THE ROLE OF QUEER LITERACIES IN A UNIVERSITY’S
REQUIRED DIVERSITY COURSE

by

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This research is a self-study of a university required diversity course taught with a queer literacies framework. My research examines student writing, class discussion, and course planning material for one section of a required diversity course at a 4-year university in the Mountain West. The research questions for this study are “What happens when a college instructor applies a queer literacy lens to the design and teaching of a required diversity course and its assignments?” And “How do students respond when written assignments in a college-level required diversity course take a queer literacies perspective?” The queer literacies framework for the course highlights performances as enacted by students and instructor, failure as a constant presence in the college classroom, the struggle to resist binary thinking, and the importance of viewing students on a spectrum of critical consciousness. Using this framework, the author first examines the course planning for the semester under study and the interruption of Covid-19. The author examines her values as presented to students, as well as approaches to resist the normative framings of those values. Then, the author identifies trends in student writing throughout the course, including literacy performances in students’ daily writing, the complicated nature of avoiding othering narratives, and how students bring their own experiences and identities to bear on course material. The author further breaks down these themes by closely examining two case study students, which helps her to see the ways that she pivots to support the learning of each individual student, as well as the sticky places in the course where learning does not come to an easy resolution. In conclusion, the author provides implications for research, theory, and practice, as well as discusses how the present research can help to fill the current gap in the literature around student writing and experiences in university required diversity courses.
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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

I have always been interested in the role of writing in students’ lives. In my own studies in departments of English and Education, reading and writing have been a central theme. My professional work as a teacher of writing and as a writing center tutor has been in pursuit of supporting students in being successful in their literacy pursuits in higher education, albeit adhering to a traditional model of what it means to be successful at the university level. As a student studying literature and composition in an English department, I was not familiar with the term literacy to describe “the process of using reading, writing, and oral language to extract, construct, integrate, and critique meaning through interaction and involvement with multimodal texts in the context of socially situated practices” (Frankel, Becker, Rowe, & Pearson, 2016, p. 7). Although I may not have conceptualized it as ‘literacy,’ in my early teaching days I did try to highlight the importance of integrating the processes of classroom discussion, classroom readings (upon which this discussion was usually based), and student written assignments. While teaching freshman composition to undergraduates, I struggled with how to honor the many literacy skills that students bring to the classroom. Additionally, as I dipped my toes into the water of introducing texts into the classroom that destabilized taken for granted understandings of identity and writing, I wondered about the best way to get students to engage thoughtfully with authors such as Anzaldúa (1987) and Young (2007), who presented the classroom community (myself included) with approaches to language and writing that pushed back against
what college level writing should look like. I found largely that my students, and myself, were having a hard time meaningfully taking up this work. Looking back, I think this was due to my insertion of the texts without really changing the framework of the course as a whole – introducing texts that brought queer perspectives into focus without bringing a queer framework (Martino, 2009) lessened their efficacy in highlighting the things that we take for granted about college writing. As a result, my first foray into queer pedagogy had an “Add-Queers-and-Stir” (Rands, 2009) feel. In a way, I was asking students to push boundaries and think outside of binaries in those specific readings, but the class was not giving them an opportunity to develop these skills.

The transition to teaching a university required diversity course was exciting because the course was centered around students’ interrogating their own schooling experience, identities, and how those things intersect and influence each other. This course is classified as fulfilling the diversity requirement that all undergraduate students at the university must take.¹ I was also intrigued by this class because it felt a bit like a return to my roots while in my PhD program, in the sense that, while not a writing class per se, much of the assessment occurs through written projects, specifically three papers that are required to be included in the course across all sections. Given my background and expectations before teaching the required diversity course, I was excited to engage more explicitly with ideas about identity and education. I went into the class thinking that students would significantly change their perspectives when exposed to the classroom content. However, students came to this course along a spectrum of experience regarding questioning identity and schooling, and also with vastly different lived experiences of

¹ Undergraduate students are required to fulfill 6 credit hours of diversity requirements in order to graduate. The course I taught in Education is one option to fulfill those credit hours for diversity in the United States context; the other 3 credit hours required a course focusing on global diversity.
oppression. I found some students already taking up the kinds of analyses on diversity that the course aimed to support, while others appeared resistant to those perspectives.

In other words, I soon discovered that getting some students to question their understandings of themselves and the world was a daunting task, and one that I could not hope to accomplish in one semester. I was left wondering what the best ways were for me to support students in entertaining new perspectives about identity and education, or to continue pushing on their own assumptions, if they had already begun thinking about their own identity and how it relates to their education. This also meant reworking (or “queering”) my expectations so that radical change in students’ views was not the only positive outcome of the course. Instead, looking at the continuum of students’ take up of queerly informed perspectives has become my interest. In particular, for my study I was interested in understanding what role a queer literacies approach to writing might play in this process.  

I was supported in making sense of this classroom experience by turning more purposefully to a queer pedagogical framework. Queer pedagogy asks us what the cost of knowledge is on students and what we will do with the information that students (and everyone, ultimately) will not take up everything that we want them to, especially given the cost of this information for students’ understandings of themselves and the world (Luhmann, 1998; Staley & Leonardi, 2016; Waite, 2017). Additionally, it is not useful (or fair) to consider students to be either critical or not critical, as queer theorists push us to rethink what place binaries have in our

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2 While the more common usage of this term is “queer literacy” singular, I have made the conscious decision throughout this work to use “liracies” plural when discussing queer literacies to honor the multiple ways that people can enact literacy. As Zacher Pandya and Ávila (2014) state, “this choice represents the ways we’re caught between one context, where mainstream education still treats literacy as singular in many ways (e.g., assessments) and the contexts we are working hard to create and share (e.g., plural contexts)” (p. 2). Their approach to this conundrum is to switch back and forth between using the singular and plural form, but I have elected to use the plural throughout.
experiences (Anzaldúa, 1987; Butler, 1990). At the same time, Bryson and de Castell (1993) write about the presence of one straight, white student in their lesbian studies course who changed the entire environment of the class with her resistance to the material. This was also important for me to read because I found myself under similar circumstances in my first semester teaching the course and honestly struggled to think about one such student and their role in the class with kindness.

The Theoretical Implications of Queer Literacies

Queer pedagogy and queer literacies are the specific lenses and practices through which I pursue my goals in this study. Indeed, queer literacies and its impact on undergraduate students’ experiences with writing is the focus of this research. Queer theory has its roots in post-structural theoretical traditions, including Foucault (1980), and studies of discourse are an important theoretical foundation for this tradition. As a result, queer theory, broadly speaking, views identity as socially constructed (e.g., Butler, 1990) and therefore constantly changing (Blackburn, Clark, & Nemeth, 2015). However, many trans theorists (Plemons, 2017; Stryker, 2004) and theorists of color (Crenshaw, 1991; Cruz, 2001; Grande, 2015; hooks, 1984; Johnson, 2001; Lorde, 1984) have argued that this view is limiting because it does not do a good enough job of taking the body into account or acknowledging lived realities. As a result, attending to this intersectionality is of vital importance. However, queer theory also points to the fact that there

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3 I was also supported by identity development research that acknowledges how we often view any process/stage/journey that is not currently at what we would consider the desired ‘endpoint’ to be inferior. We need to instead honor that one place on the continuum is not necessarily better or worse than another (Bilodeau & Renn, 2005).

4 I intentionally capitalize identity categories like “Black” throughout the paper while intentionally not capitalizing “white.” I follow Crenshaw’s (1991) example in this: “I capitalize ‘Black’ because ‘Blacks, like Asians, Latinos, and other ‘minorities,’ constitute a specific cultural group and, as such, require denotation as a proper noun.” … By the same token, I do not capitalize ‘white,’ which is not a proper noun, since whites do not constitute a specific cultural group” (p. 1244).
are limits to our knowledge, that the normal works to define the abnormal (Goldman, 1996; Luhmann, 1998), and that we need to look at why we have othered certain groups of people in the first place (Kumashiro, 2001b, 2002).

Queer pedagogy then builds on these tenets. If we look at identity as socially constructed, then we need to apply this to schools as well. The scripts that students must follow in order to perform their identities ‘correctly’ is taught to students in schools at a very young age, and students know the consequences for transgressing those rules (Keenan, 2017). There are also normative constructions of how to perform the identity of a ‘good student,’ which are reinforced by our expectations as teachers about what effective participation and classroom conduct looks like (Waite, 2017). Even as we as teachers acknowledge the ways that we construct knowledge and classroom norms for students, we need to remember that students and teachers are always already bringing their bodies and intersecting identities with them into the classroom, and that this has consequences for the way they experience the world (Alexander, 2005; Keenan, 2017; Waite, 2017). Thinking about implications this pedagogy has on the ground, it is important to think about how the way we teach continues to other students – for example, if we teach only “about the Other” while leaving out discussions that are “critical of privileging and othering” in the first place (Kumashiro, 2001b, p. 18-19). Finally, it is important for us to pay attention to the limits of our knowledge, and what we can gain from failure. Queer pedagogy seeks to interrogate failure (Halberstam, 2011; Quinlivan, 2013; Waite, 2017) and understand it not as the absence of knowledge, but instead viewing knowledge and ignorance as “mutually [implicating] each other” (Britzman, 1995, p. 154).

After teaching the required diversity course for several semesters, a question arose for me: What is the role of writing instruction in a class where writing is not the primary focus, but
where literacies in the form of reading, writing, revision, and class discussion are central? While the writing in the course served a practical function of assessment, my perspectives on queer pedagogy led me to wonder what the writing in the course could open up for students in terms of exploring their own positionality. Using a queer literacies (McRuer, 2004; Miller, 1998; Waite, 2017) approach feels like a very natural fit in a course designed to encourage students to think critically about schooling contexts, both their own experiences and about education generally. While defining what exactly we mean by reflective writing in the college classroom is difficult, I believe that queer literacies open up avenues toward reflection that hold implications for undergraduate teaching and learning.

A queer literacies approach allowed me to take the queer pedagogy framework into the world of writing. Queering writing in a classroom, for example, may involve pushing back on tendencies to ask students to produce highly delineated and specified written projects that reaffirm the idea that students have stable, unchanging identities; instead, this approach views writing as moving toward an endpoint that constantly changes and ultimately does not exist (McRuer, 2004; Miller, 1998; Waite, 2017). Instead, we should focus on “identity fracturing discourses” (Miller, 1998, p. 370) and decomposition (McRuer, 2004) that considers the fluidity (Waite, 2017) of student identity and writing. For those concerned that this approach gives up on teaching writing skills, Alexander and Gibson (2004) point out that a queer approach to writing helps students be aware of how their paper is a rhetorical moment in time, as well as giving distinct thought to the audience and how the paper is performing for that audience. Given the goals of the required diversity course – to think in expansive ways about diversity, to push against taken for granted narratives about our schools and about ourselves – queer literacies seem
a reasonable fit for supporting students in interacting with and moving through these goals because of its focus on interrogating power and constantly shifting as our identities shift.

**Queering Writing Instruction in the College Classroom**

When I think about what being critical means in a college writing classroom, it has frequently been framed differently than how it has been conceptualized in my education studies. While social contexts made their way into my writing classroom, my training and understanding around taking up critical perspectives meant essentially asking students to do two things: first, being able to understand someone else’s argument even if you did not agree with it, and second, being able to distinguish whether a source was reliable for a research paper. In other words, “critical” seemed to suggest what Luke (2012) describes as “critical reading” that “is taught as a reasoned approach to identifying author bias” (p. 6). Although such approaches to “critical” reading and thinking are important – as we have seen in recent years with the rise of “fake news,” (Pennell & Fede, 2018; Wayland-Smith, 2017) – those uses of the term are far different from its meaning in the queer literacies tradition. Instead, taking a critical lens queerly would have students questioning the authority of all sources, and looking at new ways of knowing. It would involve asking students to reconsider what makes for a credible source, and what power and privilege is involved in that process. This interpretation works with and draws from critical pedagogy’s imperative to read the word and the world (Freire, 1970; Freire & Macedo, 1987). This is not to say that no English departments are doing this kind of work (literary theory was a locus for the rise of critical theory in the academy, after all). However, the presence of a critical theoretical lens in approaches to composition seems to largely depend on the individuals involved in the administration of writing programs, and whether those programs train students to be successful writers in the academy that already exists (Delpit, 1988) or ask students to question
and remake the academy (Young, 2007). My understanding of what it means to be critical has undergone some radical changes over the past several years, mainly informed by queer pedagogy and queer literacies. Taking up critical perspectives in the tradition of queer pedagogy pushes students and teachers to question taken for granted meanings and to question where those meanings were constructed in the first place.

This queer literacies view of writing, and its understanding of criticality, has important implications for required diversity courses that ask students to critically interrogate diversity and society; this is especially true of my course, that had writing at the center of much of the assessment, yet did not spend a significant amount of class time teaching writing. Most courses I have taught, both in education and in writing, rely on a theoretical base that values the writing process, but then in practice the assessment in the course ultimately relies most heavily on the final product.

Covid-19 and the Impacts of Remote Learning

Of course, much of the preparation for this dissertation work (largely the course preparation discussed in Chapter Four) was done before the outbreak of the global pandemic Covid-19. Approximately midway through the semester, the course (along with the entire university) was migrated to a remote setting. When the students and I first discussed this switch to remote learning, we were unsure if we would be returning to campus later in the semester, if we would be able to effectively carry out class over video calls, and so many other questions that we would have to tackle as we moved along. I had imagined many aspects of the course quite differently than how they actually turned out. As such, many of my plans had to be thrown out completely or drastically reworked. Many changes that I made were made rather quickly over the course of a week over Spring Break. These changes will be discussed in detail in Chapter Four.
However, one thing that did not change with the dramatic shift in the everyday functioning of a university classroom was my commitment to a community of practice that valued students’ experiences, attempted to meet students where they were and needed to be, and viewed the work of teaching as an act of radical love (Freire, 1998; hooks, 2003). As such, all changes to the course were made with these critical and queer commitments in mind. In the final two findings chapters, I examine student work during the course of the semester, and I highlight in those chapters the ways that our community continued to forge connections between the work and our own experiences in the world even in a remote classroom setting.

**Research Questions**

The study focuses on my framing the required diversity course I taught from a queer pedagogical perspective and enacting that framework in a queer literacies approach to reading, writing, and discussion. Taking into account my personal experiences as a literacy instructor (both in writing focused courses and courses with a writing component) and my interest in a queer literacies approach to supporting students in taking up critical perspectives, my research was guided by the following questions:

- What happens when a college instructor applies a queer literacy lens to the design and teaching of a required diversity course and its assignments?
- How do students respond when written assignments in a college-level required diversity course take a queer literacies perspective?
  - More specifically, what happens to the continuum of critical perspectives that students bring to the class when writing is framed in this way?
How do students shift, expand, and problematize critical perspectives over the course of a semester in a required diversity-focused course, designed and taught with an explicit queer literacies framework?

Organization of the Dissertation

This chapter has briefly discussed the theories and concepts informing my work. In Chapter Two, I turn to the Literature Review and Conceptual Framework guiding my study. This chapter will first give a description of queer pedagogy and queer literacies. I have aimed in this work to center queer literacies as a way for students to shift their critical perspectives and honor the way that students come to college in varying places on a continuum of critical perspectives. Chapter Two will also discuss the current literature on college required diversity courses as well as how educators have enacted queer literacies in the college classroom. Currently, the amount of research available on college required diversity courses is quite limited, with the majority being quantitative studies measuring students’ prejudice. While almost three decades ago a diversity course-requirement for undergraduates was labeled “controversial” (Magner, 1992), currently the popularity of these types of requirements is on the rise (Brown, 2016; Humphreys, 2000); approximately half of all public four-year college in the United States now have some type of diversity requirement for undergraduate students (Zabala, in progress). However, there is a veritable absence of research around the writing in these courses and the role of queer literacies or indeed any literacies in these types of classes. This leaves largely unanswered in the field questions about the role of a one-semester required course in supporting students in developing and/or expanding critical perspectives and the role of writing: in this case a queer literacies approach to writing, and how it may support students’ taking up the central goals of such courses.
Chapter Three discusses the methods for the proposed study. This chapter lays out how I used a self-study approach as well as my attempts at queering the qualitative research process. I will also make an argument for why self-study is a useful and compatible approach for a queer study design. This chapter will then talk about the research setting, the participants in the study, and how data for the study will be generated, including my own journaling and curriculum design process, audio recordings of the class, student writing, and student interviews. I discuss my analysis of students’ take up of critical perspectives, using a queer pedagogy lens to make sense of their interactions within the course content. Finally, I will discuss my approach to data analysis, and how I queered this process beyond the traditional qualitative research design.

In Chapter Four, I discuss my approach to planning the course content, the assignments, and syllabus to stay true to my queer pedagogical commitments. This chapter primarily addresses my first research question. I first discuss my framing of the syllabus and how the syllabus projects to students my desired performance of the student. I will then focus primarily on three projects in the course: the weekly freewriting assignments completed by students, the Social Contexts Journaling assignment, and their time spent as reading leaders in the course content. I will address how these projects came to exist over the course of my semesters teaching this class, what informed the changes that I made to these assignments, and to what extent the assignments in their form in the semester under study align with my queer literacies underpinnings. It is worth noting that, as I continue to teach this course now that my dissertation data gathering and analysis is complete, I have continued to revise these documents; I mention this to highlight that the work of queering the classroom is never finished.

Chapter Five turns to analysis of student work after making clear my moves in designing content for the course. Chapters Five and Six pivot to discuss the results for my second research
question about student critical consciousness. In Chapter Five, I highlight themes that appeared throughout the different assignments listed above. I discuss how the freewriting assignment responses can be viewed as literacy performances (Blackburn, 2002; 2003) and examine such performances for two students in the class. I then analyze how the Social Contexts Journaling (a written assignment) and the Reading Leaders assignments (a mixture of oral and written content) both provided an opportunity to understand students’ perceptions of the role of othering, their articulation of the importance of identity in structures of education, and their own shifts in viewing students in US society as well as themselves. Much like the previous chapter, this analysis will not only be focused on ‘successful’ moments in the classroom, but will also attend closely to moments that could be viewed as ‘failures’, both from the students and myself.

In order to expand on some of the themes discussed in Chapter Five, Chapter Six will focus on two students in the course, Alex and David, as case studies that accentuated the tensions that still remained in this classroom. Such tensions include the hierarchy between teacher and student and the attendant power relationships in this hierarchy; the resistance to content that implicates us in systems of oppression; the complexities of identities that are both privileged and oppressed, and how such contradictions can make acknowledging privilege difficult; and the adjustments made by myself as the instructor to further course goals as I saw them. These students showcased some of the main themes of this dissertation research of queering the idea of failure in the classroom, viewing students’ experiences in the classroom on a spectrum of critical consciousness, and performing (and resisting) the roles ascribed to ‘good students,’ both traditionally and within the confines of my course syllabus and framing. Chapter Seven will conclude this research by accentuating the main themes found as well as discussing areas for future study.
CHAPTER II

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK AND LITERATURE REVIEW

This chapter will focus on the conceptual framework and relevant literature from which my study draws. First, I will unpack ideas and debates in queer theory and queer pedagogy that influence my study. Next, I will discuss queer literacies, which grows from queer theories and pedagogies and is my lens for analyzing the student writing in the course. Finally, I turn to a literature review to examine the available studies on university required diversity courses, an area of research to which my study will contribute.

A Queer Pedagogical Conceptual Framework

It is impossible to talk about queer pedagogy without relating it to the larger context of queer theory from which it grows. The underpinnings of queer theory come historically from studies of discourse and power and are rooted in post-structuralism (Butler, 1990; Foucault, 1980). Queer pedagogy and queer literacies stem from this tradition and the implications that this worldview has for teaching and learning. There are several main concepts, debates, and criticism of queer theory that become important in the analysis of queer pedagogy and literacies.

Gender as Performed(?)

Many queer theorists have argued that gender identity, and in fact all of aspects of our identity, is socially constructed through repeated performances of discursive acts. This idea of performative theories of gender can be traced back to Butler (1988, 1990),¹ who herself was

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¹ On a personal note, Butler (1988) is where I first came to gender and sexuality studies and so her theory plays a pivotal role in my understanding of queer theory. It is important to me to focus on my positionality in relation to the literature as there are so many ways to come to and understand queer theory.
heavily influenced by Foucault’s *History of Sexuality* (1980). As Butler explains, gender has been traditionally viewed as something that an individual possesses; refuting this assumption, Butler argues that we should instead understand gender as “performative” (1990, p. 139), and that “One is not simply a body, but, in some key sense, one does one’s body” (1988, p. 521). Butler’s idea of performativity allows for a gender fluidity “tenuously constituted in time, instituted in an exterior space through a stylized repetition of acts” (1990, p. 140). Additionally, if gender is constructed in time, then it can be created differently at different times by the same individual, which has implications for the ways in which people enact their identities in different scenarios. Indeed, Butler (2004) argues that the way individuals perform their gender is related to those around them, “even if the other is only imaginary” (p. 1). This suggests that gendered performances will change depending on the situation and that they may conflict with each other (Blackburn, Clark, & Nemeth, 2015). Rather than just recognizing that these performances exist, it is necessary to highlight these performances of gender that we usually take for granted in order to question other taken for granted meanings (Brown & Nash, 2016). This view of gender can also give us some relief, as “all ideal masculinity [and all gender performance] … is just out of reach” (Halberstam, 2011, p. 100).

If we allow this view of gender identity as performed to impact our pedagogy, we then need to think of identities in school as constructed as well. And the stakes are high in the schoolhouse, as schools are especially influential in shaping student identities through repeated actions. According to Keenan (2017) schools “teach children a script about which kinds of genders and bodies are normal” (p. 540), and from a young age all children – including those who seem best at complying with these “scripts” – are well aware of the dangers of noncompliance. In this way, the “scripts” (as Keenan calls them) function to teach students
norms around gender specifically and identity more broadly. Beyond children just learning the ‘right’ way to perform their gender identity, they learn the ways that schools and the people in them want them to perform all kinds of identities. Importantly for this research, students are also taught scripts about what makes for a ‘good student.’ Punctuality, following directions, and not causing disruptions are all taught to children at an early age. These lessons continue on into college.

Therefore, one of the questions that a queer lens compels us as educators to ask of our pedagogy is what does it mean to perform the role of the ‘good student’ or the ‘good teacher’? What performance does the ‘A-student’ give in the classroom? And how are we as teachers constructing those performances in ways that prohibit some students from being successful? As one example, Waite (2017) questions what participation looks like in the classroom, and why we value certain kinds of participation as essential to student success. Waite writes, “I wonder about why I thought, and often continue to think, that a course’s ‘success’ depends upon this participation … Is a student who talks not at all an obstacle on this path to course success?” (p. 74). In the classroom, ‘good students’ are positioned as those who participate by contributing to course discussion. Queer pedagogy pushes us to ask about who we leave out with this narrow performance for students.

This idea of performance (and later of literacy performances) is central to my understanding of students and teachers in my study. As educators, our course syllabi, our assignments, and the norms we create compel students to perform a certain role in class. While it might be easy to put something along the lines of “students should not be disruptive during class” into a syllabus, these kinds of commands – and they are commands according to Lisa Delpit (1988) – are not value neutral. What does it mean to disrupt class? What counts as
successful contributions to class? And how does failure to perform this identity of ‘good student’ as defined by myself (the educator) and the institution as a whole act as screens for what parts of themselves students can express in class? This same performance can be turned on the instructor. How does my performance adhere to norms about college instructors? How does it disrupt these norms? Chapter Four will unpack some of the performances that I value from students and address how the stated norms in the syllabus telegraph those expectations to students. In Chapter Five and Six, I will discuss to what extent students take up these expectations and what happens when they resist them.

The Body and Performance

While this idea of gender and identity as performed is frequently taken for granted in queer theory, it is not without its shortcomings. Proponents of this view of performed identity point out that just because something is performed does not make it less real. For instance, Crenshaw (1991) focuses on the realness of performance, arguing that just because “a category such as race or gender is socially constructed is not to say that that category has no significance in our world” (p. 1296). Indeed, Butler (1990) also argues that just because gender is performed does not make it less real or important to people’s lives. She writes that “To claim that gender is constructed is not to assert its illusoriness or artificiality” (p. 32). Crenshaw and Butler speak to a tension that some scholars have raised about what this idea of performance means for identity as something that impacts our lived experiences.

