

“Let us say yes to who or what turns up”: Education as Hospitality

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What place might gayness have in education? Where will it arrive, and in what guise? Historically, in education, gayness has emerged as controversy: battles over sex education, performing plays that deal with gay issues, boys bringing boys to the prom, kindergarten students reading about lesbian mothers, and fears of gay teachers seducing their students all illustrate the ways gayness rests in an often antagonistic relationship to education. In these controversies, gayness is conceptualized as standing outside of education and as an interruption to the work of teaching and learning. To think about gayness in relation to education taxes the conceptual resources we have for making sense of how we learn. We have developed a whole range of strategies for keeping gayness out of education. Developmentally appropriate practice, the core curriculum, even diversity and religious tolerance become alibis for avoiding discussion of homosexuality. And controversy, which hovers so closely to gayness, serves as a defense against recognizing the presence of sexuality and gayness in the ordinary life of teaching and learning.

To make a claim for gayness as ordinary and ubiquitous, as circulating through the halls of education, requires a step beyond controversy. Gayness must be a part of the everyday work of teaching and learning and it is this ordinariness that can ground an understanding of gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgendered human rights. This article asks how our conceptualizations of gayness would shift if we saw sexuality as part of the ordinary work of teaching and learning; indeed if sexuality, in all its strange and unexpected manifestations, was seen as ordinary.

To craft a more inclusive vision of education for LGBTQ children, youth and families, educators are faced with this formidable task of making a

claim for sexuality as central to the work of learning. Gayness, here, is not a discrete identity; nor is it only a question of sexual practices. Gayness is a quality of experience: it imbues all of one's relationships with the world. In a recent paper, Deborah Britzman and I (2004) consider the dilemma of thinking about this quality of gayness in education. In that paper, we notice the dominance of consciousness-raising as a mode of narrative and a model of learning in educational theory. We argue that "[o]ne significant effect [of this dominance] is that the very ways consciousness-raising occurs – its attempts to offer knowledge of difference, its interest in stories of subjection and overcoming—may repress the more radical qualities of narratives of social difference" (Britzman and Gilbert, 2004, p.81). Encountering these radical qualities will require a strategy of representation that exceeds what we call, "the time of difficulty," when worries over homophobia structure pedagogical responses. Instead, the relationship between gayness and education must begin with the question of how learning is tied to sexuality. Efforts to either evacuate gayness from the space of schooling or make gayness palatable and "safe" for education run the risk of also pushing curiosity, an unruly but ordinary effect of sexuality, outside of schools.

Our preliminary thinking in that paper was that the dominant focus on homophobia and controversy forecloses the possibility of thinking about gayness as central to the problem of inventing a self, making friends and learning about the world. We wonder what it would mean to shift this "time of difficulty" to "the time of hospitality." Hospitality is a welcome, but one that resists idealization and risks ambivalence. Can education be hospitable? That is, can education welcome, with what the OED describes as "liberality and goodwill," whatever and whoever turns up? This is a question for kindergarten as much as for graduate school, for curriculum as much as for policy. When standing at the door of education, who will be invited in and under what conditions? Could this relation of promise and obligation offer a new model for thinking about gayness in education?

To move beyond defenses against controversy and controversy as a defense, we might imagine what the time of hospitality might look like in education. In this paper, I have assembled three examples of times when gayness has emerged as controversy and pushed against the limits of educational thought and practice—debates about same-sex marriage, a story about a transgendered youth transitioning in high school, and explicit representations of sexuality in a teacher education classroom. Each example offers a different vantage to consider the qualities of gayness and their relation to teaching and learning. In these examples, I consider how a turn to hospitality might make possible an education that welcomes gayness as ordinary in its manifestations and as a quality of experience that could be made relevant for anyone.

