret suffering has to be positive. That to the majority of people within the teaching space this progress is itself invisible makes it no less valuable. The teacher, whether empathising through common experiences of self-marginalisation or not, is in a silent partnership with all of the learners: a partnership of trust to do everything to make the experience as positive and as affirming as possible.

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