This critique of gender performativity emphasizes that when we collapse gender and sex together into a repeated performance, it ignores the way that bodies experience the world. What happens to the material body, of the “flesh” as Spillers (1987) might call it, when we view sex and gender in this way? I am limited by my body in regard to the performances I can make that
will *then be accepted by society*. Transgender theorists and queer theorists of color especially have powerful critiques pushing for a more embodied theory. Anti-colonial scholars like Sharon Holland (2012), for instance, criticize Butler and queer theory generally for the insistence on "subjectless" identity: "it has become almost impossible to speak for or about women within emerging feminist/queer theorizing because of the call to a *subjectless* feminism" (p. 50). This is a central critique throughout Holland’s work. Queer theory positions itself as being without a subject because the subject inherently labels people in problematic ways. However, by positioning queer theory as unconcerned with the subject, Holland argues that queer theory leaves race up to some other theory to deal with. In other words, in rejecting the subject an assumption of whiteness takes hold. The absence of race becomes whiteness, and therefore the Black body, according to Holland, only materializes when we are specifically talking about issues of race.

However positive the intent of removing the subject might be, Holland argues, “the black racial project is excoriated for its crippling backwardness, since it is embedded in notions of the biological that do not help it make the case for better (racial) feeling” (p. 61); this in turn, she argues, erases the voices of Black lesbian feminists. In the world of “quotidian racism” (p. 5) in which the United States is steeped, we are not yet ready to move beyond the subject. The impacts of everyday racism are still too real to be ignored, and queer theory’s insistence on rejecting the subject, Holland argues, also leads to its ignoring race and racism as outside its purview.

While there are positive implications for trans people in the idea that we do not have to be stuck repeating the same performances we have been assigned during childhood, looking only at the performance can make us blind to the ways embodied experiences play out. The body is critically important because our bodies dictate significantly how others interact with us. Plemons
(2017) specifically points to facial feminization surgery as central to how others interact with us—a look that no amount of performance can change without physical intervention. Stryker (2013) also problematizes the focus on the philosophical that ultimately has “material consequences for the quality of transgender lives” (p. 9). The consequences of ignoring these calls for embodiment can lead to othering individuals in our research and theory. Namaste (1996) writes about how theory tends to objectify trans people instead of working with their lived experience to expand and challenge the theory. They problematize how “transgendered people are the chosen objects of the field of queer theory, and … ignore the daily realities of transgendered people” (p. 184). To add onto and illustrate this point, there is a significant difference to the way that queer theory frequently positions trans people as performing identity versus the way that (white) gay men do, as “something prior to performance” (Namaste, 1996, p. 188). Similarly, Stryker (2004) is critical of the ways that queer theory pretends to conceptualize all identities as performed, but then views one (gender identity) as more stable than the other (sexuality) (p. 212). In other words, there is a ‘born this way’ rhetoric that accompanies more ‘mainstream’ gay and lesbian folks that makes their identities less a performance and more a biological fact.

Other scholars are critical of how these ideas of performed gender leave out the embodied experiences of people of color. Cruz (2001) talks about the queer body of color as a “messy text,” that is “excessive in its disorderly movements and conduct. Nothing provokes the custodians of normality and objectivity more than the excessiveness of a body” (p. 659). In understanding the queer body of color as a “messy text,” Cruz points to the dichotomy between mind and body in research, arguing that ‘scholarly’ research does not focus on the body because
it necessarily privileges the mind.\textsuperscript{2} Turning to a theory of the body, especially the brown queer body, would require a reexamination of how knowledge is produced and what kind of knowledge counts. For this reason, the queer brown body is “messy” for Cruz because the work of queer people of color is “considered too corporeal, too colored, and sometimes too queer to be considered publishable” (p. 659). A more embodied theory will, according to Johnson (2001), “emphasize the diversity within and among gays, bisexuals, lesbians, and transgendered people of color” (p. 3). We see this attention to race and sexuality more prevalently in the work of decolonial queer theorists (Alexander, M. J., 2005; Holland, 2012) and feminists of color (Anzaldúa, 1987; Lorde, 1984; Spillers, 1987); this kind of work may not require analyzing all differences by rejecting the subject, but rather in re-centering the subject. And while the turn to racial identity as constructed may be generative in some instances, indigenous education scholars such as Grande (2015) have noted that, “contrary to postmodern rhetoric, there are in fact, stable markers and prima facie indicators of what it means to be Indian in American society” (p. 145). Grande does not mention what these “stable markers” might mean for queer indigenous people. Ultimately, when theories leave aspects of identity unexplored, like the body or race or how others view our identity performance, then the white, able-bodied, cisgender, passing body seems to operate as the norm. According to Holland, (2012) we are not past thinking about racism; instead, the question we should be asking of queer theory is “What can queer theory’s desire do for understanding racist practice?” (p. 13). In other words, how can queer theory (and in the realm of this study, queer pedagogy) help us understand the embodied, everyday racism present in our lives – and in our education system.

\textsuperscript{2} Looking at this dichotomy also most likely necessitates turning attention to the spiritual, which is virtually left out of these theories entirely, but which is more often embraced by feminists of color (Alexander, 2005; Anzaldúa, 1987). However, I feel that it is outside the scope of my project and expertise to take a deep dive into this issue in this framework.
There is fruitful coalition building work that can be done in what El-Tayeb (2011) calls a “queering ethnicity” (p. xxix) that “uses the tension of living supposedly exclusive identities and transforming it into a creative potential, building a community based on the shared experience of multiple, contradictory positionalities” (p. xxxvi). Because white Europeans view the identity of people of color and the identity of European as contradictory, Afro-European subjects can build coalition across this tension. El-Tayeb examines coalition building among people of color in Europe in a way that brings them together against Europe’s insistence on colorblindness – a state she terms “post-ethnic” (p. xix) as it unites European people of color across the artificial boundaries of the state and across racial lines. Similarly, Tallie (2019) calls for an “indigenizing queerness,” one involved in “thinking through queerness as more than external intellectual project that can be merely mapped onto exotic and different contexts” (p. 9-10). Tallie’s understanding of indigenizing queerness detaches the concept of queer from non-heterosexual identities; instead, he sees Indigenous African subjects as inherently queered by the European gaze even when they engage in relationships that are heterosexual (for example, polygamy).

What does this mean for our pedagogy? If we take up the call to enact an embodied theory in our pedagogy, this means realizing the embodied experience of the student in the classroom. Waite (2017) specifically calls for a reexamination of our understanding of participation as “a kind of embodied practice” (p. 78). Waite describes a student Andy who has an “energy around his body in the classroom … Andy leans into conversation. He’s not afraid of it, he’s not refusing it” (p. 78). Waite says that only after the student wrote a paper calling out the emphasis placed on verbal participation did his embodied participation become clear. Waite also talks about how the body of the teacher is read by students. Waite writes that “We often teach as though the baggage of ourselves has been left at some metaphorical door. We are in the
classroom. We are teachers now. We are not women or men. We are teachers” (p. 31), before pointing out the impossibility of such a proposition. It is just that those of us who are read immediately as male or female often do not have to think about the way our bodies are perceived. B. K. Alexander (2005) highlights the need for an embodied theory by pointing out the potential pedagogical power of being a Black gay man in front of the classroom, arguing that “teachers ... place our bodies in the instructional gaps negotiating the tensions that often exist between our teaching persona and the fullness of our being” (p. 258). As these authors argue, we too often think of the classroom as a space only for thinking, and not for feeling or living or existing as a material body.

While the actual study of the body is somewhat limited in my research due to the lack of video recording, the physical limitations of the classroom environment, as well as the physical performances that I and my students do, has an impact on the classroom setting regardless. Additionally, this idea of the subject and the body becomes important in the ways that students understand and write about themselves in relation to their own experiences with education. Their embodied experiences have an impact on their time in school, and my course asks them to reflect on these experiences. Unpacking the body and embodiment becomes even more complex in the wake of the global Covid-19 pandemic. Conducting class on video chat, where most students did not make use of the camera, added another layer of complexity to this research. Again, while my analysis of the body was somewhat limited by the above factors, Chapter Six will especially discuss the implications of students’ lived experiences in the world (and in the classroom) and how they related those embodied experiences to our learning.
Intersections and the Limits of Inclusive Education

Closely tied to the necessity of a more embodied approach to theory and pedagogy is the attention that must be paid to how identities intersect. All people have multiple intersecting identities, and some of those identities are oppressed and some are oppressor (Freire, 1970). Crenshaw (1991) is one of the earlier theorists to call for an intersecting view of identity, asserting that “Although racism and sexism readily intersect in the lives of real people, they seldom do in feminist and antiracist practice” (p. 1242). This is important to keep in mind because women of color, especially queer women of color, experience multiple forms of marginalization and oppression (Crenshaw, 1991; hooks, 1984; Lorde, 1984). Foucault (1982) argues that power should be examined from “the forms of resistance and attempts made to dissociate these relations” (p. 780). In other words, the focus should be turned both on the individual within the structure and also the power structures themselves. As important as intersectionality is, queer theory has been criticized for failing to take intersecting forms of oppression into consideration (El-Tayeb, 2011; Holland, 2012; Tallie, 2019). This begins to hint at the limits of knowing and what a white supremacist heteropatriarchal society can teach us within its own confines. hooks (2003) writes about the 9/11 tragedy, “I had come face-to-face with the limits of what I know. I could not be a critic of imperialist white-supremacist capitalist patriarchal mass media, then rely on it to teach me about what had taken place” (p. 10). This is one specific example, but similar limitations exist within the classroom, and inherently colonial structure. In teaching this course, I often came face to face with students’ showing me the limits of my knowledge. This is illustrated most clearly in Chapter Six.

Taking a colonial lens to queer theory, Ferguson (2005) offers up another way that race, nationality, citizenship, and sexuality all intersect, with the argument that fear of immigrants is
fundamentally heteronormative and racist; this fear positions “immigrants and U.S.-born minorities as biological threats” (p. 54). In other words, settler colonialism depends on compulsory heterosexuality, and views racialized, queered bodies as threats to this system. However, with the growing acceptance of gay marriage rising in the Western world, we now see that if scholars only focus on gender identity alone, they risk replacing heteronormativity with homonormativity, the “privileging of homosexual ways of difference from heterosocial norms, and an antipathy … toward other modes of queer difference” (Stryker, 2013, p. 2). We see this in the attempt to universalize human rights definitions to align with outwardly progressive Western LGBTQIA+ groups. Puar (2006) describes this “homonationalism” as “the intersections, confluences, and divergences between homosexuality and the nation, national identity and nationalism — the convivial, rather than antagonistic, relations between presumably non-normative sexualities and the nation” (p. 71).

This alliance between queer individuals and the state becomes clear in the imposition of Western values onto countries over which the U.S. still exerts imperial control (Gosine, 2015; Toor, 2011). This homonationalism and “pinkwashing” (the portrayal of a colonial state as progressive on LGBTQIA+ issues, while colonized nations are portrayed as homophobic and dangerous) paints colonial powers as a benevolent rescuer that exercises its imperial authority to liberate queer individuals in countries that it portrays as homophobic by comparison: “modernity is used as an alibi to circumvent some of the most egregious practices of violence that

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3 Heteronormativity can be defined as “a way of being in the world that relies on the belief that heterosexuality is normal” (Blackburn & Smith, 2010, p. 625).

4 While there is debate in the literature around what acronym is appropriate (a discussion which often revolves around the participants in the study), I have used LGBTQIA+ (for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer/questioning, intersex, and asexual) throughout because it is fairly encompassing. I am aware some identities are still left out in this acronym, indicated by the ‘+’
colonialism and imperialism expose” (Alexander, M. J., 2005, p. 183). In North American discourse, we are much more likely to recognize this tendency in countries like Israel than in ourselves (Upadhyay & Jackman, 2014).

I am drawn to these important complexities of intersectionality for my study because taking an intersectional lens to student identity has clear implications for pedagogy. In addition, thinking about intersectionality was also crucial to the content of the course under study. The idea of intersectionality was important in my classroom for a few reasons, namely that it pushed against an oppressor/oppressed binary that became problematic in the context of the course and how students wrote about themselves. Additionally, I was concerned about taking an additive approach to identity that cannot adequately explain the experiences of people who experience multiple, intersecting forms of oppression (Torres, Jones, & Renn, 2009). It is essential that this work take on a decolonial framework, as the very nature of US education upholds and reproduces the colonial settler apparatus (Alexander, M. J., 2005). Any course that takes a critical lens to education systems in the U.S., I believe, needs to acknowledge this complexity, and be informed by decolonial pedagogies.

Thinking about power and intersections of power as manifest in institutions is helpful to understanding how these structures play out in schools. Keenan (2017) argues that classroom doors operate as “a screen that filters out the complexity of who we are,” and that an intersectional understanding of identity is important to “work against that filtration of our humanity” (p. 539). It is important as instructors in higher education, and particularly those teaching courses that meet diversity requirements, to address the power structures at play in the university so that students can bring their complicated and intersecting identities into the classroom. As important as it is, taking an intersectional lens to student identity raises the issue
that attempting to include every possible identity category is an impossible, and ultimately undesirable, task. Kumashiro (2001) insists that intersecting identities are important, and that to adequately begin to think about them, we need to focus on the intersections that “we find upsetting, that we often ignore, that could disrupt the ways we otherwise make sense of oppression and identity” (p. 2). In my study (and the course at its center), this meant moving beyond an additive view of intersectionality that just layers student identity, which can often leave some identities othered. In just one example, such a reframing turned our focus in the course towards thinking about the ways that intersecting student identities often contribute to push-out (Burdge, Licona, & Hyemingway, 2014), and also understanding our role in this process as students and educators. In other words, we worked to move beyond a binary of ‘those of students who are not successful’ and ‘we that are successful.’ Student resistance of othering in their writing and their Reading Leaders presentation is most apparent in Chapters Five and Six.

Queering Failure and What Counts as Knowledge

Important to the idea of queer theory is also the focus on failure. Normative ideologies of capitalism and colonialism understand failure only in the negative. However, Halberstam (2011) sees promise in failure: “The queer art of failure turns on the impossible, the improbable, the unlikely, and the unremarkable. It quietly loses, and in losing it imagines other goals for life, for love, for art, and for being” (p. 88). What the dominant narrative sees as failure, can actually be something much more powerful. Failure only makes sense within capitalist models of winners and losers. However, if we embrace failure and reject this model, then failure can become “a way of refusing to acquiesce to dominant logics of power and discipline” (p. 88). Failure then, in Halberstam’s view, can be seen as a rebellion against colonial and capitalist systems of power. Focusing on another kind of failure, we will always fail to perform our gender identity
“correctly” because of the narrow limits of what is considered normal performance for gender (Butler, 1990; Halberstam, 2011; Waite, 2017). However, this failure can actually open up new ways of understanding our gender identity – and indeed other identities, – as well as new ways to see ourselves as students and teachers. Failure in the classroom then tells us something about our positions in the classroom, as well as the performances that we expect from ‘successful’ students and teachers.

The idea of limits of knowledge in pedagogy connects to reframing failure. Britzman (1995) discusses the relationship between knowledge and ignorance, asserting that

[T]he relationship between knowledge and ignorance is neither oppositional nor binary. Rather they mutually implicate each other, structuring and enforcing particular forms of knowledge and forms of ignorance. In this way ignorance is analyzed as an effect of knowledge, indeed, as its limit, and not as an originary or innocent state. (p. 154)

In other words, if students, teachers, or researchers display ignorance on one specific issue, it is not that they are incapable or unable to learn something. Instead of thinking of people as incapable of learning, it is more useful to think about the cost of certain knowledge to people and their ideas of themselves; what are we asking students to give up in order to accept what we are trying to teach them? As Luhmann (1998) asks, “can we bear the knowledge that students may not be able to bear what we want them to know?” (p. 150). This view opens up questions that students can ask of the word, the world, and themselves: “How does the reader insert herself into the text? … How do identifications become possible, what prevents them, and ultimately, makes learning (im)possible?” (p. 149). As the earlier discussion of the impermanence of performance suggests, we should not fix in time people’s capacity to bear certain kinds of knowledge; these
contexts will most likely change. Traditional modes of teaching frequently do not ask students to question things that they take for granted. The first time (or even the first several times) that students are asked to take in a new world view, the cost may be too high for their own understanding of their identities. However, this does not mean that they will always reject these questions. This view also might help teachers understand why they and their students resist certain knowledges. There is a lot of failure in teaching, or at least, what feels like failure. However, a queer pedagogical perspective on failure can help educators to rearrange our thinking so that it is not only interactions that make us feel good that we see as successful. Instead, interactions that feel difficult, tense, or feel like we do not get anywhere should be seen as productive spaces as well. This is an approach I took into the course under study. Throughout the findings, I wrestle with the implications of what I perceived as failure, and how I could reframe those perceptions.

What we consider effective learning frequently mirrors and reproduces normative assumptions about what kind of knowledge is valuable (Waite, 2017), and it is our imperative as educators to trouble colonial ideas about what knowledge counts (Alexander, M. J., 2005). This can be where queer failure becomes beneficial for the classroom environment. According the Quinlivan (2013), interactions in the classroom that we consider failure do not actually mean that no learning is taking place; instead, “unspoken and un-representable feelings, such as silences” can be understood through the lens of queer failures “as productive resistance rather than as a personal pathology and failure” (p. S63). According to Rhodes (2014), failure in the queer pedagogical endeavor is inevitable because the idea of the classroom as a power structure that reinforces heterosexed norms is fundamentally at odds with the questioning at the center of this theory. Given this acknowledgement of the limits of knowledge, a few questions emerge. First,
what does ‘effective’ teaching look like? Second, what conditions need to exist in the classroom for this kind of learning to take place?

I will discuss in more detail the goals and conditions that the course in this study considers effective learning in the methods section. But, broadly speaking, this work attempts to unsettle the normative expectations for classroom learning (i.e., producing “correct” answers) and instead to push students towards asking questions of the material that better illuminates their own experiences with education as well as how those experiences can help them make sense of inequality in the U.S. public school system. The necessity of having correct answers, or even any answers at all, becomes troubled in that sense. Instead, in the vein of Staley and Leonardi (2016), students were asked to lean into moments of discomfort in the classroom, or in other words to “sit alongside the discomfort that accompanies resisting repetition, desiring to unlearn, and recognizing that knowledge is always partial” (p. 223). Perhaps the clearest example of this discomfort comes in Chapter Six. Focusing on the failure of instruction, then, can be just as fruitful (for students as well as educators) as those moments where classroom instruction seems to go ‘perfectly.’ This view also questions commonly held beliefs about students’ self-development in college. As I will discuss later in this chapter, much of the research on university-required diversity courses focuses on students developing anti-racist mindsets. However, queer pedagogies of failure ask us to question even this developmental approach. Halberstam (2011) writes about Renton from Irvine Welch’s novel *Trainspotting*; Halberstam characterizes Renton, who leads a conventionally ‘troubled’ life filled with drugs, alcohol, and run-ins with the law, as displaying a “refusal of a normative model of self-development” (p. 90). If this refutation is a kind of rebellion against a capitalist value system, what might this say about students who do not conform to the ideas in student identity-development theory (Tatum, 1992;
Torres, Jones, & Renn, 2009) about where they should end up? If students do not have a new mindset on diversity at the conclusion of one of these classes, is this a failure? If it is a failure, is that necessarily a bad thing?

Similarly, what sorts of spaces are necessary for a queer kind of learning to take place? What is the role of the instructor in creating a space where this kind of learning can be productive? Bryant Alexander (2005) provides what I believe to be a positive take on these limits, and on pushing these limits in the classroom setting. One condition that limits learning is the impossibility in creating the classroom as a safe space (or, perhaps a better way to think about this, as safe for whom?). Alexander asserts that “the classroom is never a safe space but is always filled with risk and challenge to the epistemological claims and ontological notions of who we are” (p. 253). While some students may not move beyond the risk at certain times, Alexander writes that “I feel a personal sense of accomplishment because these students know that I will support them” (p. 253). Finally, they add that a way to challenge what we consider unknowable or “unspeakable” in the classroom setting is “limited by the courage of those in the classroom” (p. 251). This is similar to the work done by Arao and Clemens (2013) as they argue for a shift away from looking at classrooms as “safe spaces” and instead to looking at them as “brave spaces” where they “emphasize the need for courage rather than the illusion of safety” (p. 141). I really dig into the idea of what makes for a safe space, and if such a space is even possible or desirable, in Chapter Six.

So in navigating all the tensions listed above, and in understanding the importance of creating this kind of environment, teachers need to make sense of how their assumptions for what makes effective instruction land on different students. The idea of the classroom as a community where everyone is both student and teacher (Freire, 1970) has merit in this pursuit;
although, it may be impossible to completely remove the hierarchy inherent in the student/teacher relationship, as his critics have highlighted (Ellsworth, 1989). A balance then exists in the classroom between disrupting the binary between student and teacher, while at the same time acknowledging the power dynamic that is very difficult to completely get past in the current education system.

**Conceptual Framework: Queer Literacies**

Queer literacies as a field draws heavily on queer pedagogical frames. I turn now to queer literacies, as my study will take a queer literacies approach to the course design and implementation. The written assignments and student writing were analyzed using a queer literacies framework, which evolves explicitly from the queer pedagogy discussed above. Tracing the emergence of this approach to literacy, the earliest research focuses on bringing queer identity into the classroom, or more specifically the potential tensions when students bring their identity into the classroom and teachers are unprepared. Asking queer students to be open about their identity in a space that has historically been hostile towards queer folks is asking students to take a huge risk, both socially and academically. More than fifteen years ago, Moje and MuQaribu (2003) worried that teacher education was not doing enough to prepare educators. “What happens,” they ask, “when the experiences that students have are not valued – or worse, are considered problematic – in mainstream school and social settings?” (p. 205).

Including representations of queer people in the classroom writing context, specifically, is important as well. Blackburn (2005b) argues that “texts that ‘break the silences’ and ‘say the unsayable’” are vitally important (p. 411). More recently, we have seen this field shift to looking at the limits of such an approach (Alexander & Gibson, 2004; Alexander & Wallace, 2009; Blackburn & Smith, 2010; Blackburn & Clark, 2011). Research is also increasingly focused on
the ways that students practice literacies, rather than just *what* students are reading. In fact, simply focusing on inclusion of LGBTQIA+ identities in curriculum without further examination can be more harmful than helpful (Martino, 2009). According to Martino (2009), “in the absence of queer-informed and critical theoretical frameworks, [inclusion alone] actually contributed to disenfranchising and disempowering GLBTQ students” (p. 389). Another potential concern with inclusion-only policies is that these policies assume that this is education “about the Other” rather than for, or with the Other (Kumashiro, 2001, p. 18), and it assumes that all students will identify with heterosexual characters and not with queer ones (Blackburn & Smith, 2010, p. 627). Moving beyond inclusion, Alexander and Gibson (2004) write that “we are not talking about simply including lesbian, gay, or transgender readings in our courses ... We are talking instead about the way theory *shapes* practice” (p. 5).

I will now turn to the queer literacies approach that my research aimed to enact. The same broad themes identified in relation to queer pedagogy will be enumerated as they relate to queer literacies. This study used the idea of literacy performances to look at student work (particularly the free writing assignments) over the course of the whole semester. In addition, the idea of performances was critical to understanding the performances that I expected from students (and vice versa), as well as troubling the inherent worth in only those types of performances. The queer of color, trans, and decolonial critique of queer theory in regard to embodiment and the importance of the subject was understood in the study in terms of how students view and write about their own subjectivity in relation to their educational experiences. Viewing multiple identities and intersecting oppression was important in breaking down the us/them binary in the social contexts in the course under study. Finally, the analysis of the course
also focused on spaces that learning seemed to break down or fail, and how that was not necessarily a bad thing.