Hospitality and the Uninvited Guest

In the film, *Ma vie en rose*, Ludovic, an eight year old boy who may be a girl, makes a grand entrance to his parent's house warming party and surprises his family and neighbours by wearing a party dress. His parents are shocked; they jokingly call him a prankster while the neighbours remain speechless. Who has arrived? How can we make sense of this strange irruption? The film documents the parents' well-meaning efforts to understand and perhaps to tame what is most strange about their son. In doing so, they must confront what is most strange about themselves in order to encounter their son's experience as something more than evidence of their failure as parents. Ludovic's elaborate fantasy life requires that his parents remember their own fantasies for their son and their family. They must make sense of the estrangement between who they imagine themselves to be— as parents, as husband and wife, as a family— and how they are perceived by an often cruel and judgmental society. In the film, the fragile coherence of the self is pushed into crisis by an encounter with another's foreignness. This dynamic is what makes for the difficulty and the necessity of hospitality: in welcoming what seems strange in the other, we encounter our own sense of foreignness.

Derrida's (2000) essay on hospitality and the status of the foreigner takes up this projective to and fro and demands that we resist the idealization of hospitality. He distinguishes between the *laws* of hospitality and the *Law* of hospitality. The laws of hospitality are "the conditions, the norms, the rights and the duties that are imposed on hosts and hostesses, on the men and women who give a welcome as well as the men or women who receive it" (p. 77). The *laws* of hospitality govern, with liberality and goodwill, our relations with others. These *laws* invoke political, legislative, and juridical domains, but they also include the informal and implicit rules and guidelines that equally govern our relations with others.

But, in marking limits and drawing up boundaries between proper and improper conduct, these *laws* of hospitality—no matter how munificent—necessarily violate the *Law* of hospitality as unconditional welcome:

Let us say yes to *who or what turns up*, before any determination, before an anticipation, before any *identification*, whether or not it has to do with a foreigner, an immigrant, an invited guest, or an unexpected visitor, whether or not the new arrival is the citizen of another country, a human, animal, or divine creature, a living or dead thing, male or female. (Derrida, 2000, p. 77)

The *Law* of hospitality demands that we accept what is not yet intelligible; knowledge or understanding cannot be a precondition of welcome. We are to welcome the stranger before we know who or what he or she is.

These two senses of hospitality are incommensurate and yet inseparable.

Derrida is careful not to see the multiple laws as only a corruption of the Law; if it is a corruption, what he suggestively calls a “pervertibility,” (p. 79) it is because the Law of universal hospitality requires the laws of hospitality in order to be effected and not remain abstract. The move from the abstract and ideal to the juridical, political and indeed, pedagogical, requires taking a risk. Derrida calls the risk “perfectibility,” (p. 79) which paradoxically may mean that no one can live up to the Law; we are, as it were, all subjects under the laws.

Is there anything more foreign in education than gayness? What would it mean to throw the doors of education open to gayness? As the uninvited guest, an enemy or even a foreigner, gayness shows up both predictably and unexpectedly—in the student’s body, the teacher’s body, and the curriculum; gayness arrives. Indeed, its foreignness may belong to its mobility—sexuality travels across bodies, disciplines, identities and experiences. We can never be sure where it will turn up, or in what form it will manifest. Derrida’s provocation, however, is that we cannot simply rest with the idea of being welcoming; such an idealization of welcome fails to consider how difficult it can be to encounter what is not yet known or understood. We must, therefore, pour our resources into imagining how we might govern that welcome.

In the pedagogical moment when we enact an imperfect welcome, we must also be striving for an unconditional welcome. The universal Law of hospitality—that we should say yes to whoever or whatever turns up—is perverted by the rules and conditions for speaking about and representing a love that seems to court controversy. And yet, one cannot take the side of either universality or practicality. For Derrida, the relation is:

both contradictory, antinomic and inseparable. They both imply and exclude each other simultaneously. They incorporate one another at the moment of excluding one another, they are dissociated at the moment of enveloping one another, *at the moment* ... when, exhibiting themselves to each other...they show they are both more or less hospitable, hospitable and inhospitable, hospitable *inasmuch as* inhospitable. (p. 81)

This is a strange and restless relation. The insistence for pedagogy is that ethics resides in that perverted space between the laws and the Law. Is gayness a problem of civil rights and codes of conduct, or does gayness exceed these juridical and political distinctions and include the larger question of what it means to be human? And where in education can we find the conceptual resources to tolerate the aporia between rules of civil conduct and the dream of universal welcome, the tyranny of the practical and the hyperbole of a utopia? These questions ask us to approach the details of including LGBTQ students and families in education with a commitment to protecting human rights and an attention to the ways that commitment might be enacted at the level of the curriculum, adult-child relationships, school policies and

procedures, as well as our own pedagogical intentions and practices.

Gay Marriage and Public Education

The difficulty of protecting the human rights of LGBTQ students has emerged recently in debates about same-sex marriage. Bill C-38, the Civil Marriages Act, makes same-sex marriage legal in all Canadian jurisdictions. The bill declares that "Marriage, for civil purposes, is the lawful union of two people, to the exclusion of all others." This rather unremarkable description of what it would mean to spend one's life with another person, of either sex, is at the centre of a national conversation about the equality and status of gay and lesbians. This debate poses significant challenges to education and illustrates the tension Derrida calls "perfectibility." When the idea of hospitality is articulated in the juridical and legislative domain, an affirmation of however people choose to live in relation to one another is lost. The bill recognizes the rights of gays and lesbians who wish to marry, but it cannot recognize the multiple ways that marriages are organized, nor can it recognize and legitimate the non-matrimonial relationships gays and lesbians might imagine and create. It is both hospitable and inhospitable; "hospitable *inasmuch as* inhospitable" (Derrida, 2000, p. 81).

The prospect of same-sex marriage becoming legal is also an issue of hospitality for education. If teachers have a fiduciary duty to protect the civil rights of their students, how might the debate around same-sex marriage enter the classroom? When teachers and students discuss the multiple possibilities for finding love and companionship in one's life, what or who might arrive? Must teachers protect student's multiple possibilities for love, and if so, what does that protection look like? Derrida insists that we must wrestle with the difficult question of how to turn our abstract commitment to hospitality into pedagogical practices that express, in albeit imperfect ways, that commitment.

Notwithstanding that children can't marry and perhaps may not even be properly called hetero or homosexual, opponents and proponents of same-sex marriage have framed this debate as essentially pedagogical. Consider this excerpt from the widely discussed and inhospitable open letter Cardinal Ambrozic of Toronto sent to Prime Minister Martin:

The law is a teacher. Does Canadian society as a whole, and do parents in particular, understand what the law will be teaching in this instance? It will be teaching that homosexual activity and heterosexual activity are morally equivalent. Public schools will be required to provide sex education in that light. Many parents, religious and non-religious, would not agree, nor would many, if not the majority, of Canadians. Is it fair to put children in the position of having to reconcile the values and beliefs of their parents with a novel state-sponsored understanding of marriage that may not be truly supported by the

majority of Canadians? (p. A19)

What does the legalization of same-sex marriage teach students? According to this letter, the legalization of same-sex marriage could teach that there are no moral distinctions to be drawn between homosexual and heterosexual persons, that public schools must respect the rights of students to imagine themselves loving anybody, and that the state has the jurisdiction to imagine “novel” ways of governing relationships even if that novelty is opposed by the tyranny of the majority.