**Literacies Performed**

Queer pedagogy asks us to look at how student identity is constructed and performed over time, and what that might mean for students. Queer literacies ask us to expand that question to our instruction of writing. Conveniently for literacy scholars, this deconstruction plays well with newer iterations of literacy studies that view writing as a process. For example, Waite (2017) argues that the teacher’s role is in supporting students in the (sometimes uncomfortable) process of understanding their identities and writing as fluid: “I seek to (as tenderly as I can and with acute awareness of the responsibility) disrupt” students learning that views literacy as “fixed and named” (p. 17). A queer pedagogical approach to learning, as we have seen in the previous section, can be beneficial in asking what kinds of performances we value as teachers, and what kinds of identities students are asked to filter out. How can this benefit us from a literacies approach? Understanding literacies and writing as a never-ending process rather than a finished product is certainly not unique to queer literacies (Bloom, 1997; Sommers, 1980; West-Puckett, 2016); however, what queer literacies brings to the conversation is questioning why certain language structures and writing conventions are deemed normative and what kinds of identity (and writing) performances are left out. As Alexander and Gibson (2004) suggest, “students can be asked to view each draft of an essay (including the ‘final’) as a rhetorical entity that captures a moment in time rather than a timeless truth” (p. 7). I saw this idea about fluidity and unfixed identities coming into play both in student writing and also in the performances in the classroom from students and from myself. The writing in the course primarily took the approach that writing is a process that goes through many iterations and is never ‘finished.’ This
was reflected in the drafting process built into the writing in the course, as well as the smaller
daily writing assignments throughout the course of the semester. This analysis examines how
students revised their writing over time based on the performances that they felt aligned with
successful university writing. These performances, enacted by teachers and students as Waite
notes, extend into the interactions in the classroom as well. Chapter Four lays out the values that
I attach to different performances, and the subsequent chapters attempt to understand how
students respond to those expectations.

Allowing students to see themselves and their writing as unfixed allows them to unpack
and question which identities are being positively constructed by the dominant culture. Waite
(2017) writes about understanding writing in the humanities, saying “composition is not a
moment when we ... take one side of a two-sided debate – rather, it is an act of wavering and
careful considering in which writers move fluidly through the complicated terrain of their own
thinking” (p. 41). Similarly, Blackburn and Clark (2011) argue that “a single version of a
language is deemed more valuable than any others, even though many others exist” (p. 224) and
believe that we should tease out this value system with students. These scholars suggest that
viewing identity and writing in this way have positive implications for students as they unpack
the literacy performances that are valued in school.

We see the idea of performance perhaps most explicitly in Blackburn’s (2002; 2003) idea
of literacy performances. Drawing on theories by Heath (1982) of literacy events and Street
(2006) of literacy practices, Blackburn engages with Butler’s (1990) theory on performance to
think about literacy performances. It is worth quoting Blackburn (2002) at length here as she
describes the term she coined:
I bring Butler’s performance theory to literacy events and practices in order to consider literacy across locations and over time … Each performance is among innumerable other performances that are both similar to and different from all of the others. In this way they both confirm and disrupt all of the others. It is in the series of literacy performances that literacy has the potential both to reinforce and destabilize the values constructed through reading and writing. It is in literacy performances that literacy holds the hope for social change. (p. 313)

This approach to literacies as a continued and ever-changing performance rather than discrete sets of events or practices has radical potential, according to Blackburn. These performances can lead to empowerment in terms of identity self-construction and formation, and, in using non-normative discourses, students can push back against homophobia and sexism (2002, p. 314).

Blackburn argues that the approach to literacies (as well as identity) as performed gives students more control over their own writing and over their own lives. For this study, I mainly analyzed student literacy performances in the free writing turned in throughout the course of the semester. As will be discussed in the methods section, students in the course completed a 10 minute free write at the beginning of each class period, and these free writes were a helpful vehicle to analyze the student performances as they occurred repeatedly over time. As the course shifted to remote learning, the form of the free writes changed as well (as discussed in Chapter Four), and this change also helped me understand some of the value that I placed on time and silence.

**Embodiment and Literacies**

Because queer pedagogy also asks us to question what costs are associated with viewing gender and identity as socially constructed, we must also ask what a more embodied queer literacies might look like. As with pedagogical approaches of identity as performed, there are
some potential drawbacks to this approach in literacies as well. Blackburn (2005b), for example, argues that refusing to use the binary language of the dominant culture “would fail to capture the ways in which gender and sexuality are often interpreted by those who experience gender dichotomously and imposed on those who don’t (indeed, on all of us)” (p. 400). Additionally, Furrow (2012) points out that encouraging students to interact with their messy identities in their writing can pose dangers for minoritized students who “were concerned with how instructors and classmates respond to papers about LGBT topics” (p. 151). Asking students to write about themselves can be powerful, but it can also put LGBTQIA+ students in the position of having to decide whether to out themselves in their classes.

Perhaps then in conjunction with a view of literacy as performances over time, taking an embodied approach to literacies requires deeply questioning how a more traditional approach to literacy instruction (in my case, college literacy instruction) is structured. And then how the bodies of students and teachers (as well as, I would argue, the physical space of the classroom) can disrupt and break down this traditional approach. Waite’s (2017) approach to literacies and embodiment in the writing classroom is really critical to my understandings here. This means attaching student bodies and identities more concretely to their writing:

I want to ask students to see revision not only as a process of looking back at their own writing but also as a process of looking back at themselves in order to make self-reflexive moves explicitly about their own becoming – becoming a gender, becoming a reader, becoming a writer. (p. 114)

The focus on becoming highlights that students’ identities and their writing are more fluid; it also highlights that students’ bodies and experiences are intricately tied to their writing. Therefore, revising their writing in a way becomes about revising themselves.
Drawing on a queer theory and disability theory framework to view composition, McRuer (2004) argues teachers need to “[recenter] our attention on the composing bodies in our classrooms [to] inaugurate a productive process of ‘de-composition’ – that is, a process that provides an ongoing critique of both the corporate processes into which we, as students and teachers of composition, are interpellated and the concomitant disciplinary compulsion to produce only disembodied, efficient writers” (p. 50). What does this push against “disembodied” writing look like in the classroom? For McRuer, this means embracing the messiness and disorderly in college writing courses, pushing against the corporate writing that the university compels us to produce, and ultimately “not assuming in advance that the finished state is the one worth striving for” (p. 60). This kind of writing, then would align our writing more closely with our own identities – messy and disorderly as they are. Similar to McRuer’s “de-composition,” Halberstam (2011) writes about “the antisocial turn” that is both “self-shattering” and “other-shattering” (p. 110), a part of queer failure that society frames as unproductive but that Halberstam argues is a form of rebellion against normative understandings of development.

Finally, Miller (1998) proposes a turn towards “identity-fracturing discourse” (p. 370) in autobiographical writing that “[produces] a story of self and other with which one cannot identify” (p. 373). She argues that this can support students in breaking down the strict us/them binary that is often reinforced in literacy classrooms. This messiness in writing was encouraged in my classroom by the ongoing nature of the writing assignments, as the journaling project included quite a bit of back and forth. The project also asked students to interrogate their own positionalities in relation to the course content, which required them to think and write about their own embodied identities (to the extent that they felt comfortable disclosing this information to me). I will discuss these aspects in the findings chapters.
Intersections in Queer Literacies

Queer literacies will also need to take into account multiple and varied intersections of identity. Thinking about what this could look like for writers, one potentially fruitful avenue of looking at intersecting identities is in regard to language. Indeed, a queer literacies approach would naturally ask us to embrace and value multiple and varied language use. Alexander (2008) asserts that students are prevented from being literate if they are not allowed to participate in class, and “people see themselves as literate, as being able to participate actively in a complex society by telling their own stories about their lives, or by having that participation hampered” (p. 7). Blackburn (2005b) highlights especially how educators (and researchers) should “disrupt dichotomies in literacy education, for example between naming people as literate or illiterate” (p. 401). By asking scholars to reexamine who gets to participate in the writing classroom, we can begin to open the door for more diverse and varied literacy practices in the classroom. This pushes against the white supremacist notions in the writing classroom that there is only one right way to write – in what she calls the “standard English fairy tale,” Greenfield (2011) writes that “unresolved racism in the U.S. education system has given way to a particular rhetoric about language diversity and education that has drastically skewed our understandings of linguistic phenomena” (p. 34). Many scholars have understood that as valuing students codemeshing practices that value multiple Englishes (Canagarajah, 2011; Young, 2007). I see this push against standard English and against binaries in identities as a way to support students in working through the complex ways that oppression intersects in the education system and does not just operate independently of each other. Because the course under study engaged in educating students through analyzing the US education system, it allowed for a bit of meta-analysis in terms of intersecting subjectivities in the education system. I think having students reflect on
their own identities and reflect on the fact that no one has an identity that is entirely oppressed or entirely oppressor (Freire, 1970) supported them in seeing how intersections of oppression shape their own and everyone’s educational experience. I hope that this pushes against the us/them binary, where students learn about the struggle of ‘those other students’ without feeling implicated themselves. Chapter Five discusses how the us/them binary operated in student writing, particularly in the journaling and Reading Leaders assignment.

**Embracing Failure in Literacy Instruction**

Queer literacies also have a history of focusing on failure and what we can learn from it, and what we conceive of as failure. Failure is a big part of Waite’s (2017) understanding of queer literacies. Waite writes that “It would be impossible to engage in acts of teaching or acts of writing without coming up against notions of failure” (p. 56). Queer pedagogy’s insistence to give up a great degree of control in the classroom – control instilled in teachers by heteronormative, colonial, capitalist dynamics in education – makes the failure of education feel like a product of this lack of control. However, Waite’s point suggests that failure is inevitable in teaching. Similarly, Quinlivan (2013) initially began their analysis by looking for one set of themes, and then switched to a new viewpoint to foreground that their “affective disappointments make uncomfortably explicit my investment in the study as an emancipatory success story. Making explicit such conundrums can engage more fully with the contradictory nature of researching queerly in schools” (p. S61). Their analysis initially understood the classroom silences as failures of queer pedagogy, but in reframing the analysis, they came to understand that the silences did not necessarily mean failure. On a more hopeful note, what we see ultimately from this view is that failures in literacy instruction are not necessarily bad. In fact, “there are also dominant cultural assumptions about writing that can disrupted by queer failures,
including the assumptions that writing is something that happens in the mind and not in the body … that there is something we can ‘know about’ in some definite way” (Waite, p. 66).

Particularly in Chapters Four and Six, I highlight places where I felt implicated in moments that felt like failure, why I identified them in this way, and how I thought about the learning that may still have come from those moments.

To summarize, the themes that I have highlighted throughout the conceptual framework informed the data analysis and course design for the course under study: literacy performances and performances of identity in the classroom; the embodiment and subjectivity that takes place in the classroom; intersections of oppression, especially within the colonial structure of the US school system, and how these intersections disrupt binaries; and failure as a necessary and inherently queer part of education. As I will discuss in the Chapter Four, these themes greatly influenced my course design in terms of expectations for student behavior and participation in class, the subjectivity that I ask students to bring into the classroom, and the push to engage students to understand their own role in the system. These themes also apply to me as the teacher. My performance in the classroom is one that is influenced by normative understandings of gender just as much as the students. Reflecting on this course’s role in maintaining US colonial education structures, as well as thinking about how the course could push back against these structures while operating within them became a large part of the construction of the course as well. Finally, understanding the failure inherent in educating generally, and interacting with the feeling of failure and trying to understand it differently was also critical, as failure is a necessary aspect of education.
University Required Diversity Course Studies: Reviewing Pertinent Literature

Because the course under study fulfills one of my university’s required diversity courses for all undergraduate degrees, I situated this study in the existing literature on university required diversity courses. In this section, I will discuss the inclusion criteria that limited the literature under study. I will use the literature to define a “university required diversity course” like the one I taught. Then, I will examine the existing literature: first, I will look at the quantitative studies, which are by far the majority, before turning to the qualitative studies, which more closely align with my own research.

Inclusion Criteria

In searching for studies, I first searched across databases using the term “diversity requirement.” Because of the abundance of work on diversity more broadly, I used the limiter “requirement” to focus only on courses that were a requirement for graduation, as this most closely mirrors the course in this study. I then limited the search to only journal articles, books, or book chapters (i.e., excluding unpublished dissertations and newspaper articles). I further limited the topics to Education, Journalism and Communication, and Literature and Writing. After reading these initial results, I included any works cited in the publications I reviewed that had been missing from the initial search, but that fit within my original constraints. As I decided which publications to include, I had to make some decisions about what to consider a “diversity requirement.” There is too much literature on multicultural education courses or general diversity initiatives to possibly be reviewed for this study. For instance, there are many studies on changing student attitudes in elective diversity courses. However, I believe that this is fundamentally different than the case I am working with as the students are required to take a

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5 It appears that earlier articles are more likely to use the term “diversity courses,” which may have explained their initial absence from the search.
diversity course to graduate. Elective diversity courses were not included because the self-selection process of students enrolled in an elective versus a required diversity course will be very different. So, in my search for diversity courses, I limited my field to studies that identified the classes under study as fulfilling a university diversity requirement or were designated as a university diversity course. I also excluded studies that focused on graduate level courses.

**What Is a Diversity Requirement?**

There are many definitions of diversity requirements used in the literature. Broadly, there are several aspects of “diversity” on which these courses usually focus. One prominent focus is courses that address multiple kinds of diversity or oppression (e.g., race, class, gender, sexuality, etc.) that is a main focus of the course and the learning outcomes (Bowman, 2010; Case, 2007; Castellanos & Cole, 2015; Duffee & Bailey, 1991; Owens, 2005; Pickens, Bachay, & Treadwell, 2010). Another attribute of these courses is in providing opportunities for interaction among students with diverse identities or that promote intergroup interaction (Nelson Laird & Engberg, 2011). Finally, opportunities for students to self-reflect in writing or group discussion were present across many of the studies (Chang, 2002; Duffee & Bailey, 1991; Nelson Laird & Engberg, 2011).

The number of diversity courses required varies, but typically one or two courses are required. Denson (2009) has a particularly helpful framework regarding what diversity coursework is attempting to target or achieve. Denson suggests that diversity coursework targets cognitive rather than emotional mechanisms, because the focus is on exposing students to new knowledge and perspectives. Things like peer interventions are considered to be targeting emotional mechanisms since this is about exposure to people of other identities. The type of bias
targeted by these courses, according to Denson, are attitudes and cognition, rather than emotions and behavior (p. 809).

These definitions align with the definition of what makes a diversity requirement at the university where this study takes place. According to the university in my study, the purpose of these courses is to prepare students to participate in a diverse society after they leave school. The university requires two diversity courses – one that focuses on the United States context and one that focuses on the global context. To fulfill the United States requirement, which the course in my study does, the course is required to substantially focus on at least one form of diversity.

**Quantitative Studies: Measuring Students’ Prejudice**

The majority of studies on required diversity courses are quantitative in nature, and they typically focus on students’ racial bias before and after the course, although there is quite a bit of variation. Perhaps most importantly, the results for the quantitative studies vary greatly. Some studies find that diversity courses decrease students’ levels of prejudice toward people of color, women, and LGBTQIA+ people (Case, 2007a; Case & Stewart, 2009; Nelson Laird, Engberg, & Hurtado, 2005; Radloff, 2010), while other studies showed negligible or negative results on students’ levels of prejudice (Case, 2007b; Henderson-King & Kaleta, 2000) or findings that suggest that the outcomes depend largely on the individual class or on student identity (Bowman, 2010; Castellanos & Cole, 2015; Chang, 2002; Cole, Case, Rios, & Curtin, 2011; Hogan & Mallott, 2005; You & Matteo, 2013). One reason for this variance could be the type of quantitative survey designed, as Denson (2009) asserts that studies with more rigorous methods tended to have smaller effect sizes.

Many studies found positive results from students’ enrollment in diversity courses. Chang (2002) randomly sampled students in several diversity requirements across different subject
areas (none of them in education) and then administered surveys in those classes. He found that students had statistically significantly more favorable attitudes towards African Americans after they had completed the course. Nelson Laird, Engberg, and Hurtado (2005) studied the impact of a variety of diversity courses in education and women’s studies on students’ commitment to social action engagement. The study found that enrollment in a diversity course positively influenced students’ interest in social action engagement and that it increased the quality of interaction with diverse peers (p. 468). Case (2007a) and Case and Stewart (2009) look at the effects of a Psychology of Race and Gender course on students’ levels of sexism and homophobia. The studies found that first, both men and women had lower levels of sexism at the end of the diversity course, but that men had not reached the same level that women had at the beginning of the course (Case, 2007a p. 429); and second, students became more aware of heterosexual privilege, decreased their prejudice, and increased their support for same-sex marriage (Case & Stewart, 2009). Radloff’s (2010) quantitative study examined the effect of completing multiple diversity requirement courses and found that students who had completed two diversity courses were less likely to resist race-based educational policies and showed less modern racism.

Other studies had more mixed results. Hogan and Mallott (2005) included more variables in students’ perceptions of race than the studies already listed. They overall found that the students who were in the middle of the class and students who had completed the class showed sustained awareness of racism, but only the students currently taking the class showed reduced antagonism towards minorities. Their hypothesis regarding the reasoning behind this is important for my study. They speculate that while “the denial component may have been relatively easy to modify because it is fundamentally a belief stereotype rooted in ignorance and
misunderstanding” which can be improved by presenting students with facts, the other two components are more difficult to change because they are “defensive emotional/motivational reactions to the implication that if modern racism is to be eliminated, the majority group will have to share economic rewards, political power, and employment opportunities more equitably with minorities” (p. 123).

Bowman (2010) similarly found that the effects of diversity requirements vary greatly depending on student identity. The study found that the results were quite different for men compared to women, and for students of color compared to white students: “White students benefit substantially from taking multiple diversity courses, while students of color reported no significant gains from taking two courses” (p. 560). Similarly, Cole, Case, Rios, and Curtin (2011) examined measures of blatant racism, awareness of white privilege, intersectional consciousness, and endorsement of Protestant work ethics for white students and students of color in and out of required diversity courses. They found that students of all races were “less likely to deny the existence of blatant racism and were more aware of White privilege” after taking the diversity course (p. 402). However, they found that white students’ enrollment in a diversity course “was associated with increased intersectional consciousness and decreased endorsement of the Protestant work ethic” while “no such effect was observed for students of color” (p. 403). These studies are important in that they are of the very few studies that focus on the experiences of students of color compared to white students in diversity courses, and they raise very important questions about who these courses are really for.

The effectiveness of these courses could also be largely dependent on the course content. You and Matteo (2013) used a Multicultural Experiences Questionnaire to measure how much multicultural interaction students have and how much desire they have to have these interactions.
They looked at the different course syllabi and found that the two courses that had “structured interaction with people of different backgrounds” (p. 64) also were the only courses to have a marginally statistically significant (p<.05) increase in multicultural experience and multicultural desire. This suggests that students’ being able to interact with their peers may have more of an impact than learning about the material without these interactions, although causal claims here cannot be made. Castellanos and Cole (2015) use civic engagement as an outcome measure in their study of students enrolled in a diversity requirement course. They divided the courses up into clusters based on the content and syllabus. They found that the majority of courses focused on curricular reform and that none of the courses focused on equity pedagogy. When looking at the civic engagement outcome, they found that “only the multicultural content cluster was found to predict civic engagement for all students” and “courses that emphasize society equity have … greater gains experienced by students of color” (p. 805).

Some studies showed negative or no change in students’ attitudes based on their enrollment in diversity courses. Henderson-King and Kaleta (2000) looked at students’ changing feelings towards women and people of color, both for students enrolled in the university’s required Race and Ethnicity course, and those who were not enrolled. They found that students not enrolled in the required diversity course became less positive towards people of color and women, while the students enrolled in the diversity course did not show a change in either direction. So while these courses may not increase positive feelings towards marginalized groups, they may halt the negative perceptions that seem to be developing over time in college. Additionally, while Chang (2002) found that students in his study who were enrolled in the diversity requirement developed more positive attitudes towards African Americans, he found that students who were enrolled in a second diversity course did not have more positive attitudes,
which suggest that these courses do not have a compounding effect in terms of their effectiveness. These results are in direct contrast to Radloff’s (2010) study which also focused on the impact of multiple diversity course, but which had the opposite results. Another concern is that students’ engagement in the course (and at what time in their course trajectory they take the diversity course) is influenced by students’ interests. Nelson Laird, Engberg, and Hurtado (2005) found that “students who were more committed to social action engagement tended to take a diversity course, which in turn strengthened this attitude” (p. 469). Case (2007b) actually found negative associations in students’ levels of prejudice after taking the required Psychology of Race and Gender course. Prejudice against most racial groups did not change at all, prejudice against Latinx people increased, and, although there was a statistically significant change in students’ awareness of white privilege and racism, their own white guilt, and support for affirmative action, the author admits that the practical changes were very small.

**Qualitative Studies: Contextualizing Student and Teacher Experiences**

There are fewer studies that use qualitative methods or that focus on the teachers in these required diversity classes. However, the studies that do exist also have very mixed conclusions about the impact of these courses. Also, the only studies to focus on the impact of teaching these courses on educators tasked with teaching them are qualitative in nature. As the most recent literature review on university diversity initiatives points out, there is a lack of qualitative literature, and specifically an absence of studies that are willing to call out broader issues of inequity in the institutions at large (Patton, Sánchez, Mac, & Stewart, 2019). These qualitative studies I believe paint a much clearer picture about the changes in these courses over the years, as the earliest study shows outright student resistance to the material, while later studies show
more insidious opposition to the course material. They are also more likely to discuss issues of inequity in the university as a whole.

Duffee and Bailey (1991) offer one of the first case studies in their experience implementing the first course to fulfill a diversity requirement in criminal justice at SUNY Albany. They ultimately found that the students (the majority of whom were white, with a few African American and Latinx students) were very resistant to the diversity aspect of the course, and the reaction from students was “generally negative” (p. 148). Most of the students were not interested in hearing about the historical context of current policies: “To us, the most frightening such remark was that ‘slavery is irrelevant’ … Many students appeared to possess a remarkable ability to compartmentalize historical and current issues” (p. 150). Most of the students were also not interested in hearing about the social contexts of these policies or were unwilling to admit that there were current issues in the criminal justice system and wanted to relegate all of the problems to the past. The authors concluded that, even though the students were largely resistant to the course content, that just illustrated the need for this type of course: “In our view, the evidence of the types of resistance we encountered more than justifies the presence of such courses or other attempts to include diversity content in the curriculum” (p. 154).