It is an ambitious agenda and the anxiety this letter expresses suggests the ways debates about same-sex marriage have reached out to effect larger conversations about the relationship between children and parents. Same-sex marriage is difficult, in part, because it asks us to re-imagine understandings of family. Increasingly, debates about LGBTQ issues in education focus on the family. While the rhetoric of “family values” works to exclude gays and lesbians from the fold of the nuclear family, gay and lesbian activists work to guarantee ever more access to the rights and privileges of family life: not only marriage (and divorce), but also adoption rights, pension benefits, illness and bereavement leaves, spousal support, tax benefits, etc... These are, as Judith Butler (2002) describes, “the ambivalent gift[s] that legitimation can become” (p. 17). As education wades into these murky waters, an ethics of hospitality cannot foreclose the ambivalence that accompanies any experience of family life, valued or not. It is a problem for curriculum: how to hold open the tensions that contested conversations will provoke. Again, Derrida is instructive. In a conversation with Elizabeth Roudinesco about the ways gays and lesbians are remaking forms of family, Derrida (2004) does not simply equate gay and straight families, or argue that all gay and lesbian families are loving, instead he offers a thoughtful provocation: “the experiment *must not be forbidden*” (italics in original, p. 33). His comment carves out a space between idealization and repudiation. Families may be idealized as the site of unconditional love and acceptance (a claim many gays and lesbians are unlucky enough to disprove), but it is also remarkably difficult to become a member of a family. The family works by exclusion. Same-sex marriage, then, can create the conditions for gay and lesbians to have an ordinary life—with all the disappointments and hopes such a life entails.

Transgendered Youth and Public Education

In our next example, we meet a young person struggling to make sense of living in a body. Matt began his senior year in high school as a boy and decided part way through to begin living as a woman named Jade. This

story is remarkable not for the controversy it caused but for the relative ease with which the school made the necessary adjustments to protect Jade from harassment. In a letter to teachers and staff, the principal outlines what he sees as the school's responsibility to welcome whatever and whoever decides to show up to learn:

[in his letter, the principal] said Matt was a wonderful and courageous student who has the right to live as he chooses at school and in the community. 'Matt will be as smart an funny and nice as before, except he will be dressing differently in order to feel more comfortable. It is our professional duty, as board employees, to support Matt to the best of our abilities.' (p. A7)

What surprises, in this example, is not simply Matt's transition to becoming Jade, but the capacity of the school community to accept this transition as part of the work of becoming oneself. The only concrete change in policy that was required to accommodate Jade's transition was giving her a key to the staff washroom. On the first day of her new life, the school counselor attended classes with Jade to answer student questions. Otherwise, she continued to attend all classes. She maintained her position as student council president. She made and lost friends over the course of the year. There was no student assembly, no workshops on trans-phobia. "The staff wasn't asked to prepare students. The thinking was that Jade should not be seen as an exhibit and exposed to an open forum about her change. 'We have this person who is one of us,' [the principal said], 'and we are not going to have this person hurt or embarrassed'" (p. A6). What seems most important to the school and to Jade's parents is creating a space where Jade can explore the multiple possibilities for living in her body. In other words, the school tried to protect the ordinariness of Jade's life.

Students and teachers struggled to make sense of Jade's transition. Students mixed up pronouns, wondered whether Jade was gay, and sometimes felt uncomfortable. But the principal trusted the school community to be able to tolerate discomfort and also had confidence that Jade could survive the school's transition. In a statement uncannily similar to Derrida's, a football player who did not totally understand Jade's decision was able to distinguish between his discomfort and Jade's right to live free from harassment: he said, "It was kind of shocking, but you have to allow it"(p. A7). In a lovely example of hospitality, this student recognizes that welcome cannot depend on his comfort, understanding or knowledge. And, the pedagogical approach at this high school recognizes that the goal of an anti-homophobic or transphobic education cannot simply be for students to adopt positive attitudes.

Learning proceeds through conflict and wading into the confusion of pronouns may ultimately be more instructive than always saying the right thing. Learning from and not simply about Jade means confronting

unsettling questions about the nature of gender. Like young Ludovic, seeing Jade work at becoming a woman reminds students and teachers that gender is work, and not just for those who make a transition. What is both strange and ordinary here, for both Jade and the school community, is that our sense of who we are and what we want is not coterminous with our sexed body. Hospitality also demands that we welcome what is most foreign within the self.