Perry, Moore, Edwards, Acosta, and Frey (2009) have similar concerns about student resistance, but their study focuses on instructors of color in these courses at a PWI. They use the Black feminist framework of “outsider-within” (p. 83) that highlights that faculty of color in the predominantly white (and male) setting of the university are viewed as outsiders and their credibility is frequently challenged – their “position at the margins of the predominantly white academy is a multi-dimensional phenomenon and includes physical, intellectual, and psychic isolation” (p. 83). They argue that this happens even more in diversity requirement courses
because of the contentious nature of the material. There is significant resistance because people (mainly white) are already debating the usefulness of these courses. This puts already marginalized faculty in the unpleasant position of having their authority doubly questioned. This is especially problematic given that other studies have shown that these courses are predominantly taught by faculty of color, suggesting that “teaching about diversity is disproportionately the purview of groups traditionally marginalized in higher education” (Nelson Laird & Engberg, 2011, p. 132). Perry et al. (2009) found that students challenge instructors of color in a variety of ways, not only on their authority as experts in the field, but also their credibility as unbiased instructors. They also found that these challenges were not one-off occurrences but were instead a “daily expectation” (p. 89). One strategy that instructors describe engaging in is described as “depoliticizing,” (p. 96), where instructors try to make the subject matter less of a direct attack on the students in the classroom. The authors are critical about whether this approach subverts the intentions of these courses.6

One way to mitigate these effects for people of color teaching diversity courses may be to have all faculty in support of these courses. Pickens, Bachay, and Treadwell (2010) present a case study opposite to the previous study: their small urban Catholic university has a majority Hispanic student population and a majority white faculty. This study discusses the overall commitment of the faculty to support this diversity initiative, which was very high overall, and how the students’ perceived of the faculty’s support of diversity. They found that student

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6 While I do not want to discredit this approach as a person who presents as white in the classroom, from a queer pedagogical perspective this approach is somewhat problematic as it does not ask students to examine their own role within the structures.
relationships with their own identity, their rating of campus climate, and preparedness after taking a diversity course were improved.\footnote{It is worth noting that I had some concerns about the survey instrument that they used for students, which took for granted that students thought that diversity is important. For example, one question asked students to agree/disagree with the statement: “Before taking this course I had the opportunity to: Respect that male-female roles can vary significantly across different cultures” (p. 11). This question assumes that they agree that male-female roles can vary across different cultures.}

Another strategy proposed by Martinez (2014) is that students may be more open to learning about diversity when it is presented differently, and not as fulfilling a diversity requirement. She discusses her experiences as a woman of color teaching a course that focused on diversity and fulfilled a math requirement, compared with teaching a course that fulfilled the diversity requirement. She found that, while many “class discussions were emotional and intense,” students “often appeared less defensive and uncomfortable because we could always turn to the statistical evidence” (p. 76-77). She believes that students may feel more comfortable because they can fall back on a “numbers do not lie” (p. 77) mentality. While Martinez acknowledges that this approach can be problematic, she believes that it is a “developmentally appropriate mechanism” (p. 77) for her students.\footnote{Similar to Perry et al.’s (2009) study, this ‘just the facts’ mentality is somewhat problematic within a queer pedagogy framework.} In a similar success narrative, Owens (2005) discusses her “participation/identification” model that she developed for her World Religions class based on Freirean pedagogy. In this model, she had students choose a religion that’s not their own, and then they act as a member of that religion for the entire semester. She argues that making them use the first person “I” to talk about the assigned religion makes it so that they are not studying the “other.” From a queer theoretical perspective, Owens has identified one very real issue in diversity courses, which is that these classes can feel like teaching ‘about the other’ (Kumashiro, 2001; 2002). However, her solution is still problematic. She argues that, by
assigning students to another religion, that they “try to actually function as though they are members of the group they are studying” (p. 247). However, I believe that asking students to role play as a member of a marginalized group opens the door for stereotyping and essentializing. One of the student blogposts that she cites as an example of their successful understanding of Buddhism, to me, evidences this essentializing: “A lot of people in the world have no idea what their goal in life is, and fortunately for the Buddhists, they know what they are working for and they ignore everything else that may get in their way of reaching that ultimate goal” (p. 250). She identifies one concern with her approach, that “we risk the students’ becoming once again colonizers who take what they need or want from a culture and move on” (p. 250), but then she brushes it off just as quickly, saying that “First-person speech personalizes, unifies, and humanizes” (p. 251) thereby making colonization impossible in her view.

Finally, Winkler (2018) shares her experiences teaching a diversity requirement course and viewing racism as a “threshold concept” which means that “racism as a system of advantage based on race is the concept that students must truly ‘get’ in order to move forward in the class” (p. 808). She found from student writing that none of the students in the class showed an applied analytical understanding of racism; by the time of the midterm, this had shifted so that 87% of the class showed an applied analytical understanding. She also found that Black students showed higher level understandings much faster in the semester. However, a real problem with this article is that the rubric Winkler (as a white woman) developed to measure students’ grasp of racism is rooted in academic understandings of racism and not practical understandings of racism. One example of how she is analyzing the student writing can make my view on this clear:
For example, one black woman named Crystal wrote in her very first journal entry that she “found [the new] definition of racism profound.” She continues, “In my own mind I could not differentiate between racism and prejudice and would use prejudice in my attempt to define racism. I knew there had to be a difference between the two words …. I was relieved when Tatum [2003] made use of David Wellman’s definition of racism which is that racism is a system of advantage based on race.” For Crystal, the threshold concept is a relief; it helps clear up the dissonance she felt in trying to understand racism.

(p. 822)

In Winkler’s analysis, Crystal does not have a strong understanding of racism because she cannot articulate the difference between prejudice and racism. That is not how I read this journal entry at all. Crystal very clearly understands racism as a structural issue on a practical level, as evidenced by her “attempt to define racism.” The frustration that she experiences is in trying to explain her feelings to others using the term prejudice. Tatum is not giving Crystal a better understanding of racism (which she has almost certainly experienced) but is giving her a term to articulate racism. To borrow Lorde’s (1987) language, “survival is not an academic skill” (p. 112). Understanding and attaching academic jargon to a concept are two entirely different things, and it makes me think that the rubric Winkler is using assesses student learning based on overly traditional measures.

**Conclusion: What is the Benefit for Students?**

The central question I asked in considering the theories guiding my research, as well as the contributions this study can make to the literature on queer pedagogies, queer literacies, and required diversity courses is this: How can these approaches benefit students – and teachers? To this question, Waite (2017) writes, “I consider it a pedagogical imperative to invest in what this
queer turn *could* mean … for students (and scholars in the field) *as writers*” (p. 4). It is this potential that I want to better understand.

As the preceding literature on queer literacies and pedagogies has shown, this approach *could* mean a great many things. It could support students, especially in the realm of a university diversity requirement, to go beyond an understanding of learning about the other. Instead, it could support students in breaking down the strict barrier between themselves and the other. This approach to literacies could also allow students to push back on the sharp divide between body and mind that often exists in writing instruction, and instead to see their writing as a product of their whole selves (mental, physical, spiritual, etc.). This kind of writing could also open up new avenues to value students’ lived experience and multiple modes of literacies that can make writing instruction more supportive of students who have been traditionally marginalized by the university.
CHAPTER III

METHODS

This chapter will discuss the methods for my research design. I start with an overview of the study design. Then I will move to discussing the participants, setting, and data sources for the study. I will then discuss my data analysis.

Study Design

The purpose of this study was to explore the ways that a queer literacies approach to student writing assignments impacted college students’ critical perspectives in a university required diversity course. This research is a qualitative case study design, which includes an analysis of student written and audio data as well as a self-study of my own praxis. The data came from audio recordings of the class, student writing submitted for class purposes, fieldnotes, and interviews. In this section, I describe key aspects of my study design.

Practitioner Inquiry

This research included a self-study and practitioner inquiry component where I reflected on the decisions made in the construction of the course. According to Cochran-Smith and Lytle (2009), there are several characteristics that all approaches to practitioner inquiry share. I will discuss the characteristics that relate to my research. First, as the name suggests, the practitioner (widened from just including “teacher” to many other educational practitioners) serves the dual role of researcher. Cochran-Smith and Lytle highlight that this is an important feature because, in most other forms of educational research, “practitioners are the topics of study, the objects of
someone else’s inquiry” (p. 41). This is important to my queer pedagogical framework as well, in that this approach blurs the boundaries between teacher and researcher, as well as how knowledge is produced. According to Campano, Ngo, and Player (2015), practitioner inquiry “challenges established hierarchies of knowledge” (p. 81-82). They explicitly draw from Cochran-Smith and Lytle (2009) who argue that practitioner research “[assumes] that those who work in particular education contexts and/or who live in particular social situations have significant knowledge about those situations” (p. 42). Additionally, this broadened assumption of knowledge-making serves to “blur” the boundaries between practitioner and educator (p. 42-43). This focus on disrupting taken for granted hierarchies of knowledge and blurring boundaries is important to my theoretical framework as well as my data analysis, which I will discuss later in the chapter.

One form of study that falls under the umbrella of practitioner inquiry is self-study. Kitchen, Fitzgerald, and Tidwell (2016) in their introduction to *Self-study and diversity, volume II*, situate self-study research as a methodology unique to the field of education, and more specifically unique to the field of teacher education. Their research into the *Studying Teacher Education* journal revealed that, between 2005 and 2015, about 8% of the journals examined the identity of minority educators, and about 11% involved teacher educators addressing equity and social justice (p. 4). While the bulk of self-study work in education seems to be focused on teacher education, I believe it is a useful tool of inquiry for all educators, especially given the definition provided by Cochran-Smith and Lytle (2009) for this specific kind of practitioner inquiry: “self-study works from the postmodernist assumption that it is never possible to divorce the ‘self’ either from the research process or from educational practice” (p. 40).
I also believe that self-study research is one path toward addressing (partially) the dearth of equity and social justice self-study research highlighted by Kitchen, Fitzgerald, and Tidwell (2016), importantly including more self-study by practitioners of color. Kitchen (2016) writes that narrative inquiry and “knowing inside out” (p. 14) allowed him to “explore how my stories of experience informed … my responsiveness to students” (p. 14). Research into educational practices is focused on contexts in which teaching is occurring yet is divorced from researchers’ own identities as teachers. I designed my study to heed Kitchen’s argument that it is important to work to understand ourselves and our teaching practices ‘inside out’ alongside our attempts to look at the impacts of our teaching strategies and the ways in which students interact with them. Kitchen, as an out gay teacher educator, also draws on queer theory in his understanding of critical approaches to self-study (p. 16).

A key component of self-study – and an important data source for my qualitative design – was reflection on my own praxis. Here, I use Freire’s (1970) understanding of praxis as “reflection and action upon the world in order to transform it” (p. 51). For educators engaged in social justice pedagogy, praxis – reflection on our teaching and action in relation to that reflection – becomes a necessity. Self-study allows for foregrounding of praxis and, thus, was an integral part of my research. Therefore, I documented and reflected on the planning and implementation of course material throughout the process. Having taught the course for two semesters prior to the implementation of the pilot study in Fall 2019, this reflection includes analyzing previous iterations of course material and comparing them to the current material used in the course, as well as memo writing and reflecting on the lesson planning process. This reflective process was the central component of the self-study/practitioner inquiry aspect of the research.
The self-reflective component of the research was also vital, as it was a necessary attribute of the queer pedagogy that this study aimed to enact. Building on the work of other queer pedagogy scholars who also use a self-study approach (Blackburn, 2006; Waite, 2017), I see many of the aspects of self-study reflected in scholars’ descriptions of queer approaches to teaching.¹ This is partly because there is no end point in queer theoretical frameworks; “queering” is an ongoing process. Therefore, developing a teaching strategy and then leaving it unexamined becomes problematic. According to Kumashiro (2001a):

[A]s problematic as expecting that oppression does not play out in our classrooms is expecting that we now know the effective way to change it. There is no panacea, and even my explorations in this article need to be treated as tools that, while changing our practices, must themselves be constantly reworked. (p. 3)

Any ‘results’ produced by this or similar studies must be constantly reexamined according to this paradigm.

Similarly, our teaching strategies, and the role of our own experiences in developing them, must be reexamined as well. Like other queer pedagogy scholars who use a self-study approach (Blackburn, 2006; Waite, 2017), I engaged in cycles of reflection and analysis on the approaches I enacted in my teaching. Such reflective analysis was also key to the critical literacy standpoint proposed by Freire and Macedo (1987), who argue that the “less malicious the naiveté of a person, the more he can perceive the ineffectiveness of his actions by learning directly from his own practice” (p. 43); in other words, leaving our teaching practices unexamined can lead to a ‘naivete’ that is damaging for students. Going back to Freire’s idea about praxis as the

¹ Although, the terms “self-study” and “practitioner inquiry” are not used for the most part in the queer literacies literature.
combination of reflection and action, espousing a critical (or queer) position while doing nothing to align our teaching with this position “becomes pure rhetoric” (Freire & Macedo, p. 39). This research is my attempt to make sure that my theories are not pure rhetoric.

**Qualitative Case Study**

As Kumashiro (2001a) has pointed out, there is no one approach to anti-oppressive teaching strategies. I take an approach similar to the work of Stacey Waite (2017), who reflects on Waite’s own teaching strategy in the classroom. It is impossible to implement the moves that Waite makes verbatim for, as Waite points out, “I do not mean to suggest here, or elsewhere in this book’s inquiry, that the student work in writing and discussion, or my own work as a teacher should be reproduced as some sort of ‘best practice’” (p. 67). Instead, Waite suggests that the individual (intrinsically not replicable) examples serve as a broader “strategy that values new ways of knowing, rather than merely offering new knowledge” (p. 67). With this framework, I argue that the self-study component of this research might move my own teaching towards presenting students with ‘new ways of knowing.’ Hopefully, this will contribute to a body of research in university required diversity courses that often instead present ‘new knowledge’ to students rather than ‘new ways of knowing.’ One of the most important aspects of the semester under study may have been the shifts between semesters because these changes were a result of deep reflection on my own teaching. The changes in the course between semesters were a concrete outcome of my feelings on how the course was meeting its course objectives as well as staying true to my queer and critical commitments. My work in the course design during the pilot study semester (Fall 2019) and the study semester (Spring 2020) was significantly informed by my previous two semesters teaching the course and memoing on the course design.
In choosing student work to analyze (among those who consented to be included in the study), I employed a (queered) case study design approach. What I mean by a queered case study design is that it did not necessarily rely on replication logic. Based on Yin’s (2003) description of single and multiple case study design, I believe that he would situate my student interviews as embedded units of analysis, with each semester of my course constituting one “case” (p. 39-43). I label this study as a multiple case study design because I looked at more than one section. However, Yin’s paradigm does not fit neatly onto a queer conception of data analysis. According to Yin, multiple cases should be used “as one would consider multiple experiments – that is, to follow a ‘replication’ logic” (p. 47, emphasis original). However, this comes with a caveat in relation to the theoretical design of the study: “if some of the empirical cases do not work as predicted, modification must be made to the theory” (p. 48). In other words, each student (and course section) should produce similar results. However, the theoretical framework for this study already predicts that the results would be different – in a queer sense, the results have already failed to replicate. Therefore, I consider my approach to the case study design to be queered because it rejects the idea that the results need to be replicated to be important. Instead, I think that Yin’s description of single case studies works better in this situation. He argues that single cases can be selected if they illustrate “representative” cases or “unique” cases (p. 40-41). While he does not use this model for multiple case studies, I believe that my focus on both students who ‘represent’ the course as a whole and students who seem ‘unique’ in their take up of the course material could provide interesting contrast to understanding the outcomes of the course.
Participants, Setting, and Data

Participants

The participants in the study were undergraduate students enrolled in my education courses for the Fall 2019 and Spring 2020 academic semesters. Although my official dissertation research occurred in Spring 2020, I had IRB approval for Fall 2019 and conducted pilot research, some data from is incorporated into the dissertation. This course fulfills the diversity in the U.S. context university requirement for undergraduate students to graduate. In total, I had 46 students enrolled in the study; the majority of the data analysis comes from the Spring 2020 semester, in which 21 students consented to be involved in the study. Two sections of the course were asked to consent into the study. Of the 46 students who consented to have at least some of their data analyzed, a further 17 did not want to be contacted to be interviewed. All participants were undergraduate students enrolled at the university under study.

I am never completely certain of the demographics of the students enrolled in my courses, as they disclose the demographics to which they identity to varying degrees; the Spring 2020 semester was no exception. However, I can say that the majority of the participants were white-identified, with several students who identified as Asian American and Middle Eastern. This brings many different experiences into the classroom. As the course is taught at a Predominantly White Institution (PWI) with fairly expensive tuition, many of the students enrolled in the courses self-identify as white and also upper-middle class. The majority of students have first-hand experience with the U.S. public school system, although a few international students each semester are new to the US education system with their enrollment in the university.
Because there are many different options available to fulfill the required diversity course, the students who chose to take this class were self-selected. According to the university’s enrollment report data, the 2018 fall enrollment at the university consisted of more than 65% white students with around 11% Hispanic or Latino and fewer than 10% each of Asian, Black/African American, Native American, and Native Hawaiian. The total population was around 45% female and 15% first generation students. Again, while I do not have specific demographic data beyond information that was self-disclosed, students enrolled in this course more or less reflected this student population with the exception that no students in the class identified as Hispanic/Latinx or Black/African American. Also, the fact that the university only records gender demographics as male or female does not accurately capture the diversity of gender identities in the students under study.

All students enrolled in the course were asked to consent into the study. Student data was excluded from the study if they dropped from the course without completing the whole semester or if they classified as graduate students (the course is also open to master’s students, although they constitute a significant minority of enrolled students). I formed my research questions to focus on undergraduate learning, as I wanted my research to speak to the literature on courses that meet universities’ undergraduate required diversity courses. Although the course focused on diversity in the U.S. educational context, the majority of the students enrolled in these sections are non-education students, although some education minors take the course.²

All students who elected to participate in the course were assigned a pseudonym. These pseudonyms accurately reflected the gender pronouns that students shared with me as well as

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² Education majors have their own section of the course specifically for education majors. As a result, education majors are not frequently enrolled in these sessions for non-majors.
accurately reflect students’ names culturally. If students provided a pseudonym for themselves at any point, I used that pseudonym. Last names (either real or pseudonymous) will not be used.

**Setting**

As I have discussed in earlier chapters, the education course fulfills one of the required diversity courses that students must take to graduate. In this section, I provide a sense of how the university defines what can count as fulfillment of that requirement, which speaks to the larger context in which this course is situated.

According to degree requirements, this institution generally defines United States diversity courses as those that discuss how social contexts have influenced relationships within the United States. These courses can focus on present-day or historical discussions of diversity, while the education course under study did a bit of both. These courses must make diversity a central focus of the course (although, it does not need to be the exclusive focus). Students are required to take a second course dealing with diversity in a global context. The course I studied was a one-semester, three credit-hour education course. The course was designed as an introduction to educational issues, and therefore did not focus on developing teaching skills. The syllabus stated that the course was for “prospective educators and students who have a more general interest in public education in our democratic society.” The university in which the course is under study is a PWI located in the mountain West and has an enrollment of approximately 30,000.³

The course was also situated in a School of Education that includes PhD and MA programs across disciplines, undergraduate and graduate teaching licensure programs, two

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³ Based on the demographics of the university discussed in the participants section, I identify this institution as a primarily white institution (PWI) and situate this research within other research done on diversity efforts within PWIs (Logan, Lightfoot, & Contreras, 2017, Perry, Moore, Edwards, Acosta, & Frey, 2009; Patton, Sánchez, Mac, & Stewart, 2019).
undergraduate majors, and a minor. The majority of instructors of the course are current PhD students in the School of Education, although some full-time faculty do teach the course as well. There are approximately ten sections of this education course taught each semester. This course has more offered sections than any other course in the school and draws students from across the university. Because education undergraduates have their own dedicated sections of the course, the majority of the sections are filled with other educators across campus, including students pursuing an education minor.

For the first half of the semester, the course was taught in-person on campus. The course was designed and planned to be taught in this way. However, because of the outbreak of Covid-19 in the United States, the course was forced to move online after the first 10 weeks. For the remainder of the semester, the majority of students met remotely over a video conferencing service at the same date and time as the in-person course. During the remote class period, students interacted with each other and me either in one large video chat room or in smaller breakout rooms. Students participated in a variety of ways including on camera, over audio call, and over the text chat feature. A small number of students (approximately four each week) were unable to participate in the synchronous video calls, due to relocation to a vastly different time zone or unstable internet in their homes, to name a few reasons. For these students, I created an asynchronous discussion board option for these students to continue to interact with the material in a similar fashion to the rest of the class. These students continued to complete free writing assignments and other writing projects for the rest of the semester.

 Break out rooms are a function on online meeting platforms that allow small subgroups of the whole group to meet in separate video meetings. These meetings happen simultaneously and allow people in online meetings to participate in smaller group discussion.
Data Sources

In this section, I discuss my data sources and how data was collected. In this study, I collected data from the following sources: audio recordings of the class sections and interviews, student writing, and reflective memos. Students had the option to consent into the study by having their conversations in class transcribed, their writing for class included in the study, and by participating in optional interviews.

Audio recordings of class sessions. I audio recorded class meetings from start to finish, with the exception of the first class-day when consent was collected and one class period during the study semester as a result of technical problems with my audio recording device. For the most part, this included my own speech as captured by a lapel microphone, and also student discussion in small groups as I moved about the classroom in and out of small groups. In both study semesters, I wore a lapel mic, which was sensitive enough to capture comments from the length of the classroom. Because of the number of students in the class and the acoustics in the classroom, capturing the entire whole class discussion proved difficult to achieve. Once the course moved to remote learning over video conference, I placed the audio recording device next to my computer and captured both my speech and the student audio coming from the computer speakers in this way. Audio from breakout rooms is only present when I entered the breakout rooms to join students in conversation. As I understand literacy to include oral discussion, reading, and writing (Frankel, Becker, Rowe, & Pearson, 2016), student writing and in-class discussion was analyzed to understand students’ perspectives in the course and responses to the writing pedagogies I implemented. Due to the switch to remote learning, I also included text chat from the video conference calls as these were now forms of class discussion. Students who did
not consent to be a part of this study did not have their comments in class transcribed and their comments in class were stricken from any analysis.

The digital recordings of class meetings were partially transcribed based on my memos and my listening to the course sessions again. Given that each semester generated approximately 40 hours of audio recordings, transcribing them in their entirety was not be feasible. Instead, I used my reflective memos, any notes taken during the class, and revisiting of the audio to determine portions of the audio that helped me address my research questions given the focus of my data analysis. This was limited to specific interaction, conversations, or literacy events that I decided were pertinent to my study.

**Interviews.** The interviews with students took place after the semester concludes. I take a critical and humanizing view of research where knowledge is co-constructed between participants and researchers (Cruz, 2011; Paris, 2011; Villenas, 1996). Therefore, I engaged in a loosely structured interview session that relied on the dialogic spiral (Kinloch & San Pedro, 2014), which focuses on listening and responding rather than predetermining strict interview questions. Because I view this process as collaborative, the interview process was not constrained to a strict protocol. Rather, the interviews strove to imitate a collaborative conversation on the learning outcomes in the class. Following Kumashiro’s (2002) lead, “I conducted the interviews to see what difference their stories can make to my theoretical framework, to see how they can help educators think differently about antioppressive education” (p. 18, emphasis original). However, I used some guiding questions to make sense of some content about which I wanted more discussion from students (see Appendix A). Unfortunately, after contacting several students from the class, only one student consented to be interviewed. I can imagine the context of the pandemic made it challenging for students to take on additional
commitments. This interview was conducted using Zoom and was audio recorded by placing my recording device next to the computer speakers. This interview was then partially transcribed. When reproducing speech (either my own or that of students), I left intact filler words (e.g., um, like) to preserve the original speech as closely as possible.

**Student writing.** Most of the student writing in the course was already saved in a Google drive for my grading records. This writing is the more formal written assignment for the course. Due to IRB requirements, all writing assignments was used only for the study after the semester is over, for students who consented into the study. I also collected student writing throughout the semester in the form of writing done in class such as freewriting, brainstorming, or group writing that is taken up for my feedback. Both the formal graded assignments and the in-class writing was analyzed. When student writing is presented in this dissertation, the pieces of student writing are sometimes quite lengthy to preserve the original intent of the students. While I do not consider this presentation of student writing a testimonio, I am drawn to the framing of Treviño, García, and Bybee (2017) who write that their co-author’s “testimonio speaks for itself” (p. 231). They provide his testimonio in whole and then “concluding by providing commentary” (p. 231). I followed a similar format in that I often left large portions of student writing intact – sometimes entire essays – before including my own analysis of the writing.

**Reflective memos.** Finally, throughout my previous semesters teaching this course, as well as during the two semesters under study, I analyzed my memoing about the course and how it impacted my course design. I typically wrote these memos on the day following the course, and I included any field notes that I took during the actual class. I found that, because of my facilitation work in the class, my field notes were somewhat sparse. For the semesters under study, I used both audio recorded reflections about the course on my drive home which were
then later transcribed into written form as well as written reflections. The writing up of the course reflections allowed me to see trends or things that I kept returning to across different class meetings, while the conversations I had (with myself) allowed me to have mini discussions about the course that got into a bit more detail.

**Positionality**

As I am one of the primary participants in the study, and as identity is such a necessary component to queer literacies, it is worth discussing my own identity and experiences, and how they play a role in my research and teaching. I identify as a cisgender biracial Latina woman, although I acknowledge (frequently in my course as well) that I am white, which complicates that identity. This is a mixed bag in terms of teaching this course. As Perry, Moore, Edwards, Acosta, and Frey (2009) highlight, the majority of diversity courses are taught by faculty of color, which places an unequal burden onto faculty of color to educate white students about racism. I think it is important for me, as a white person in a PWI, to help other white-identified students do the work of unpacking their white privilege. Also, I talk about my biracial identity in the course as a way to complicate binary ideas about race. To borrow Rosa’s (2016) language, “Can one be positioned simultaneously as a member of a historically Spanish-speaking population and White?” (p. 69). This is a question that I think is worth exploring in my class and is one of the conflicting identities that I discuss with students.

I am in my late 20s and have been working with college students for seven years before this pilot study year. Prior to my PhD studies, I taught college freshman writing for several years at two universities and a community college, as well as worked at four different writing centers. I believe that this also impacted my interaction with students because many of them are very
similar in age to me. My writing background also influences how I teach the writing assignments in the course, namely by giving feedback on drafts more frequently.

I do not consider myself heterosexual, as in my late 20s I have now begun to accept my attraction to many different kinds of people. However, I do acknowledge that as someone who presents as heterosexual, is dating a cisgender man, and receives all of the attendant straight privileges, I still feel outside of the queer community.

My own relationship with education has been one that focuses on education as a necessity. There was no question for my parents that my brother and I were going to college, and while this approach worked out well for me, it ignores the fact that some people do not enjoy college. This failure of higher education to live up to my parents’ and my own high expectations has made me deeply question its value, while I pursue it aggressively for myself at the same time. Thinking about my father’s career as a person of color in academia, he always framed universities as wanting to say that they were diverse, but that they did not actually want diverse opinions – a concern validated by Urrieta and Villenas’s (2013) idea about the tipping point of faculty of color. As a result, I have felt sometimes like I was deploying my biracial identity not in an authentic way that mattered, but rather when it served me. My relationship to higher education is, as a result, somewhat fraught: while I deeply value my college experiences and continue to work toward a full-time career in higher education, at the same time I remain cautious of the narrative of school as the great equalizer. This leads me to ask my students (and myself): is education enough? A frequent conclusion students came to in this course was that if only we could educate dominant students about ‘the other,’ then we would be able to get rid of oppression. As much as I would like to believe this, I think it is important to trouble such an idea. Are people who are educated about diversity suddenly not homophobic? Are they actively anti-
racist? While these are, I believe, some of the arguments behind including such diversity requirements in college degrees, I am forced to question this as well.

**Queering Qualitative Data Analysis**

In this section, I describe my data analysis. First, I discuss how I framed the data analysis in non-binary terms. Then, I turn to discussing students’ critical perspectives in the classroom. Next, I discuss the literacy performances that students (and myself) enacted in the classroom environment. I will next discuss the focus on where teaching and learning break down in the course of the semester, and how this failure is not necessarily a bad thing. Finally, I return to the idea of binaries, and discuss the focus of disrupting binaries in the course content. As I describe in more detail below, one way that worked to better understand student engagement with the goals of the course was to understand student learning on a spectrum of critical consciousness. However, a main goal for the data analysis was also to queer that process of analysis in a variety of ways.

**Asking Non-Binary Questions of the Data**

In the move to avoid binaries, one important aspect of a queer methodological approach has to do with the framing and research questions. Specifically, how can we use frameworks that ask expansive questions of the data rather than asking whether or not data falls into one binary or another? For example, Blackburn and Clark (2011) look at interactions that can have contradictory and conflicting results. Their article examines the discourse of queer youth of color, and how none of the data in their study is “solely liberatory or hegemonic” (p. 246). They claim that the context and the people involved play an influential role in understanding the youths’ discourse and trying to label their data as either liberatory or hegemonic would be forcing an analysis on the data that does not fit the theory.
I took a similar approach in interacting with student work and participation, both written and spoken. For the writing assignments, both in my data analysis as well as my written feedback to students as part of the course, I tried to avoid labeling writing moves or points as right or wrong. In responding to student writing, I tried to take an approach that privileges questions – maybe by first discussing how I understood a point that a student made and then asking them how they understood the point. I also tried to think about how I could ask students to take other pieces of information into account and how that changed their understanding.

In the data analysis for the course, I took a similar approach to analyzing written data, in trying to understand the inherent value in it for the students’ learning, instead of labeling the writing as disruptive of power structures or supporting them. This approach to non-binary data analysis is something that I saw as an overarching umbrella for the other aspects of data analysis. Instead of trying to uncover some existing truth about the queerness (or lack thereof) in writing assignments, it was instead be more generative to look at a range of complex and intersecting factors that contributed to or pushed against normative constructions of identity.

The students were not the only participants that I view in this way. It was important for me to view my own pedagogy and practice using this same disruption of binaries. Shelton (2018) provides an example of approaching data from a non-binary perspective in regard to the role of the teacher: “How does Lulu’s adoption of a queer pedagogy, within the context of an intersectional curriculum, shape her understandings of her own and her students’ considerations of literacies and female sexualities in her classroom?” (p. 229). For this study, I attempted to avoid asking either/or questions of my own practice as well. In this case, then, it is not beneficial (or queer) to ask questions like, ‘Is this a queer move? Is this not a queer move?’ because these kinds of questions place literacy and teaching into a binary (Blackburn, 2005b). I believe that
this is a generous approach to understanding my own teaching, for if I am constantly asking myself “is this queer?” I think that I would be constantly failing. As I elaborate later in the chapter, I want to think about teaching and learning in non-binary ways, which includes where my teaching has ‘failed to be queer.’ I try to emphasize this approach in each of the following sections on the data analysis.

**Critical Consciousness in the Class**

Given that one of the goals for the course is for students to “develop [their] own critical and thoughtful views about education in the United States,” one way that I analyzed student writing was with the goal of discerning aspects of their critical consciousness. I draw heavily from Freire’s (1970) understanding of critical consciousness here. Freire writes that students “must acquire a critical awareness of oppression through the praxis of this struggle” (p. 51), and that a critical pedagogical perspective “makes oppression and its causes objects of reflection by the oppressed” (48). As the course under study used the framework of critical pedagogy as an object of study, I believe that a queer pedagogical perspective was also fruitful in attending to the data analysis. hooks (1994) draws and expands on Freire’s notion of critical consciousness.

Talking about how influential Freire was to her teaching philosophy, she combines his approach with that of the Vietnamese Buddhist monk Thick Nhat Hanh who focuses on the teacher as healer as well. This holistic approach, which she terms “self-actualization,” she argues, will allow teachers to “be better able to create pedagogical practices that engage students, providing them with ways of knowing that enhance their capacity to live fully and deeply” (p. 22). This approach to criticality, for one thing, takes into account the body that is so important to trans and queer of color theorists. It troubles the mind body binary to understand critical consciousness as being about both.
As I mentioned in the introduction, it is important to note that I did not view students’ critical consciousness as a linear process, whereby one starts in the dark, so to speak, and moves to some ‘woke’ endpoint. Instead, I used the framing from hooks and Freire to understand students as coming from multiple places based on their identities and lived experiences. The goal of the course was not necessarily to move students from point A to point B, although the course did make critical analysis one of its goals. Instead, I understood the course as giving students the opportunity to engage with and respond to critical perspectives as presented in the course readings/podcasts/videos/etc., acknowledging that some students have already had quite a bit of contact with critical perspectives while others may have not. I also understood this standpoint as applied to teachers and classrooms. According to Alexander and Wallace (2009), “there are a wide range of contributions that can be made by teachers, theorists, and researchers” (p. 316). As a teacher, you are not either taking up queer perspectives or leaving them out; similarly, criticality is not either present or absent in student writing. Therefore, one aspect of the data analysis examined places where students (as well as myself) took up, resisted, left out, embraced, rejected, leaned into (Staley & Leonardi, 2016), criticized, touched on, skirted around, and problematized critical perspectives in writing and in class discussion.

Because I did not view students’ critical consciousness as fixed or all in the same place, analyzing the day-to-day interaction in addition to more formal writing assignments felt important. In viewing student critical consciousness as on a spectrum, looking at the everyday writing assignments that they turned in during each class period, as well as students’ speech during class, helped me to understand the trajectory of student consciousness, and not just see it as something fixed in time. In much the same way that Blackburn (2002, 2003) uses literacy performances, I examined repeat performances that students made throughout the course of the
semester to understand how it painted a picture of their critical approaches to the content over the course of the whole semester; this approach was most present in my analysis of student free writing activity.

I used a fine-grained analysis that looked at students’ engagement with course concepts as well as how it impacted their critical consciousness. I did not attempt to label student writing as either exhibiting critical perspectives or not. So things that I did look for in the student written and audio recorded data include shifting perspectives over the course of the semester. For instance, I read for instances in which students framed their school experiences or the experiences of other students in the same way throughout the course of the semester. In identifying such instances, I was not looking for students to end up anywhere in particular, or that I counted students as lacking critical consciousness if their perspectives do not really shift. And indeed, unsurprisingly students took up the material in a variety of different ways and to different extents. They frequently linked their understanding of the course material to their own experiences. As a result, I began to notice where students indicated thinking differently about themselves, their classmates, and the histories and practices of schooling based on the course material. This led to my highlighting the ways that students framed their own relationships to education in relation to the course readings in my findings chapters, particularly Chapter Five and Six. This is not to say that I sought out places that students agreed/disagreed with the readings, but rather where students took insights from the readings and used them to make sense of their own experiences. Students did not necessarily take up ideas in ways that I expected or wanted at the outset – after all, what I wanted, my goals, were somewhat tangential to the student experience.
I read student work as well as listened to any audio recorded data from the class and highlighted passages that reflected students’ thinking about the concepts discussed above. Using spreadsheets, I collected portions of student writing and transcribed student audio that I believed indicate students outwardly reflecting on the course content through this critically conscious lens and grouped them together to highlight my understanding of student expression across that individual student’s writing or speech. While there was a degree of inductive coding to this approach (Li, Marquart, & Zercher, 2000) because I had already identified that critical consciousness was something that I wanted to focus on for the study, specific codes within this larger umbrella were largely in vivo as they will emerged from trends in the data. I added student quotes and data to a large Excel document organized by student pseudonyms in order to more easily trace students’ ideas across writing assignments.

The Excel document I created and used for analysis had student data organized by pseudonym, and then included columns for direct quotes from student writing or transcribed audio, the type of work that the quote came from, drop-down menus for the codes I assigned to these pieces of data, and then a final cell for my mini-memos and initial analyses on individual pieces of data. There was a drop-down option for student critical consciousness (as discussed in this section) as well as columns for the different codes that I discuss in the sections below. After grouping these codes by student pseudonym and also by type of work (audio, free write, Reading Leaders project, etc.), I began to write larger memos that expanded on the initial analysis and highlighted themes either within the written work of an individual student or within one assignment across multiple students. Grouping student data in this way is also how I began to choose students for the two case studies presented in Chapter Six.
Literacy and Pedagogical Performances

I focused on a few different things as I analyzed performances throughout the course of the semester. The first were the ways in which students perform their identities in the course. I believe that, while this comes from a variety of social factors, a large contributor to how students perform the identity of students in the classroom has to do with expectations from the instructor. According to Waite (2017), the performances that we expect from students, specifically in terms of class participation, are shaped in large part by the syllabus and by our expectations as instructors. In this course, I examined the ways that I set boundaries for students’ identity (namely, what identity students perform as an ‘A-student,’ ‘disruptive student,’ etc.) and tried to challenge those boundaries to include more holistic ways of understanding student participation and contribution. My primary analysis for this comes in Chapter Four. While I occasionally drew on student physical participation as I described in my audio memos, this was quite limited given the lack of video recording. In other words, physical movement of the students and myself was not a main focus of the data analysis, but I did make note of physical interactions that seemed important to me in the class that day, or when students themselves mentioned the physical aspect of the classroom.

I also focused on how students constructed their own identity and the world around them in their writing using Blackburn’s (2002, 2003) idea of literacy performances. As discussed in the literature review, “If literacy is conceived of as a series of performances in which people read and write words and worlds, then any one performance is situated among innumerable other performances, each of which is both similar to and different from all of the others, both confirming and disrupting them” (2003, p. 469). I used this lens mainly to focus on the free writing projects that students produced every class period. In personal correspondence with the
author, she suggested that the everyday writing that students do on a repetitive basis is a natural fit for examining literacy performances (rather than events or practices) because I was able to trace the repetition of moves over time. In these free writing assignments, I focused on the ways that students situated themselves in relation to the course content, particularly in regard to their identity and the social contexts of education. I think that McRuer’s (2004) idea about the composing body and Miller’s (1998) idea of identity fracturing discourses can be useful in this regard. I read student work for words, phrases, stories, or themes that incorporated students’ understandings of their own identities in relation to their education. So much of the course focused on learning about ‘other’ students’ experiences, so for this portion of the data analysis I highlighted the ways that students situated themselves in their education or saw themselves implicated in what they are learning. I was especially interested in how students frame their own identities in relation to student identities and experiences that they read about in the course content. These foci added to the Excel document as an additional drop-down code option to group student framing of their own identities. As with most aspects of my plan for this course, there were some significant changes to the free writing assignment after the move to online learning that disrupted this neat plan somewhat. While I will discuss this in more detail in Chapter Four, the literacy performances that I traced for two students were mainly focused on the first half of the semester before we went online.

The final focus was looking at my own performance as the instructor. Teachers are always also performing their identity in front of their students (Alexander, B., 2005; Kedley, 2015; Waite, 2017). In looking at the performance of my own identity in the classroom, I tried to think about the ways that my own performance of instructor contributed to the classroom environment. Additionally, what did it mean for me as a biracial educator to teach a course on
educational diversity at a PWI in a white body? What performances do I enact with my identity in my body? One aspect of my identity that came up a lot (and that I discuss in Chapter Six) is my disability and how this helped me to illustrate the point that we can occupy both privileged and oppressed subject positions simultaneously. This is coupled with the fact that my invisible disability does not usually draw disdain from students in the way that more visible marginalized subject positions do. To borrow Kedley’s (2015) approach, how can I “identify, question and disrupt the subtleties of heteronorms as [I myself] perpetuate them in the everyday spaces of schools” (p. 366)? These are questions that I attempted to tackle, specifically in the audio recordings of my own teaching (and learning) in the classroom and in my planning for the course.

This involved analyzing the audio recordings in class regarding how I positioned myself in conjunction with my memos where I attempted to immediately make sense of my own performance in the course. This included places where I explicitly situated myself within the context of the course readings, for example with direct ‘I’ statements, or where I introduced my own experiences with education without explicitly naming them as my own experience. This also included highlighting the moments and classroom interactions where I explicitly identified my performance in the class as successful as a teacher and where I expressed disappointment with my handling of the classroom, sometimes directly to students. This process was done quite a bit less formally than the Excel documents, as I primarily used memos I wrote about myself and the class to identify in the moment themes that I wanted to return to in the data analysis.

**Places Where Teaching and Learning Fail**

Another important focus for this analysis, based on the body of queer literacy and queer methodology, was focusing on places where learning or teaching fail in the data. Before I get
into the implications of queering failure for my study, some examples may help. I have already discussed the queer approach to failure as proposed by Halberstam (2011) and Waite (2017). Returning to Waite (2017), queer pedagogy “involves my inevitable and deeply necessary failure” (p. 23). So what did this look like for data analysis? Quinlivan (2013) provides one example; initially beginning their analysis by looking for one set of themes, Quinlivan switched to a new viewpoint to foreground that “attending more closely to my affective disappointments makes uncomfortably explicit my investment in the study as an emancipatory success story. Making explicit such conundrums can engage more fully with the contradictory nature of researching queerly in schools” (p. S61). Their analysis initially understood the classroom silences as failures of queer pedagogy, but in reframing the analysis, they came to understand that the silences did not necessarily mean failure, or that failure was not always bad. This led me to focus primarily on times when I feel like the classroom experience had failed in some way (as it would be very difficult to get this experience from the student perspective). I revisited my memos and fieldnotes to identify moments in the class that I was dissatisfied with; although to be honest, my bodily reactions to such moments meant that I did not really have to sit down and think too much about the experiences from the course I wanted to focus on. Then, I revisited the audio recordings of the course for those moments, pulling those interactions I identified into a document that allowed me to look at them together. I looked at these data sources together to try to rethink how the moments counted as failure and then wrote reflections about those moments related to some of the following lines of inquiry: Why did I initially express displeasure with the interaction? Is there something that I would do differently if a similar situation happened again? What did the students potentially get out of the interaction? What did I potentially get out of the interaction that I may have ignored the first time?
Similar to the idea of failure is the idea of discomfort. Kumashiro (2001b) and Staley and Leonardi (2016) argue that discomfort is a central part of anti-oppressive pedagogy, and not something to be avoided: “discomfort importantly shaped how some preservice teachers responded to the curriculum—that is, by resisting discomfort altogether. Others, though, were willing to move toward discomfort … we refer to that coming toward as a deliberate move to lean in” (Staley & Leonardi, 2016, p. 210). Kumashiro (2001b), in addition to educational approaches that “invite students into crisis, and then help them work through it” (p. 20), also posits an important role for educators’ discomfort. I analyzed the data to focus on places where students expressed discomfort or displeasure with the course content, because these moments helped to highlight the kinds of things that students were not able to bear the knowledge of (Luhmann, 1998). This process was not difficult; many students in the course were quite forthcoming with their expressions of discomfort. It might be easy to view moments where students resisted knowledge or where students expressed deep discomfort with something as moments of failure. I discuss the feelings of this initial response in Chapter Six. However, using discomfort as an anti-oppressive pedagogical move can instead open up ways of understanding how students are interacting with the data. So dealing with moments in student writing or speech where they expressly highlighted their discomfort or resistance was a main focus of this research. Student discomfort with the course material was usually most clear in their writing. Therefore, I focused on places where students either explicitly stated that they were made uncomfortable with something, or where it was heavily implied. I was also interested in how I attempted in the course to support students in working with this discomfort, while not necessarily removing the discomfort. Students tended to frame discomfort both positively and negatively: on the one hand, relating how they had a hard time with a concept, but it helped them think about schooling
differently, and on the other hand, arguing that some topic was inappropriate for the class. Both of these markers were important to understanding how students made sense of the perspectives in the course, and what they potentially learned from the discomfort that they experienced. These moments that students highlighted as uncomfortable were grouped together and added to the Excel sheet. These codes all worked together in some ways, as moments that students identified as uncomfortable also played into their literacy performances over time; moments that students labeled as uncomfortable were also likely to make me uncomfortable as well.

Returning to the idea of resisting either/or questions, resisting viewing lessons as either success or failure (and the good/bad hierarchy that comes with it) was important to the data. One way that I saw role of discomfort playing out was in the Reading Leaders assignment where I (somewhat) relinquished control of the classroom. As an anxious person, I tended to plan lessons in increments: we’ll do small groups for 10 minutes, then come back as a large group for 15 minutes, and then on to the next activity! While I felt more comfortable going into the classroom with this kind of planning, it often left students lacking control over their learning. I feel that Kumashiro (2002) is almost speaking to me when he writes, “By leaving little room for what is uncontrollable and unknowable in education … my preparation also left little room for addressing ways that learning can be unexpectedly difficult, discomforting, and even emotional” (p. 7). But what happened when my lessons did not follow this structure? What happened when one of the students took the discussion somewhere else completely? I discuss some instances of this and my (imperfect) responses in Chapters Five and Six. A focus on discomfort and where planning breaks down can addressed some of these questions, and what they might have meant for me and the students in my course. This focus on discomfort in the data analysis of my own work differed somewhat from my data analysis of student discomfort. Similar to my discussion
about how I identified certain classroom interactions as unsuccessful, my memos also frequently identified moments where I felt discomfort in the classroom. I was also able to hear my own discomfort by listening to my own speech in the class itself. Thinking about why I am uncomfortable with course content or course interactions was a main focus, as well as moments where I allowed the students in the course more control over the direction of the course as well as times where I restricted the class. Either end of this spectrum is not necessarily better than the other but it was important for me to reflect on why I chose who exhibited control over the classroom in which moments. My Excel document database of these moments allowed me to look at the data over time and reflect on them.

**Disrupting Binaries**

One important binary that I attempted to disrupt in this process was that between student and teacher, and also participant and researcher. Cruz (2011) defines “resistance researchers” as researchers who “refuse to collaborate on the side of power” and who “recognize the differing levels of disruption that may happen when we look at our work from the inside-out, when we re-focus our attention not ‘on’ or ‘at’ subjects, but ‘with’ and ‘from’ them” (p. 549). Data analysis and course design that does not collaborate with power was crucial to this study. I considered myself the primary participant under study in that a significant focus of this research, mainly in Chapter Four, but also throughout the findings, was on the self-study aspect of the course design (although this is not to say that the power hierarchy was completely erased, as I will show).

I also saw the us/them binary acting out in the course around the unit on the social contexts of education. One of my biggest struggles with the class, historically, has been getting students to move away from the idea that they are privileged and the ‘other’ (queer/of color/disabled) is disadvantaged. When working with teacher educators, Kumashiro (2002) notes
that some of his students “equated [addressing issues of equity] with teaching about ‘minorities’ and the disadvantaged in society … learning about the Other helps students see the self in the Other and, thus, does not change how they see themselves” (p. 3). This meant reading the data closely for the disorder of us/them binaries and the potential attempts to disrupt that binary by students or myself. By asking questions of the data that resist binaries, as well as focusing on sites of failure, this research moved itself away from traditional data analysis. One focus analyzed places and spaces in the classroom that pushed against binaries, both in terms of everyone involved in the study, as well as the topics in the course.

While I did not consider the students to be co-authors or co-researchers, I do value disrupting the formation of knowledge. Just as I hope to build a queer and critical pedagogical space where I worked to disrupt the hierarchy in the “teacher-student contradiction” (Freire, 1970, p. 72), I viewed data analysis in the similar way. This is the main function that I saw the interview performing. Frequently in the course, I noticed concepts that students wrote about coming up in class discussion, which allowed the students and myself to flesh out sometimes off-hand comments in more detail in person. The interview that I conducted with a student from my case study served a similar function, yet more directly. I approached the interview with questions and understandings that I had about this student’s data and asked him to reflect on these writing moves. In this way, the data analysis was shaped by the student’s own understanding of his moves in class. In fact, students’ understanding of their moves was an integral part of the data analysis in understanding how students performed their identity as well as their critical engagement with the course concepts.

After interviews and after I had written findings about specific students, I conducted member checking with the participants of this study. I shared the analyses of student writing and
speech with the individual students who were quoted in the reports of this research. The goal of sharing results with participants was to check that they were comfortable with the interpretation of their participation in class. I did not want to publish analyses of students that they themselves did not agree with. I believe that these kinds of interactions can be a similar kind of ongoing dialogue to the student who chose to participate in interviews. In this way, the process felt like a back and forth between my interpretation of student writing, student response to my interpretation, and my re-interpretation. Similar to the way that I viewed student writing as never reaching a final endpoint, I do not believe that my own analysis will reach a final endpoint, but rather will be submitted at some point.

A contradiction I also addressed in terms of my own teaching (and performance as teacher) was the dichotomy between my personal goals and the institutional goals in relation to the course. As I mentioned previously, the course under study fulfilled one of the undergraduate requirements for graduation, hence its popularity. However, there is always tension between a queer pedagogy and the institution of education. According to Rhodes (2014), “Pedagogy is a heterosexed political indoctrination in service of a heterosexed institutional imperative.” As a part of this colonial and heterosexed institution, I as an educator must grapple with the implications of this setting. Instead of viewing the institutions as something that I am inherently against – a position that I view as hypocritical at best, as I am devoting considerable time to maintaining the institution of higher education – I instead thought about disrupting the binary between myself and the institution how to trouble the inherent inequity in the system. My analysis on this front is most present in Chapter Four. I now turn to my findings chapter where I will discuss my own pedagogical commitments and strategies and how students responded to those designed choices.
CHAPTER IV

COURSE PLANNING AND (RE)PLANNING:
QUEER PEDAGOGIES DESIGNS AND PANDEMIC INTERRUPTIONS

This chapter discusses the course design process and my attempts to bring a queer literacies focus into my university required diversity course. I primarily address my first research question: What happens when a college instructor applies a queer literacy lens to the design and teaching of a required diversity course and its assignments? In what follows, I share the findings from my analysis of the changing iterations of the course material over time, with a central focus on the syllabus and three of the assignments that students were required to complete, namely in-class free writing, the Social Context Journal, and serving as a reading leader. While there will be some degree of student material analyzed in this chapter (after all, it is impossible to cleanly separate the teacher from the student), this chapter’s main focus is my self-study of my moves as the instructor. The results of my close analysis of student-centered data will follow in Chapters Five and Six. Through illustrating my design and implementation of my attempts at queer literacies and queer pedagogies in curriculum and instruction, this chapter provides a lens through which to make sense of student writing, my response to this writing, and students’ perspectives on the course.