Sex Instruction

For Derrida, the arrival of the foreigner returns to us our own foreignness. This is, of course, what Freud calls “the uncanny”—the strangely familiar—and at stake in this return is the flash of recognition that is defended against through feelings of horror. If an engagement with gayness can stage this return and offer a new language for thinking about the horrors of recognition and the surprise of our own foreignness, then education might learn something about its own limits from an encounter with gayness.

In our last example, we are reminded that, in opening the doors of education to what is foreign, we are also making space for what is foreign or strange in the self. It was this dynamic that I wanted to stage in an undergraduate class I teach on theories of adolescence. I decided to show the Mexican coming of age film *Y Tu Mama Tambien* because I felt that the final, much discussed, scene where best friends, Tenoch and Julio, kiss suggests some interesting qualities of sexuality in adolescence: that there is bravado, the performance of a hyper-masculinity, and even a vulnerability that belongs to being a beginner; but there can also be a promiscuity, a fluidity and an almost narcissistic willingness or blindness to fall in love with parts of oneself in another. I thought that, in so far as gayness is foreign and not soldered to identity, the film asks us to notice first of all Tenoch and Julio’s confrontation with their other selves, the selves they both are and could be. And, by extension, I imagined the film would ask us to notice what we cannot bear to know and would therefore put into relief the contours of our own ignorance. Could the film, I wondered, prompt students to recognize their own foreignness? When I included the film, I thought I was creating the conditions to welcome gayness into the classroom as a quality of experience available for anyone.

The Law of hospitality, however, demands that we do not anticipate who or what will arrive. Watching the film with the students, I may have squirmed uncomfortably through the scene where the two boys masturbate side by side while lying on diving boards, but I was most distraught during a scene when Tenoch enters their sexy, older road trip companion’s hotel room in a towel and she, acting as a committed teacher, offers him clear instructions on how to please her. While I had seen the film before, somehow I did not

anticipate the shock of this scene. Of course, horror becomes something else less horrible if you can anticipate it. This became, for me, the gay moment in the film: my own foreignness was returned to me in the horrific image of the teacher as seducer. Tenoch is a lousy student, doesn't follow instructions, and you can see the disappointment and disapproval on Luisa's face when he fails to please her. It is a disapproval I often evince.

You can invite gayness into the classroom, but you cannot anticipate what will arrive. For gayness—and here I am thinking of sexuality as what is most foreign in each of us—pushes against the laws of hospitality, is a disruptive guest, breaks rules, and is rarely a good role model. The disappointment is that you cannot put gayness in the service of socially progressive goals without foreclosing the more radical qualities of sexuality—the surprise of an awkward pronoun or an unexpected interpretation. Indeed, an engagement with gayness must risk the failure of a certain dream of education—that prejudice can be educated and identifications anticipated. In my use of *Y tu Mama Tambien*, I imagined that it was the students' learning that was at stake in the film. What I could not tolerate was the mobility of gayness and its capacity to disrupt the stable division between teacher and student: I imagined that I was the host and that I would welcome gayness into my curriculum and pedagogy. Derrida's provocation, however, asks us to navigate that fragile and ambivalent space between the dream of the perfect lesson and the inevitability of an unexpected guest.

This paper is a call to see hospitality as necessarily emerging from the conflict between what we imagine and what we can do, and to insist that our commitment to justice and human rights does not, and indeed cannot, lie flush with social practices. Each example demonstrates what can happen when our ideas about embracing and honoring difference meet the conceptual, political and psychological limitations of group living. If education is a relation of hospitality, then we will affect and be affected by our encounters with others. This is a relation that exceeds affirmation and risks ambivalence. The challenge of welcoming gayness into education begins with a tolerance for the conflicts of learning. We might approach the issue of same-sex marriage through the conflicts of love and learning to live in a family; we might protect Jade's human rights most robustly if we acknowledge her ordinariness and tolerate our own sense of strangeness, and we might temper our drive to educate with a willingness to endure the humiliations of surprise. In each of these cases, I see the foundation for hospitality in education.

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