I could not have predicted as I was designing the course that the class would be shifted to remote learning in March of 2020 due to the outbreak of Covid-19 in the United States. This radical alteration pertained centrally to my design-focused research questions and, of course,
became integrated into how I approached analyzing and writing this chapter. Therefore, I provide some of that context here. In the planning stages during the Fall 2019 semester and the beginning of the Spring 2020 semester, I imagined the course (as in all previous iterations) would be conducted in person. After my university’s campus was closed, all course sessions in April and May 2020 were conducted remotely. The major turn students and I navigated in Spring 2020 required me to make quick shifts in my planning of the course, as well as changed the classroom environment and assignments that students submitted. I still valued the queer and critical pedagogies as integral to my class and implemented them in the new synchronous, remote format. However, a global pandemic obviously brought new challenges to the classroom community, including students moving to different time zones, students not having reliable access to internet, both the students and I being intensely focused on the threat to our health and the safety of our families, as well as adjusting to what was, for many of us, a brand-new way of learning. As a result, I did not attempt to treat the rest of the semester as ‘business as usual.’ I will discuss some of the specific changes I made to the class to ensure it was responsive and humane to the entire classroom community (including myself). My primary goal in including the impacts of the pandemic in this chapter is to center my attempts to preserve the queer and critical community that I had been building in the classroom as we switched to a remote format, while also holding space for the new and traumatic reality that Covid-19 brought to the university.

**Description of the Course**

As context for this chapter’s analysis, some of the central goals for the course are important. According to the syllabus, one goal of the course was “to develop our own critical and thoughtful views about education in the United States” and “Articulate your own informed position on the goals and purpose of education, as well as understand and engage with other
positions that you may or may not agree with.” Thinking about these goals from a queer pedagogical standpoint, my goal in relation to the course was not to have students radically change their thinking during one semester. Such a goal would be unrealistic, and, from a decolonizing standpoint, attempts to radically alter the student in rather than the student’s work can be somewhat problematic (Bawarshi & Pelkowski, 1999). My goal, as supported by my queer framework, was to support students in thinking and reading critically about aspects of school and identities of students (including their own), as well as questioning which narratives are normalized and which are othered.

Taking up some level of critical perspective is important, even if it does not end up changing students’ perspectives. As stated previously, I wanted to value the multiple places that students came from in their critical journey. While not necessarily a queer approach, Freire and Macedo (1987) ask, “how to deal with the individual consciousness as emphasized in an emancipatory literacy when this consciousness may be at odds with the collective social consciousness” (p. 48). Much of the learning in the course asked students to discard long held assumptions, for example the idea that the U.S. school system functions as a meritocracy. Shifts on this scale can be difficult for students, if not impossible, over the course of one semester. However, I argue in this research that a queer pedagogical approach can help educators reflect on their own engagement with critical consciousness as well as value students wherever they may be on this spectrum.

Generally, the course focused on three main contexts of education. One topic is the philosophical contexts of education. In Unit one, students read about and discussed different traditions of education, namely the traditional philosophy, the progressive philosophy, and the critical philosophy. A second topic was the social contexts of education. In Unit two, students
read about how different identities (e.g., race, gender, sexual orientation, social class, ability, language, etc.) impact students’ experiences in schools. Students were then required to write a paper that reflected on their own experience with education as it relates to the different identities that students hold and the structure of schools. This paper in the class under study was called “Social Contexts Journaling.” The third unit dealt with the political contexts of education. In Unit three students read about different policies in education, such as tracking, charter schools, school funding, and school segregation. For my course, I also assigned a “Reading Leaders” assignment that asked students to develop a lesson plan and spend 30-45 minutes of one class period leading the class. While the structure of these three topics and many of the assignments were required across all sections, the way that graduate instructors teach these topics, and the specifics of the written assignments are largely up to the individual. One big question remained: how do I as the instructor create conditions for learning that honor the multiple goals of queer pedagogy and literacy? This chapter attempts to identify the moves I made in order to foster these conditions for students.

Queer Approaches to My Syllabus

A Feminist Framework for Syllabi

I was initially inspired to revisit the syllabus after attending a workshop presented by Maya Livio (2019). While I have always been careful about wording in the syllabus, I think that I (and perhaps most instructors) viewed the syllabus largely as a tool to protect myself later in the semester. However, the syllabus is our first interaction with students and viewing the syllabus as a contract sets the tone for the semester as a whole; in a contract framing, students and instructors are at odds, and the syllabus acts as the final word about who is ‘right.’ Livio (2019) discusses the importance of not making the syllabus a document to protect yourself and your
policies, but rather to communicate to students that you are all a part of a classroom community. She uses a feminist lens for syllabus creation that posits the syllabus as the instructor’s first way to express to students the deeply felt beliefs inherent in their pedagogy. For a feminist (and I would add, queer) pedagogy, some of those beliefs include disrupting hierarchies in the university, opening up room for student emotions in the classroom, and discarding overly regulatory language.

After attending Livio’s workshop, I set out to look for more information on making my syllabi less contractual and more feminist/queer. Already armed with Waite’s (2017) suggestions in regard to thinking deeply about the language that we use in our syllabi, I looked for something that addressed the structure of the syllabus as a whole. Bailey (2010), in a similar vein to Livio (2019), discusses her feminist approach to syllabus creation in her praxis class for graduate students where she creates two syllabi: one which she calls the “conventional” syllabus and the second called “The Other Syllabus” (p. 141). The first syllabus lists due dates, objectives, assignments, and course policies. She writes that the “reason for having two syllabi” is to “make visible some of the forces shaping instructors’ choices in what might otherwise appear to be an individually-determined, authoritative, seamless, objective course syllabus and curriculum” (Bailey, 2010, p. 143). The “Other” syllabus is filled with questions and uncertainties that highlight how difficult teaching is. For example, some topics on the “Other syllabus” include “Who Does Your Curriculum Think You Are?” (p. 143) and “the question of whether a truly inclusive curricula is possible and what it might look like in an inherently unequal University and social structure” (p. 145). While I do not completely understand why these two documents need to be rigidly separate, I read Bailey’s attention to the syllabus and what it suggests about our relationship to students as another way of grappling with the inherent tensions involved in
the challenging task of taking a feminist (or queer) approach to an ultimately colonial and hierarchical institution (Rhodes, 2014). The syllabus, a document produced by the university to compel students to adhere to specific classroom rules and ultimately ‘protect’ the instructor when conflict arises, is just one example of ways that universities reinforce dominant forms of learning. Bailey, in holding up the “Other” syllabus beside the institutional one, pushes against these tendencies. Another way to approach the feminist syllabus is presented by Ludlow (2004) who includes a student “Bill of Rights” that outlines the rights and responsibilities of both students as well as instructors. She notes that her students appreciate the Bill of Rights because it makes it clear what her responsibilities as the instructor are, as well. In both Bailey’s and Ludlow’s document, making your pedagogical choices and responsibilities transparent for students is an integral part of a feminist practice.

As I created (and revised) the syllabus as well as assignment requirements for students, I wanted to keep two things in mind. First, what these documents conveyed about my values and what kinds of performances I valued from students in the class (Waite, 2017). Second, how I could reframe the syllabus as a feminist document that holds students in classroom community with me (Bailey, 2010; Livio, 2019). While I do not know if I have ultimately been successful in truly disrupting the ‘syllabus as contract’ mentality (after all, it is quite deeply ingrained), I hope that the discussion I share below, chronicling my analysis of the reflections I undertook throughout the course of the semester, provides insight into my values as a queer literacies focused educator.

**Expectations around Participation**

To understand my expectations on student participation (and what that says about my construction of a ‘good’ and ‘productive’ student), I will trace some of the changes in my syllabi
statements over the course of my teaching this diversity requirement, especially the participation component. I include two semesters of teaching this diversity course prior to my design of the research study, the pilot study semester, and finally the semester under study in my dissertation. Across these syllabi, I looked mainly at how I was asking students to perform and how I was positioning the performance of a ‘successful’ student.

Before the semester started, my first goal in applying a queer literacies framework involved the syllabus, as this is the first interaction I would have with students. In my first two semesters teaching, I framed participation as vocal engagement, with a specific emphasis on preventing microaggressions (Sue, 2010) in the class. The first half of the “Class Expectations and Policies” statement starts off with a firm stand against bigoted language in class. I wrote in one paragraph that students should feel comfortable to “share [their] opinions with [their] classmates, but I will not tolerate language or discussions that question the humanity of other individuals or groups of people; we have no space for disruptive racist, sexist, classist, homophobic, or transphobic language.” It is worth noting that the above statement on not tolerating “disruptive” harassment was the only portion of the syllabus that was underlined.¹ This phrasing also did not change much throughout the different iterations of my syllabus. I felt a great deal of concern in structuring the class so that the learning of students who were not familiar with oppression in the U.S. school system did not do their learning on the backs of students who were all too familiar. To quote from Delpit (1988), “Those with power are frequently least aware of … its existence. Those with less power are often most aware of its existence” (p. 282). Making sure that learning is not happening at the expense of marginalized

¹ I am putting aside for the moment that using underlining as a way to emphasize something does not follow Universal Design principles, which I did not realize at the time. I put a lot of emphasis on adhering to Universal Design, but “failed” in this case.
students has always been my goal in the course, especially considering that my literature review highlighted that sometimes white students have been found to learn more in required diversity courses (Bowman, 2010; Cole, et al., 2011).

The only change in this participation statement from my first semester teaching the course to the following semester was that I added the sentence: “You may read more about the university policy on what constitutes disruptive behavior [here],” with a link that sent students to the policy on disruptive classroom behavior. I clearly remember adding this statement at the time after having responded to several hateful comments in my first semester teaching, and so I shifted this statement to redirect students to the university policy on disruptive behavior. In revisiting this portion of the syllabus, it was very clear that I was positioning this section of the syllabus as a protective document where I could be justified in responding to student comments by the university policy on “disruptive” behavior. As I was designing material for the study semesters, I realized that this is not the attitude that I wanted to have towards students even before the class started. Again, the syllabus felt like a contract rather than a set of community guidelines for productive dialogue. I have since removed this phrasing.

My decision to revise language that I interpret as placing burdens on students who experience systemic oppression was not easy. It involved grappling not just with contractual framings, but also with my ideas about what performance I was expecting from students who are also challenging their own long-held assumptions in important ways. In other words, I was concerned that my original, adamant language puts a much lower threshold on the kinds of thoughts students are able to bring to class. In a commitment to a justice-oriented classroom, students making intentionally hateful comments is not something that I would tolerate and is not a ‘performance’ that I would encourage. However, I am concerned about how to create spaces of
generous dialogue and learning for students who are grappling with some of these ideas, and not always using ‘appropriate’ language to convey these struggles. Are these students disruptive? Is their complete silence related to their developing thinking better than imperfect language or questions? As hooks (2003) writes, “People often tell me that they do not share openly and candidly their thoughts about white-supremacist thought and racism for fear that they will say the wrong thing” and that the fear behind this silence is a “belief that saying the wrong thing will generate conflict” (p. 27-28). I also see the above as tied into the idea of the classroom as a contentious space rather than a safe space, and I believe that this silence can lead to these beliefs going unexamined. I see it as a queering move to take out the contractual language while still holding the commitment behind the language. I also continued to work with other ways to convey this commitment.

In this early version of the syllabus, the remainder of this paragraph continued to focus on the “space for discussion and debate” that I hoped to create in this class, while also “protecting the safety of individual students.” The next paragraph discussed how to prepare for class as well as the requirement for speaking in class. This paragraph stated, “You should come to class having read the assigned material for that day and prepared to talk about them. Much of this class will revolve around discussion, which will not be possible if we have not completed the readings.” While there was no graded requirement for speaking in class these two semesters, the syllabus very clearly framed successful participation in the class as being vocal. I highlighted for students that being prepared for class means “having read the assigned material … and prepared to talk about them” [emphasis added]. These requirements did not leave space for students who have read the assigned material but may never feel comfortable talking about it in a large group setting. This emphasis on the discursive nature of the course reveals the tension between my
teaching style, which requires discussion and collaboration amongst students to complement my relatively little directive teaching, and what kinds of students such an approach may leave out of the process or may alienate with this requirement.

Emphasis on vocal participation is highlighted by Waite (2017), who writes, “how can I describe the ways [a quiet student] contributed? … and of course why, might I have failed to recognize his contribution” (p. 74-75). Feeling particularly implicated in this point, I wrote a memo prior to my pilot study about what I valued in the class to unpack some of these assumptions about participation:

I value students having done the reading or prep work before coming to class … In fact, that was one of my favorite things about one of the most difficult students I have had: they came to class always having read (although there is a real difference between having read everything and having an open mind to the ideas). So I actually think in this class that having an open mind to the ideas is equally important as having read them in the first place. So there’s like a difference between ‘reading’ and reading if you get me … on the one hand, I get that participation in the form of talking out loud is difficult for a lot of students, but in the context of this class, it’s really hard for it to go anywhere if there isn’t that group of people, because it’s so discussion based. I think that’s maybe why writing is also so important to this, because the little brainstorming/free writing stuff can give me a decent idea of what students are thinking about the content even if they don’t necessarily speak up in class. (Memo, 8.11.2019)

In writing this memo I identified some important strands. First, I did not actually only want students to do the reading. I wanted them to do the reading with an open mind to what the reading is saying. The second thing I came up against was that the class breaks down if no one
decides to speak up. However, I think in writing out the memo, I was placing too much emphasis on encouraging students to talk. The odds of having a class where no one is comfortable talking in class is quite small (and has in fact never happened to me). So, I decided to rewrite the syllabus to encourage multiple forms of genuine engagement with the material. The syllabus wording about participation in both the pilot and study semesters read:

First and foremost, this class is sustained by your active participation as a member of the classroom community. What does active participation look like, you might ask. For some of you, active participation may mean contributing to the whole group discussion; it may mean contributing to small group discussion; it may involve active listening and writing about your ideas that then will get shared with me. However, at the end of the day, this class is not lecture based. Learning in this class primarily happens in your interactions with your peers and with me … This class necessitates reading and thinking about assigned material critically and carefully. My aim is to provide you with perspectives about educational issues that are not usually presented in mainstream discussion about education. In other words, I want to disrupt what Chimamanda Adichie might call the “Single Story” we tell about education.² I don’t ask that you agree with all the texts and arguments we will read; I do ask that you work hard to read and understand each of them. You should come to class having read/listened to the assigned materials for that day and prepared to talk about them. Much of this class will revolve around discussion, which will not be possible if we have not completed the assignments.

² For many semesters, I have opened the class on the first day by watching Chimamanda Adichie’s “Danger of a Single Story” TED Talk. However, given her problematic comments on the trans* community in a recent interview (Allardice, 2020), I will be removing her work completely from future semesters, and therefore the syllabus.
You will notice a few things. First, I expanded what I expect from the class in terms of “active participation” to include other forms of engagement with the materials. I did notice upon analyzing the syllabus for this chapter that I retained the phrasing about “being prepared to talk about” the materials, so I clearly was not perfect in this endeavor. Expectations around talking in class were clearly something that I was having a hard time breaking away from, as I went through the syllabus to specifically make changes around singular definitions of participation, and yet somehow always left this sentence intact. I also expanded what I expected from students about having read the materials. For example, instead of asking that students have merely read the material before coming to class, I tried to emphasize that they “work hard to … understand” the material, even if they do not agree with it. I tried to expand on this idea in the class discussion structure as well, as we began by talking about why the author might take this position before we started talking about what the potential criticisms might be for a reading.

This reworking of active participation became especially important once the class moved to remote, synchronous learning. One thing that quickly became apparent in video conference rooms is that I heard a lot from students who had seemed comfortable participating verbally when we were in person. I heard even less from the more introverted students, probably because of the added awkwardness of online classes. Measuring how much students were participating verbally would have been much more inequitable in this new environment. Additionally, several students in the class were no longer able to participate in the class synchronously because of circumstances outside their control (new time zones, lack of internet at their new living space, etc.), and so continuing to hold these students to verbal participation standards would have been impossible if I were to be responsive to their needs and circumstances. For students who could not be involved in class time, I set up asynchronous discussion boards so that they could discuss
with each other the same discussion questions that were being used in the synchronous group. These students also continued to do Free Writes (which will be discussed later in this chapter), and so I was able to continue a written dialogue with them about their ideas. For the synchronous students, we did a lot more small-group discussions in breakout rooms because my sense was that more folks were able to have their ideas heard in that format. I would then usually ask one person from each group to share out to the whole class (for verbal participation) and we also created more deliverables together, like study sheets, definitions, or PowerPoint slides. Finally, the chat box became a fruitful tool for hearing from students who were not participating verbally. Often, ideas that were presented in the chat would migrate into the verbal discussion, or vice versa.

This tension around what participation looks like in a queered classroom and how to measure it continued to migrate into other aspects of the syllabus, the assignments, and the classroom interaction. Specific to participation, I noticed that I did a significant amount of back and forth across these four semesters on whether to grade participation. I think the fact that grades for participation in my syllabus assignments changed so much – participation was not graded; then it was graded, but not defined; then graded and defined; then finally not graded at all – makes it pretty clear that I was struggling not only with how to gauge/grade “active participation” (which is a term I continuously used) but also what this kind of participation even looks like. In the following chapters, I will examine how this relationship between the syllabus and the actual class interactions (specifically in the form of the Reading Leaders assignment) continued to highlight the tension between my role as part of the class community and also the inescapable hierarchy in higher education (Ellsworth, 1989). This tension impacts what kinds of participation were possible.
My final version in the study semester of the “Class Expectations and Policies” section also included a discussion of what safety looks like in the classroom: “As your instructor, I will work hard to foster a space for discussion and debate in this class that values the opinions of individual students while protecting the safety of individual students. I need your help in this endeavor.” This reflected some of the same tensions examined by Arao and Clemens (2013) and Ludlow (2004) around the inability to make the classroom a truly safe space for all students while also pushing students on their thinking. Ludlow (2004) discusses the difference between a safe space and a contested space in the required diversity course that she teaches, writing that “Students who identify with privileged groups often perceive a threat to privilege and suspension of safety in the very construction of feminist/diversity classes” (p. 41). Therefore, it is somewhat impossible to create a truly safe space for everyone in the classroom because there is significant discomfort in learning about privilege. After failing to provide a truly safe space, Ludlow instead develops a pedagogy of “contested [space] … that is not necessarily defined by conflict, but which includes room for conflict” (p. 47). While my syllabus does not use this exact phrasing, during the first day of class of my study semester, I told students in class that they would most likely be made uncomfortable in the class and that a “safe space” was not completely possible. I also used the phrasing of contested spaces during this first class-period (field notes, 1.14.20). I have spent a lot of time in my life trying to make all students in the class comfortable, but I have realized that this goal is simply unachievable. Centering the reality of oppression in the United States will make some students uncomfortable. It will be uncomfortable for students to confront their privileges. Focusing on oppression also holds risk for marginalized students for very different reasons, as seeing oppression that they themselves experience at the center of the
curriculum can be traumatic. I will discuss how discomfort unfolded throughout the course of the semester in the following chapters.

**Balancing My Goals with Institutional Goals**

The second theme that I found related to the syllabus is in the relationship between my goals as a critical educator and the university’s goals in fulfilling diversity requirements for students. Sometimes, these goals are in conflict. However, simply attempting to answer whether the goals of the university and my goals ‘get along’ or not was not a question I was particularly interested in answering. Instead, I find it more important to my project to unpack the ways that my goals and the university’s goals frame learning about ‘diversity’ and about how such goals played out in the trajectory of the course. To this end, I compared the discourse on the university website and how they describe a required diversity course with my description of the goals of the course and the learning outcomes.

I began this process with a memo on my goals for the course, as I found that, prior to this attempt to sit down and write them out, I had never necessarily broken them down for myself explicitly. According to Waite (2017), “I confess to not always being comfortable … giving grades as a response to how well students might follow [my] parameters,” but despite this contradiction, “I do these quite un-queer tasks in the confines of the institution that disciplines both me and my students” (p. 36). I wanted to think about a way to engage with the two sets of values – those of the institution and my own. In my memo on my own values, I also spent some time writing about the values of the institution:

The goals as far as I can see them are to introduce students to ideas about race, gender, sexuality, etc., in a way that prepares them to work with diverse people in a global world. My understanding of this though is that it is more centered on preparing them for the
workforce. At least, this is how they are selling [the required diversity course] to students. The university sees valuable participation as non-disruptive. It would be students that complete their work in a timely fashion, they come to class, they read. I feel like this expectation matches with really any expectations of a more [traditional] education (which I would argue a University education is). (memo, 8.11.19)

My understanding of the goals of the university are influenced by the description of the required diversity courses from the university website. The description of what counts as a diversity requirement for the general education curriculum first focuses on the economic: the description highlights that a course with this designation will prepare students to live and “work” in a diverse world. The terms “global” and “multicultural” society are used. First and foremost, the goals of the diversity course, in the eyes of the university, are to prepare students for working in an ever-expanding world. Preparing students to work in a diverse environment is very far from my goals for the course.

On the whole, I believe the university’s phrasing about the diversity requirement aligns with the social efficiency pedagogy espoused by Bowles and Gintis (1976). From this perspective, the purpose of college is to prepare students to be workers. The university in which I conducted my study is by no means the only institution to frame their diversity requirement around being a productive worker. In a related analysis I conducted looking at such language across universities, the majority of universities with diversity requirements instead position these courses as promoting an appreciation for cultures other than the students’ own, as well as understanding the history of oppression in the United States and globally (Zabala, in progress). While many universities use the appreciation rhetoric, I strive to move my course beyond

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3 I paraphrase some of the main points here to preserve the anonymity of the institution.
inclusion in order to avoid the “flattening effect” (Alexander & Rhodes, 2014) whereby multicultural courses present students with a message of ‘we are all human.’ In other words, although this move to “appreciation” might seemingly work towards inclusion it ultimately erases (or flattens) the differences among people, and attempts to fit all people into the norm, even where it does not make sense.

One way I drew on curriculum and pedagogy to address this contradiction between critical goals and the flattening effect of the institutional diversity rhetoric was in assigning Joel Spring’s (2009) chapter on the purpose of education. In the chapter, Spring argues that public school is largely a tool to prepare students to be laborers, while also offering some critiques. We read this chapter the first week that we had readings in the pilot study (we had not read the chapter in previous semesters), and students were quick to criticize this approach to education. I think in future iterations of this course, I will also ask students to turn this reading more explicitly toward the goals of this course. I see my understanding of required diversity courses more in alignment with the work of Moses and Chang (2006) in their understanding of affirmative action. Moses and Chang argue that there is a rich philosophical tradition of diversity as an end for education to pursue. Philosophers like Aristotle, John Stewart Mill, and John Dewey have all advanced arguments in favor of diversity. Drawing on Derrick Bell, Moses and Chang caution that “the reliance on the diversity rationale for race-conscious [admissions] policy distracts from the larger issue of social justice” (p. 9). They argue that relying on diversity for diversity’s sake can actually weaken the pursuit of social justice in higher education. Moses (2010) discusses this idea further as she argues for a social justice rationale for race-based admissions. The social justice rationale is a forward-looking, moral justification. It argues that we have a moral obligation, as a just society, to make sure that minoritized groups have access to
higher education. She argues that, while remedial or economic arguments are more often used to justify diversity initiatives such as affirmative action, “[t]he social justice rationale ought to be the heart of the policy” (p. 224). While she is specifically talking about affirmative action in college admissions, I argue that her point is especially relevant to the discussion at hand concerning my course as one that fulfills the university diversity requirement.

I believe that my framing of diversity as social justice issues came through in my framing of the course objectives (and also as I will discuss later, the framing of class discussion itself). While students were given a significant amount of time in class to investigate other aspects of the syllabus in pairs, I always began the class by drawing attention to the guiding questions of the course. A few of the questions that I want to draw attention to here are “what is the relationship between inequality in schools and inequality in society in general?” and “In what ways does public education promote equality? In what ways does it work to increase class, gender, race, etc. disparities? How does education impact the diverse body of students in the US?” and finally “Should education be a force for social justice, or should it limit itself to transferring content into the minds of students? Can content be separated from social contexts?” When I first began teaching this class, these questions were much more binary, leaving no space for any kind of middle ground. My questions were framed with either/or answers: do schools support marginalized students or hurt them? Should education be a force for social justice or not? While some of my questions during my semester under study still rang with some of that framing, I attempted consciously to trouble some of these binary questions with alternatives that pointed to the stickiness of these questions. Rather than thinking about whether schools should tackle social issues, I instead aimed to pivot us into discussing if this separation is even possible. Instead of deciding whether schools harm or help students, I reframed the question to think about the
variety of ways that schools in the U.S. every day do a bit of both. Looking across iterations of the syllabus, I found this reframing was more in line with my framework of queer literacies and social justice frameworks.

One other reason that I think institutional rhetoric often feels separated from our goals as instructors is the somewhat tacked on nature of required syllabi statements. Again, the messaging around these statements is a contractual one to protect the university. I personally cannot remember one instructor in my undergraduate coursework reading the required statements in class. As a way to push against this institutional/interpersonal binary, I reorganized the required course statements so that they were sprinkled throughout the syllabus in the sections that most closely corresponded to them. For example, under the broader heading “Attendance,” after I talked about my attendance policy for the course, a subheading included the required text for the university policy on religious holidays. With these changes, I hoped to both disrupt the purpose of the course according to the university, as well as challenge the divide between the instructor’s policies and the university policies – which, to be fair, were often fairly similar to my own, just worded more coldly.

**Assignments Shifting Over Time**

I will now turn to the evolution of three of the major assignments I designed for the course: the weekly Free Writes, the Social Contexts Journaling, and the Reading Leaders project. When I turn to analyzing student literacy work over the course of the semester, it is the outcomes of these three assignments on which I will focus. Apart from perhaps the Reading Leaders

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4 I implemented this change after clearance from the faculty member who oversees these education courses that such a framing was still in accordance with university policy.

5 To be fair, calling this “my attendance policy” is somewhat misleading as this is a School of Education attendance policy – so a smaller institutional policy under a larger one. It is presented as “my” attendance policy to students.
assignment, one thing that struck me is how much these assignments have changed over the
course of the years as I have attempted to shift the class from a more traditional exploration of
difference into a space where students can question norms and structures. For the free writes, I
mainly intended to design a space for literacy performances (Blackburn, 2002; 2003), as students
return to the same format every week throughout the course of the semester (a close analysis of
this process will come in Chapter Five). As a former college composition instructor, I also
believe strongly in making written reflection a part of student practice throughout the course of
the semester. The Social Contexts Journaling was designed around making writing into more of a
conversation, which is frequently how I framed the assignment to students. Finally, the Reading
Leaders project was my attempt to give students more control over the direction and activities in
the course. I will now discuss the changes in these assignments over time, and also how I see
them in relation to my theoretical underpinnings.

Free Writing

I have had some version of weekly free writing since the very first time that I taught the
course. My initial assignment, entitled Reading Responses, was designed around my experiences
teaching college freshman writing. This assignment gave students three boxes to fill out about
each reading for the course, asking them to generate a discussion question about each reading, to
highlight a quote to put into the box marked “agree/resonate,” and to highlight a quote for the
box marked “disagree/questionable.”. One of the motivations behind this assignment was a
positive experience I had had in my own schooling experience with a similar format. On a
practical level, it also served as an assurance that students were reading the assignments at least
closely enough to find a few quotes and generate discussion questions. One immediate issue with
this assignment was the binary agree/disagree quote boxes. I clearly tried to mitigate the binary
framing by adding the terms “resonate” and “questionable,” but the focus was clearly on finding a quote that you like and a quote that you dislike; the students got that unspoken message as the responses to this assignment were almost exclusively framed around liking or disliking the quote. Also, I think that students were immediately able to identify the secondary functions of these Reading Responses as checks that they had done the reading, and as a result they were quite mundane (at least for me as a reader, but I assume also for the students as writers). One thing that I see myself grappling with early on is a way to involve students in the design of the course, as they are asked to generate potential discussion questions. On many occasions, I did use these student generated discussion questions instead of my own. The aspect of these that made them similar to later iterations is that they were completed weekly and so got students into the practice of writing about the material, at least in some way, on a regular basis.

By the next semester, I had already reorganized these into much the same structure that they would take through and including the semesters that I studied the course. During this second semester, they had been renamed Free Writes, and they were now set to be completed in the first five minutes of each class period. This time spent at the beginning of each class period was something that would continue throughout the next three semesters. Again, incorporating writing about their ideas was something that I valued and giving them time in class to write, I found, gave them a jump start to group discussions. I think this switch over to in-class writing time was also part of my realignment around class participation. This time doing writing individually, and then oftentimes shifting immediately after to discussing their free writing with a peer or in small groups, was also part of my transition to viewing participation beyond just verbal interactions. These Free Writing assignments gave students an opportunity to spend time reflecting in class on the course topics and a chance to get their ideas heard (by me, at the very least) even if verbal
participation was not something they were comfortable with. Again, on a nuts-and-bolts level, it gave me a clear cut off for late arrivals, which was an issue I had due to the late hour of the course – after the Free Write portion of the class was over, students were considered late. So again, this assignment had a bit of a regulatory function that is often present in schools (especially for minoritized students) (Annamma, 2015; Burdge, Licona, & Hyemingway, 2014), but that I am uncomfortable with enacting in my own classroom.

As I used Waite’s (2017) framework to think about my construction of the assignment, including my word choice for it and what those conveyed about the value I attached to this assignment, I found it important to analyze my rationale on the assignment document that I presented to students. I wrote that the purpose of this assignment is to “[give] you time at the beginning of class to reflect back on what you read for the week and put some words to your feelings/thoughts about the information you learned before class.” Additionally, I also made it clear for students that the free writes were a way to participate if talking in class was not a way that they were comfortable participating: “if you are more introverted, [this writing time] gives you a chance to get some of your ideas out – participation can look very different for different people.” I also will admit that I saw these Free Write assignments as a ‘low-stakes’ way for students to express their thoughts on paper in a less formal way than a more traditional paper. I think my framing may have come across for some students. However, my conceptualization of low-stakes writing may be very different from theirs. For a student who writes in English as a second (or third) language, is any writing low stakes? To what extent do students view anything with a grade attached to it as low stakes? Education has long served to reinforce the idea that grades are the only way to measure success, and students have received that message (hooks,
2003). In this environment, how low stakes can any assignment that is graded truly be? And from whose perspective?

For the first half of the Spring 2020 semester, these Free Writes were completed in the first ten minutes of class. However, after the class went to remote learning, I changed the requirements so that they were done outside of class time. In a message on Canvas to students, I wrote that the format of the assignment would be changing because “I don’t think it’s necessarily useful to listen to each other write in silence for 10 minutes of each call.” I wonder now about my phrasing there. Yes, perhaps silent writing time on a Zoom call is not traditionally ‘productive work,’ but I am particularly interested in my dismissal of “silent” time as not being “useful” time. As Waite (2013) writes, there is an “illusive and unexamined normativity” (p. 67) around verbal participation in class, in English classrooms specifically (as in Waite’s narrative) but in higher education more generally. But what use does silence have in the classroom? What are the “silent possibilities of a classroom” (p. 69) that are frequently overrun with the speech of students and instructors?

I know at the time that I was thinking specifically about cutting down on the length of time that we would be in an online classroom. I wonder now if I dismissed this kind of silent time together too summarily without stopping to think about what silent time together could buy for us as a community. After all, weren’t we silently writing in person just a week earlier? Is silent writing time on Zoom somehow less “useful” than silent writing time in person? My email to students seems to suggest it was. To borrow Waite’s language, I did not “practice a politics of silence – especially not in the classroom” (p. 64). Even after reworking my syllabus to, I thought, trouble the idea that class discussion was the only active way to participate, even after having read this idea about silence once in Waite’s (2017) book, I still reflexively discarded the silent
moment in class when my goal was to make the classroom time shorter and more manageable. The fact that this part of the class was the first to go still says something important, I think, about my deeply seated values around class time.

**Social Contexts Journaling**

One assignment that is consistent across all sections of the course that I taught is a paper that asked students to reflect on their own identities in relation to their educational experiences. In other sections, this paper is usually referred to as the Educational Autobiography. This assignment was very important to the learning outcomes in the course, as being able to situate our own experiences and identities in what we are learning was important to making connections about inequity in schools. We also see a focus on self-reflection as something that comes up consistently in diversity courses (Chang, 2002; Duffee & Bailey, 1991; Nelson Laird & Engberg, 2011). This assignment was also one that changed quite drastically throughout my time teaching this course. In my first semester teaching, the project was framed as a cross-cultural analysis paper; in the second semester students were asked to construct an educational autobiography. After those first two semesters of teaching, there were ultimately two things that I wanted to change about the assignment to be more in line with my queer literacies principles. First, I wanted the papers to be more of a conversation between me and the students. Second, I wanted students to focus less on how ‘lucky’ they were to have privilege and instead think about how their identities intersect and relate to their experiences in schools, and how those experiences related to students with identities that they did not share.

The first concern that I had was in making the papers more dialogic. In a queer literacies framework, it is impossible to arrive at a ‘final’ draft of a paper because papers can always be
worked on and revisited (McRuer, 2004). So having students turn in one draft of paper that I would then give them feedback on felt very final, and it constructed an artificial finished product where I did not really believe that one exists. Additionally, there is some disagreement in the literature regarding whether or not one course on diversity is enough to change student outcomes in the long term, whether multiple courses can improve these outcomes, or whether students express changes in attitudes towards minoritized groups after the classes are over (Chang, 2002; Hogan & Mallott, 2005; Radloff, 2010). Given that this course is only one semester, I was concerned that having one paper where students were asked to reflect on their own identities was condensing their time to self-reflect even more. Having students revisit the writing and thinking that they were doing over the course of a couple of months gave them the chance to spend time ruminating on their ideas as well as revisit earlier writing based on new things that they have read over the course of the semester. Finally, I was interested in being more in conversation with students about the writing that they were doing, especially in this project. Thinking back to my experience teaching writing, I have found that students engage much more deeply with feedback that occurs on a draft or in one-on-one sessions than they do with feedback that comes after the final draft has been submitted. I have had students tell me straight up that they do not read my feedback on their papers, especially if they are satisfied with their grades. And why should they? Students have been given the message throughout their schooling experience that grades are the most important thing about learning, and so it is not at all a surprise that students will not make time to address feedback that they cannot respond to in any way. I wanted to be in conversation with my students about their writing on this very important topic.

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6 Such a position is not unique to queer literacies and is in fact something that we also see in more recent approach to college level writing more broadly. Queer literacies are unique in that they attach ideas about the un-fixed nature of identity to the un-finished product that we write.
What I settled on for most of my time teaching this course were what I referred to as Social Contexts Journaling: “journal-style” assignments that focused on student identity and education experience. Instead of writing one 6-page paper, students were required to write three shorter papers that reflected on the material from one class period. Built into this assignment was a requirement for students to resubmit the assignment in some way based on my feedback to them. In this way, I hoped to create a more genuine dialogue between the students and myself and to encourage them to view my feedback not as fixed and indisputable judgements on their papers, but rather as the beginning of a conversation. In the Spring 2020 semester under study, students were required to respond to “a question that I have, either coming from the discussion that we had in class, from some specific point in [the student’s] journal entry, or general impressions from everyone’s writing” before they would get a grade on each entry (Assignment Handout). My purpose in structuring the assignment in this way, I explained in the assignment instruction to students, was “to embrace writing as a dialogue… Rather than you writing one 6-page paper and me giving you feedback, this assignment is designed to imitate a conversation back and forth. You write something, I respond, you respond back to me.” I also made it quite clear to students in the assignment handout that, even after I had assigned a grade for each entry, they could continue working with me to revise the entry if they were not satisfied with the grade they received. In this way, it furthered my presentation of these entries as ongoing work that did not necessarily have a final form.

It is worth noting that the idea for the format of this assignment was inspired by an assignment I was asked to write in a class by Dr. Bethy Leonardi that I was enrolled in towards the beginning of my doctoral courses. This project, which Bethy referred to as a “Queer Autobiography,” was also submitted in loosely autobiographical fashion in that multiple short
papers formed one larger narrative over the course of the semester. Additionally, re-writing and responding to feedback on those papers was a large part of the learning process as I understood it. I was particularly struck by how much I felt like I was involved in the revision and feedback process by this format, and I had a chance to respond to things that my instructor was curious about. My overwhelmingly positive experience with this format is a large part of what inspired me to try a similar approach to the more traditional “Educational Autobiography” paper in my own class. I thought that this type of assignment fit especially well with my queer literacies commitments to teaching this course.

This dialogic cycle of revision and response became more difficult when we switched to remote learning, largely because of the uncertainty in everyone’s lives. I began to worry that our assignments in this class would just become boxes that we needed to check to survive until the end of the semester. I tried to resist the feeling, in that I believe very strongly in the importance of the content and in these activities, and if the rest of the work moving forward in the semester is just busy work, then why even continue. I spent a significant portion of class right after our transition online discussing this concern with students and soliciting feedback. Students identified that they were feeling like they were “scrambling” and like everything was “a giant mess.” In the same meeting with students, they specifically asked how I was doing, and I responded, “I’m Diabetic so I get a little scared” (class session, 3.31.20). I think that this openness for the students and myself to share difficult emotions in the classroom reflects, to some extent, the success at inviting alternate ways of knowing in the classroom. This exchange took up the first fifteen minutes of class on that day, which while not ‘productive’ in exploring the content of the class, I would argue was absolutely necessary for the ongoing community building work that I have found so necessary to my goals. I invited students to let me know “If
there is anything else in this that can make it feel like less like busy work um I don’t know and
more like something that can actually fit into our lives right now” (class recording 3.31.20). I
continued with the response format to the Social Contexts Journaling, and, despite some of my
concerns, continued to have meaningful conversations with students in this format. I think that a
lot of my fears about my own assignments in the class were not mirrored by students, as one of
them mentioned “A lot of my other professors have been assigning a lot of extra busy-work to
try to keep us engaged which really hasn’t been helpful” in contrast with the way this class was
running (Alex, 3.31.20). Despite my fears right after our move online, I believe that this design
of writing and response helped me to continue to hear from students in a way that I might not
have, given the fact that some of the students were not attending the synchronous class sessions.

So, the first main revamp I tried to make with this paper was in making it more of an
ongoing dialogue rather than one finished paper with one finished draft. The second concern I
had was in reframing the assignment from a place where students just reiterated the privilege that
they themselves had to one where they were asked to grapple with structural power and
oppression. While for some students (especially at a PWI) getting them to acknowledge their
unearned privilege was a positive step, just stating “I have privilege” did not actually get us to a
place where we were interrogating what that might mean for our schools and institutions. What
does it take for students to engage with power and privilege in their writing?

In the Fall of 2019, I had a realization that what I was doing was not working or, at least,
not accomplishing some of the goals in terms of queering students’ understanding of identity and
schooling. I felt this realization as I was reading a slew of student papers with the same kind of
tone around privilege and oppression. I highlight the writing of one student, Emily, because it
struck me that I was not encouraging students to see people with marginalized identities as whole
people with cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1989); this is not to say that Emily had failed in any way or that they were insensitive or classist. I only highlight this student because it was the moment where I realized that I did not like the impressions that I was putting out. In her second journal entry related to our class discussion on socioeconomic status and how income impacts student success, Emily wrote that her unawareness of income disparities in education “truly speaks to my economic privilege in that regard, as I was so blissfully unaware of these students’ struggles.” I had been struggling with a nagging sense that these journal entries had not been leading to the conversations that I was hoping for, but reading this statement, for whatever reason, opened my eyes to the perspective that I had been placing on these readings. When I looked back at the readings and class discussion, they all focused on how kids with minoritized identities are at a disadvantage.

I had been hyper focused on getting students to acknowledge that all school experiences are not equal, and that inequality often falls along raced, classed, and gendered lines. I was thinking about the idea of threshold concepts that Winkler (2018) uses in her work, with racism being the threshold concept in her course. The idea of the threshold concept was developed by Meyer and Land (2003) who define the term as like a “portal,” that is “opening up a new and previously inaccessible way of thinking … there may thus be a transformed internal view of subject matter, subject landscape, or even worldview. This transformation may be sudden or it may be protracted” (p. 1). I began to think about how I was so focused on the existence of oppression as a threshold concept: the bottom line that I was trying to get across was that school is not a meritocracy, and that the system is set up to perpetuate white supremacy. And while this idea is important, obviously, the idea of a threshold concept goes against the dialogic, queer learning that I was envisioning for the course. I think what I had lost, in the focus, is that all of
these diverse identities students hold are assets—for them and for society. What seemed to be coming across to privileged students in my class is that K-12 students who are Black or disabled or queer are miserable and their lives in school are terrible. I decided to try to build in more focus on institutions instead of just as individuals as being privileged/oppressed. Something that shows both that schools routinely enact violence against minoritized people and also that these students are not miserable and in need of rescuing. Additionally, it was important to me to convey that many students have their own knowledge that is not valued in schools, but that is still deeply valuable. Piepzna-Samarasinha (2018) writes about “crip skills” and how emphasizing these skills is important because “the deficiency model by which most people view disability only sees disabled people as a lack, a defect, damaged good, in need of cure. The idea that we have cultures, skills, science, and technology runs counter” (p. 69). In short, despite my intent to focus on structures of oppression in schooling, the class interactions had resulted in a focus on only the things that minoritized students lack.

How do I get both points across? I wrote in my memo directly after this realization that “I’m actually feeling majorly disappointed in myself that I hadn’t noticed this before” (memo, 11.16.2019). I think a lot of my decisions with this class have been largely influenced by a difficult experience teaching during my first semester where one student was resistant to even the idea that inequality might not be a choice. From then on, it has felt like this impossible task to get students to acknowledge that inequity is not a result of individual choice, but rather is a result of systemic practices meant to reinforce white supremacist heteropatriarchy. My previous experiences had created something of an adversarial relationship with my students where I had expected them to be against my attempts at critical pedagogy from the start. I was not giving students enough credit and it did not reflect that students are on a spectrum of critical
consciousness in an infinite number of places. I see this interaction with students as a queer failure of sorts – where my intentions were sound, but the effect was not moving us all towards a kind of critical consciousness that could see students as having skills and strengths, even if those are not privileged in schools.

In the assignment for the semester under study, I tried to shift the focus even more to thinking about structures rather than just the experiences of individuals. I describe the required content of the entries as a discussion about “how the identity or social context that we discussed impacts students’ different experiences in the U.S. education system.” I tried to foreground how the education system as a whole is related to students’ disparate experiences. I did still want to emphasize for students that outcomes are not dictated by effort alone, but I also tried to remove focus on only negative outcomes. I continue in the description, “Equally importantly, you should address what the readings/class discussion/topic helped you understand about yourself.” It is important for students to be implicated in what they are learning, but also to move the emphasis away from simply a discussion of how much privilege they have. I will discuss the student responses to this project in more detail in the following chapter.

**Reading Leaders**

The Reading Leaders assignment was something new that I added during the study semester. This assignment was my attempt to give students more control over their own learning in the classroom. Given my rooting of the class in queer and critical pedagogies, positioning the students as fellow teachers in the classroom was something that I identified as important to the classroom. This positioning was a move beyond just saying ‘we are all learning from each other,’ toward actively challenging the binary of student/teacher. According to Freire (1970), “Education must begin with the solution of the teacher-student contradiction, by reconciling the
poles of the contradiction so that both are simultaneously teachers and students” (p. 72). In some ways, students were involved in the direction of my classroom prior to starting my study, in that a great deal of the class was discussion oriented. However, in infusing queer pedagogies into the course, I felt that building in time for students to lead class as teachers was really necessary.

The Reading Leaders activity was framed in the syllabus as a group project. Most of the Reading Leaders groups consisted of two or three students (although, because of unforeseen circumstances, one student ended up presenting by themselves). In the syllabus, I described the responsibilities of the Reading Leaders activity as “generating 2-3 discussion questions, facilitating an activity that addresses some of the reading’s main arguments, and presenting their group’s ‘take-aways’ for that reading” (Spring 2020 Syllabus). While these initial guidelines were somewhat rigid, they were my attempt to give support to students who may never have led a class discussion before. In the assignment handout, I described the purpose of the assignment as “[giving] every student a chance to deeply explore the complex issues in education” as well as “[giving] everyone in the class control over their own learning.” I tried in this semester, even more than in previous semesters, to be really explicit with my students about the reasons behind my choices in class, which I practice here. I wanted students to feel that the assignment was not busy work, but rather was my move to practice the critical pedagogy about which we were reading.

I was concerned (and still am a bit concerned) about how much control the Reading Leaders assignment was actually giving to students. In theory, the students were leading the class, but they had also been told what readings to focus on as well as some guidelines about what kinds of content to include. I tried to mitigate my concern by having the class and I came
up with norms for the Reading Leaders activity on the first day of class. On the first day, I put students into small groups and asked them “What makes for a positive learning environment?” This question, and the discussion that followed, helped us as a group to flesh out what they thought would make for a good classroom experience. I made it clear to them that the results of the discussion were how I would be evaluating their Reading Leaders project. After some time spent in small groups, the class called out ideas about what makes for a positive learning environment, that I then added to our Google Slides as students spoke. I added the following bullet points:

- multiple forms of presentation delivery (presentations, handouts, activities, lectures)
- ask questions and have dialogue (including discussion questions in the presentation)
- think, pair, share (some sort of activity)
- videos (5-6 minutes max) [The students suggested that videos would be helpful, and I added the caveat to keep them to 5-6 minutes at the most]
- having an open environment; sharing opinions, but not being pressured to agree
- engagement with the readings (with at least 1 of the readings) [The students identified that they wanted the class discussion to be rooted in the reading, and I added the parentheses about using at least 1 of the readings from the syllabus]
- jokes/enthusiasm (engaging with your fellow classmates)

After that class period, I sent out an announcement to the class as well as updated the assignment handout. The assignment handout (in its final form) had a subheading “Co-Created Grading Criteria” that included “some technical stuff” such as length of time of presentation, the deadline that students should send their project draft to me, and that they should engage with at least one

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7 This activity took place on the first day of class because there were students scheduled to give their Reading Leaders project the following week.
of the readings from the class period. In other words, the first section is ‘my’ requirements. I also added the criteria generated from the class of “Multiple forms of presentation delivery,” “Activities,” “Facilitating dialogue,” and “Enthusiasm/engagement.” While I am aware that I have once again set up a binary (my criteria/their criteria), I thought it was important to emphasize that the majority of the grading would be focused on what they considered to be a successful/engaging class.

Conclusion

Honestly, Covid-19 threw most of my planning into disarray and I, like most instructors, felt deep uncertainty about the best way to proceed, as I think the preceding discussion has shown. On the last day of in-person class I had with my students, I was wracked with anxiety about whether they would resist my decision to move us remote (the university as a whole had not yet made that decision, although it did announce closure the following day), or overall whether they trusted me, and if I had the skills to continue to make the class meaningful in the midst of everything else. For every class I have taught, a community where my students trust me and we as a class care about each other’s well-being is the first goal that I set about working towards. It is hard to know, sometimes, if that community is being achieved; there are other moments when I suddenly feel that community and have a visceral feeling in my gut that there is genuine love and trust in the classroom. I will conclude this chapter with an excerpt from the last in-person class period before the semester went completely online due to the pandemic, because I felt that visceral feeling very clearly then – and still have strong emotions thinking about it now. I emphasize those strong feelings as part of my continued attempt to highlight that not only what we think but also what we feel physically and emotionally is central to the work of a queer classroom.
I opted to start the class period with a discussion of what remote learning would like for the rest of the semester, as well as letting my students know that this meeting would most likely be our last in-person class session. I began by highlighting the importance of our class topic that day, and my trust in the class that we could refocus on our topic for the day (somewhat poignantly, gender and sexuality in schools). I discussed what I imagined the class would look like for the rest of the semester, and the students and I talked back and forth about things like university policy, the bandwidth necessary for Zoom, and what attendance would look like. Then, the conversation went in a direction that I did not expect.

**Raylan:** Just out of curiosity how is that going to affect your research that you’re doing? Are you going to be able to record the—

**Christine:** That is a great question.

[Class laughs]

**Christine:** Um I have emailed the director of the—of the um—of the board that basically oversees all that and um I think like worse case I’ll just put it next to my computer and it will audio record. I’m hoping that I can record Zoom calls, but it might be that y’all will have to resign the consent forms. So ‘I don’t know’ is the answer to that question. Stressing me out a little bit, but I’m not going to focus on that right now.

[Class laughs]

After a minute or so of discussion about Zoom recording capacity, we continued:

**Christine:** I’ll just be blunt. I’ve never taught online before so I’m kind of winging it a little bit here. We’re gonna see what works I guess.

**Dee:** I think you got this.

**Christine:** Thank you, thank you. I appreciate that
[several “yeah” and “I agree” from the class]

**Dee:** I think– I think it will all be fine

**Christine:** Thank you. Well I do think it will be fine, as well. I think that we will continue to have a lovely classroom community. I don’t know what that lovely classroom community is gonna look like.

[Class laughs]

**Dee:** You’re learning and we’re learning.

**Christine:** Yes that’s true.

After this discussion, I realized that the students cared about me and my research, even though we had not discussed it again since the first class-period when they signed consent forms. I was surprised to have this question asked, considering the million other uncertainties that directly pertained to their lives and classroom experiences. At that point, we were still uncertain if we would be back on campus, if synchronous learning was going to work, if the campus would be shut down. And yet, the impact on my research was something that at least one student was curious about. Additionally, I am left with the indelible impression that we trusted each other to get through this together. I had voiced my trust in the students to be able to continue to grapple with structural inequality in school, even in the midst of a crisis, and they trusted me to continue making a productive and worthwhile endeavor – they trusted that together, we “got this.”
CHAPTER V

EXPANSION AND CONTRACTION:
SOME TRENDS ACROSS THE ASSIGNMENTS

Having analyzed my intentions and planning around the course readings, assignments, and class structure, in this chapter I turn to an analysis of student work, specifically in light of my queer literacies goals that were central to my study. In this chapter, I analyze trends in the entire class across the three assignments that I discussed in Chapter Four: the free writes, the reading leaders, and the social contexts journaling.

Approach to Analysis and Findings

I used the analytic tools discussed in Chapter Three to code the student writing and class discussion, which resulted in three categories that were present across the students’ work: student performances, places where othering occurs or is resisted, and critical consciousness. Although these three themes travel across the assignments, the various forms they took led me to different paths for sharing the results of my analyses. Specifically, I focus on two students’ writing across the semester in the free writing assignment in order to emphasize ongoing literacy performance through the writing, whereas I draw on a thematic analysis across all students’ work for the reading leaders and social context journal assignments in order to show the complex ways that students engaged with the content and queering processes of the course. Here, I describe my approach to discussing each assignment.

In the free writing assignment, I trace two students through several free writes over the course of the semester, reading these weekly reading practices as a performance that is ongoing.
I chose these two students because their approaches represent two different performances across the semester. I examine one student who traces a brief journey in his thinking about racism and works through his thoughts about the learning over the course of free writes and also one of his Social Contexts Journal Entries. Another student, in responding to questions that seem to suggest one answer, carefully teases out some of the multiple and conflicting viewpoints without trying to tie them up into a neat conclusion. In the Reading Leaders Assignment, I focus on how students engaged with us/them thinking in ways that embraced this kind of dichotomous narrative, rejected that narrative, and that existed in the myriad spaces in between. Additionally, the Reading Leaders Assignment shows students displaying a wide range of critical consciousness building and growing, as well as pushing their fellow students with questions that expand binaries. This criticality by students is apparent both during in-person classes and also after the switch to remote learning, illustrating that this kind of successful work is possible in a fully online setting. Finally, turning to look at the Social Contexts Journaling, I similarly saw a tension in students’ moves that sometimes positioned marginalized students as others, and also moves that resisted that practice. I also highlight moments where I attempt to urge students through my own comments to resist these impulses. I am also interested in the moves that students make over the course of the semester that show their views on their performances as students and how their social class and ethnicity can play a role in whether those performances are read as successful. When I discuss the impacts of COVID-19 in this chapter, I mainly focus on the changes in the method and delivery of assignments due to COVID-19. However, students also brought the impacts of the developing crisis into their writing without prompting.
Free Writing Assignment and Literacy Performances

The rest of this chapter will focus on trends across the work of multiple students; however, this free writing analysis is rooted in Blackburn’s (2002; 2003) ideas about literacy performances, as previously discussed in Chapters Two and Three, and therefore focuses on themes within the work of individual students. Thinking about this from a literacy performance perspective, I examine themes in these students’ free writes and writing that appear multiple times throughout the course of the semester. While these kinds of themes could be developed for virtually every student in the class, I have chosen the two students here because they also align with some of the themes of critical consciousness and how it develops over the course of a semester as well as a resistance to neat definitions and binaries. Additionally, while I initially intended to analyze the free writes neatly as their own assignment, what I actually found in that analysis is that the barriers between the assignments were permeable. Therefore, while I mainly focus on ideas and themes that emerge in the free writes, there are some instances (especially as in the case of the first student, Matt) where it made sense to revisit some of the ideas in the free writes as those ideas threaded through other written assignments, such as the social contexts journaling.

Changing Viewpoints: Getting Beyond the “Eye Roll”

Matt, a white student who characterized himself as “an older student” and “a new parent,” explained a great deal of his thought processes to me in his free writing entries, often doing so without prompting. Early in the semester, Matt discussed that he was interested in education (and therefore taking the course) because he taught grade school children at a nearby science program off and on, and also because he had aspirations to teach in the future. As one of the older students in the class, Matt often participated in small group discussions in somewhat of
a leadership role. He also often made connections in the course material with his own extended
time in school and how he wanted school to be for his children.

Multiple times throughout the semester, he commented that the readings and discussion
were challenging him to think in new ways. In one free write about a third of the way through the
semester, he wrote that “the readings for each class continue to make me think in ways I have not
before – both in terms of education (my primary focus for enrolling) and larger views of culture
and identity.” He made a similar comment in one of his journal entry responses, writing
“Thinking from a crisis approach can be tough and make you question your views, something
that can become difficult as you get older and try to assimilate new viewpoints with your own
experiences in life.” This is something that I see quite clearly in Matt’s free writing. His
performance in these free writes seems to be one of unpacking understandings. He often started
by thinking about how he was initially thinking, then pivoted to a response that a reading or
discussion caused him to have, and then turned to how he is thinking about that topic now. While
he used the pronoun “you” in this free write, it is clear that he was talking about himself and his
own ability to assimilate new viewpoints.

The ways that Matt grappled with the material came through most clearly after we read
Tatum’s (2003) article that contained her definition of racism. She writes that “if one defines
racism as a system of advantage based on race … People of color are not racist because they do
not systematically benefit from racism.” This is a passage that typically brings up a lot of
emotions for students. For that day’s free write, my goal was to begin to tease out the differences
between how students have traditionally defined racism and how Tatum defines racism. In
addition to asking for a paraphrase of Tatum’s definition, I asked for the free write, “Based on
the three readings for today, how would you define ‘racism’?” Matt then discussed his visceral feelings in response to doing this reading, writing:

Admittedly, I thought I had a good grip on the concept of racism and what it meant -- these readings have me questioning even the basics. In particular, when [Tatum] first claimed that white people cannot experience racism (or men, sexism), I was taken aback. After the details concerning systemic advantage and the distinction between racism and prejudice, I started to think a bit differently. The claim that business as usual perpetuates racism is powerful and persuasive. Based on the readings, my definition now includes advantages gained by a group in a system.

It took Matt a little while to get to his definition of racism, because it includes some of the feelings and thought processes that he went through to get to this new definition. It is important here how he detailed his thought process. At first, he was “taken aback,” representing a quite strong, possibly physical reaction. In this free write, he did not come out and say that he agrees with Tatum now, but rather that his definition has been expanded by the readings. His rumination on his changing views on racism — saying that he “thought [he] had a good grip on the concept” and then his very visceral reaction of being “taken aback” — detailed his thought process as he defined and redefined racism based on the work we did in and for class.

While I go into further detail about the Social Context Journal paper later in this chapter, I think it is worth talking about how Matt expanded on the concept from his free write in his first journal entry. Indeed, this illustrates that the barrier between different assignments is somewhat thin, and there is a lot of crossover of ideas. It is also interesting to see some of the difference that time (and maybe also the ability to edit his writing) made on his framing:
To me, the most provocative part of the readings came again from Tatum. Her conjecture that white people cannot experience racism or that men cannot experience sexism astounded me at first. Now, I am in no way a subscriber to ‘reverse racism’ or ‘meninism’ but my sense of the definitions of racism and sexism followed a more traditional pop-culture understanding of the terms, which allowed for any race and sex to experience discrimination. Reflecting back on my thoughts at the time of first reading Tatum’s statement, I admit that my mild feelings of confusion and interest were overshadowed by an internal eye roll and an “oh come on” frustration. Reading deeper into Tatum’s philosophy helped me see that the disparity was partially due to semantics and how something is defined, but also led to a slow realization about the more appropriate and systemic definition. I pushed past my reservations and reminded myself of one of Patel’s first points (the reading I did right before Tatum), that learning is fundamental to all life – a philosophy I have always shared.

Here, he drew a line. He was careful to point out that he did not believe in things like “reverse racism” or “meninism,” and he even put them in air quotes to seemingly further highlight how they are not real; I read a certain disdain in how he used the words in this paper. He went into some further detail about his discomfort in the piece (he submitted this the day after the free write in class), and here he seemed to challenge his own views even more. What started out as an “eye roll” had changed to calling her idea a “more appropriate systemic definition.” Again, I am drawn to the physical reactions that this elicits, but also to the idea of “pushing past” his own reservations. He tied his own belief about lifelong learning into the “frustration” that he was now feeling in having to confront this approach to racism.

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1 This was in reference to Leigh Patel’s (2009) “Fugitive practices” article.
As part of the Social Contexts Paper as an ongoing process, I asked Matt at the end of the paper, “I’m struck by your phrasing of like ‘pushing past your reservation … how do you feel about Kumashiro’s learning through crisis?’” Matt responded to this prompt by writing in part, “I think I better understand the value of discomfort and crisis that Kumashiro suggests. I had not initially made that connection … I saw value in what he wrote but it clicked more after reading your prompt.” This again illustrates the important interconnectedness of this writing. The conversation begins in Matt’s free write where he really went beyond the rote definition that I asked for to explain his evolving thoughts on the material. The same topic continued into his Social Contexts Journal entry but in an expanded format, and he continued to make connections between this feeling of frustration and shifting perspectives to the idea of crisis in our discussion after the paper was submitted. In this way, it is somewhat difficult to group this writing and discussion within rigid assignment boundaries. Although I initially attempted to analyze the free writes as an individual assignment, I realized during analysis that the significant overlap among all the different assignments is connected to the queering process that I took up in my course design process. In my analysis of the course design in Chapter Four, I discussed my intention to make the Social Contexts Journal assignment an ongoing process to which students could continue to add and respond based on my comments. In pushing myself to engage with student writing in the analysis process more queerly, I was able to see how my goal of ongoing collaboration and revision was not contained to the social context journal but continued across multiple assignments. In Matt’s case, an idea that initially arose over the course of a 10-minute free write in class time manifested in a much longer unpacking of his visceral response to a re-definition of racism in his journal entry. Students’ literacy performances, which I initially
assumed I would analyze through the free writes and other individual assignments, were actually weaving across projects.

**Teasing Out Nuances**

Jessica identified quite strongly throughout her writing as a “woman in STEM,” and also “someone who has not experienced racism.” In a lot of her writing and discussion in class, she related her experiences with sexism as a woman in a male-dominated field. I also saw her on several occasions troubling this by discussing the white privilege that she also held in these spaces, complicating this straightforward understanding. Jessica was someone who contributed orally in class quite frequently and often used her own experiences to make sense of the content.

Jessica’s propensity in her free writes was to go beyond more obvious, single answers to questions and to flesh out some of the complexity and contradiction within the ideas she encountered in the course. Our first free write was an example of this tendency in her writing. For the first free write, I asked students, “what is the purpose of education according to the traditional philosophy?” I got a lot of responses that dove deeply into one aspect of traditional education. Jessica, on the other hand, pulled at disparate threads. She wrote that one author “stated at one point that multiculturalism and bilingualism is a calamity to public education, and may even be the causes of public education failure.” This is only one small (albeit important) part of the whole author’s argument, but she drew the aspect out to then immediately compare it with another author who “argues that traditional education is failing due to a LACK of inclusion of these ideals. These authors wrote pieces years apart and have pretty opposing opinions, particularly when it comes to what should be included and what should not.” This stood out to me because she highlighted an aspect of the readings that clashed with each other, which underscored that there is not a singular “purpose of education” for the authors within this
tradition of pedagogy. In this case, Jessica did not try to come up with one takeaway from traditional education. Rather than searching for a theme on which the authors agreed, she instead chose to point out a place where the authors do not display internal consistency. This approach feels like it works against more traditional goals in education where students are expected to find themes and bring narrative together. The way the course is framed (and this again may be a shortcoming of how I structure the course), the compare and contrast element usually comes in looking at the different philosophies of education. For example, the quiz for this unit asks students to think about how traditional approaches to education are similar to and different from the progressive philosophy espoused by John Dewey. In Jessica’s case, what she really highlighted here is that there is quite a bit of disagreement even within the traditional philosophy of education, making it clear that viewing each individual philosophy as a coherent unit is quite impossible. She resisted the straightforward answer that my original question suggested.

In another free write, Jessica responded to an intentionally binary question on my part. I asked the class, as we began our foray into discussing how identity plays out in education, “What kinds of identities/traits/abilities do schools consider normal? What kinds of identities/traits/abilities do schools consider abnormal?” I know that one of my goals was to avoid binaries, but when I asked what is “normal” and “abnormal” in schools, I was asking a rather binary question. However, my goal in framing the question in this way was to get students to think deeply about how artificial and ultimately unachievable it is for any student to fit into this binary. What counts as normal in schools is quite binary, and this question falls in line with an article by Annamma, Boelé, Moore, and Klinger (2013) that we read for class. In discussing the ideology of normal in schools, the authors write, “When the ideology of normal exists as unexamined common sense, it creates the inherent binary of abnormal” (p. 1279). Intending this
question to drive this point home, I hoped that students would identify at least one of these
binaries that we could then examine in class. Jessica went far beyond this. She presented a free
write that has a list in two columns. The first half of the list was titled “In US society and schools
it is normal to be:” and the second half of the list was titled “In US society and schools it is
ABNORMAL to be:.” She then listed several items with commentary:

In US society and schools it is normal to be:
- heterosexual (or arguably homosexual who ACTS heterosexual)
- achieving good grades
- involved with extracurriculars
- dressing ‘fashionably’
- dressing as the gender you are assigned at birth
- dressing in a way that is not “distracting to men” (why is there so much emphasis on
dressing???)
- patriotic
- thinking like everyone else

In US society and schools it is ABNORMAL to be:
- Trans or bisexual
- A person of color who doesn’t [sic] act white
- falling behind in grades
- too poor to afford extra curriculars
- dressing in a way that is not like everyone else
- dressing as another gender
- dressing in less clothing
- unpatriotic or bothered by the system
- thinking unlike everyone else

Even though she had these items set up in a quite binary fashion, the items themselves contradict this to some extent. Her first item about heterosexuality being normal includes the addendum “or arguably homosexual who ACTS heterosexual” which is already creating an in-between space for what kinds of queer performance are acceptable to be “normal.” Although she doesn’t use the specific terminology, here Jessica pointed to the idea of homonormativity (Stryker, 2013), arguing that some kinds of queer performances are acceptable as long as they fall in line with heterosexual performances — i.e., “gays and lesbians are just like everyone else” (McRuer, 2004, p. 66). Her focus on clothing is also quite interesting, as the way she describes societally “normal” dressing is so restrictively narrow as to be basically impossible to achieve dressing “fashionably,” while not “distracting to men,” but also “as the gender you are assigned at birth.” She highlighted the absurdity of restrictive norms about dressing with her comment “why is there so much emphasis on dressing???” The triple question marks signaled an exclamation of how prominent this observation was among the items she included in her list. The multiple question marks also suggest a certain frustration or bewilderment with the fixation in schools with how we dress. We had not gotten there yet in the course, but she already pulled in a critique about gender and performance here that feels important. In Jessica’s identification of the extremely restrictive standards for appropriate dress, she echoed Butler (1990) who highlights the “persistent failure to identify fully and without incoherence with these positions” (p. 122). While not using the language of these queer critics (as we did not discuss these authors in the class), Jessica still performed a rather queer/feminist reading of dress codes. Her focus on clothing also seems to speak to her experiences as a cis woman, as some of the restrictions of
school dress codes she listed spoke directly to the experiences of women and girls in schools, with her examples about “dressing in a way that is not ‘distracting to men’” as the ideal and “dressing in less clothing” as an abnormal way to dress. As an aside, the way we dress seems to be an accessible in-point for students to critique what we count as normal in regard to gender and sexuality, as we see a continuation of this discussion in Chapter Six, where a different student in class also highlighted the failure to adhere to traditional clothing requirements.

In the previous section, I mentioned that I asked students to define racism based on the readings that we had done for class, providing both a definition that the authors would agree with and also one that they create themselves. In her free write on that topic, Jessica, after noting that racism is an “overarching structure built up of many components,” listed out some of these components, which end up being quite concrete. She starts with the more overt example of racism as “an act of aggression, prejudice, or judgment based solely on the belief that one race is better than the other”; she elaborates on how racism can be a structure with “policies that are put in place to inherently benefit one race, while another race suffers”; she provides more insidious examples such as “pretending that since you haven’t SEEN it directly in your life then it just must not exist” and that “other races are falling behind because ‘they just don’t work as hard as you’”; and finally she concludes with the quite timely example that “Racism can even be blaming cultures for disease (example: coronavirus).” This continues the trend that I see across her free writes of thinking about things in multiple and various terms rather than with one neat definition. She starts with an example of racism that most people will agree with, specifically “aggression” against another person because of their race. However, she adds in many examples that include the structural aspects of racism as well as an idea that seems to echo colorblind racism. Throughout the course of these free writes, Jessica took what can be somewhat
straightforward questions that asked for one, cogent answer and then highlighted how there is not one clear answer to the question.

The free writes, ultimately, were relatively short questions given the 10 minutes of class time students were allotted to complete them. As a result, a lot of the time, the questions I asked for the free writes focused on only a small part of the content for that class period. What I found unique about Jessica’s responses to the free writing was her tendency to pull apart some of the nuances in these sometimes simplistic questions. When asked about the views of traditional educators, she focused on places where the authors disagreed with each other. When discussing what counts as normal and abnormal in schools (an intentionally binary question), Jessica got ahead of me by including examples that already acknowledged some of the in-between spaces, as well as hinting at the (im)possibility of any student being able to accurately perform all of the “normal” requirements. When asked to define racism, Jessica went several layers deep to include more overt acts of racism as well as those that are more insidious. In this way, the free writes provided a space where Jessica could complicate or queer some of the straightforward responses that my free write prompts might suggest. I am also intrigued by this because I had been concerned that the relatively short amount of time students were given to complete these assignments would limit the amount of in-depth critique that students could put forward.

These two cases show the possibilities that are available in the free writing assignment. I understand in Matt’s assignment the idea of permeability and the chance to build on seeds of ideas presented in the free writes in longer written projects. For Jessica, the free writing presented an opportunity to muddy the waters of definitional work. Initially, I had conceived of in-class writing as a place where students could flesh out initial ideas. This “writing to learn” approach is common in English pedagogy courses and views short writing like this as an
opportunity to “recall, clarify, and question what they know about a subject and what they still wonder about with regard to that subject matter” (Knipper & Duggan, 2006, p. 462). The kind of writing these two students completed for their free writes take this approach and also more. There was idea recall and questioning, but students also moved beyond that, responding to these seemingly simple questions in complicated ways even in short responses.

One shortcoming is also what I mentioned in Chapter Four, when I moved these from class time and made them something that students completed on their own time. I feel that this had consequences for the writing. For the whole class in general, including these two students, the free writes became less in-depth and more straightforward in their answers. I will admit that I am not sure as to the reason for this. It could be because my removing them from class time signaled to students that they were less important. It could be because everyone was completely overwhelmed by the switches to remote learning and the physical and emotional toll of the pandemic and the free writes were one thing that fell by the wayside. I suspect it is a combination of many factors, but I think this again may be a place where students responded to my expectations of their performance — in this case, I highlighted their free writes as a less necessary aspect of that performance.

**Reading Leaders and the Student/Teacher Contradiction**

I now turn to the Reading Leaders assignments from students. As mentioned in Chapter Four, the Reading Leaders assignment required students, in groups, to lead 20-30 minutes of class time (although in practice, these presentations sometimes lasted much longer) utilizing information from the readings for that class period as well as including discussion questions and activities for the class. In this section, I will explore two major themes in the Readings Leaders projects and presentations related to my analytic lens and theoretical framework. The first theme
has to do with othering, and the complexities of my queer commitment to avoiding othering. I use two student presentations to highlight this theme; the first example shows an example where rejecting othering is made difficult by the content, and the second example shows how one student was able to use his lived experience in relation to the material to disrupt stereotypical narratives for the class. The second theme in this section has to do with student critical consciousness and explores the ways that students bring their own critical understandings into the course content. As the most student-led portion of the class, the Reading Leaders activity gives students a chance to add their own understandings of the material and to drive the class using these understandings. I believe that this project shows the critical perspectives that students bring to class from their prior experiences and from their understandings of course content. Over these overarching themes, I also saw the ways that this approach helps students to take control over their own learning and works to resolve the student/teacher contradiction that Freire (1970) posits.

The Role of Othering

One trend that emerged from students acting as reading leaders was the way that they characterized students that they saw as sharing some aspect of their own identity and those whom they saw as not sharing some aspect of their own identity or values. While students for the most part refrained from referring to “others,” I was surprised at the way that some of these interactions unfolded. In this section, I highlight a Reading Leader activity that ended up othering white supremacists, and I attempt to unpack my feelings about that, in addition to a case where a student explicitly resisted othering and the reaction of the class to this approach.

The most obvious example of students putting an “other” label on folks that we were studying was in how they positioned people in the texts and images from class who presented
overt racism. After our switch to remote learning, Britt and Monica acted as reading leaders during our class period on continued school segregation. The class period that they were responsible for focused on segregation in schools, both historically and in the present day, and how the continued segregation of the public school system impacts school funding. As reading leaders, students were able to choose which readings they wanted their presentation to incorporate, and Britt and Monica focused on the Civil Rights Projects’ report on school segregation (Orfield, Ee, Frankenberg, & Siegel-Hawley, 2016). After giving a brief background introduction on the readings that the whole class had done to prepare, Britt (who seemed to be responsible for this section) introduced one of the issues with desegregation in that white folks at the time fiercely resisted desegregation. They included a slide (see Figure 1) that showed three black and white pictures of different protests to desegregation: three white students wearing signs saying, “WE WON’T GO TO SCHOOL WITH NEGROES” a protest by a large group of white people holding United States flags and signs saying “RACE MIXING IS COMMUNISM,” and a picture of a sign saying “WE WANT WHITE TENANTS IN OUR WHITE COMMUNITY.”
Figure 1. Slide from Reading Leaders Presentation

Under the pictures, the slide reads “Look at all of these terrible, terrible people.” The second “terrible” on the slide is not only italicized but also in a different color than the rest of the text.

In all my thinking and discussion around not having students other marginalized people, it really never occurred to me that they would other white supremacists. In designing the course content and the syllabus, as outlined in the previous chapter, I was hyper-focused on moving the class away from othering minoritized students: trying to resist students hypothesizing about ‘that group of students over there.’ I did not think at all about this kind of othering. Maybe ultimately this says more about me and my values than it does about these students. Ultimately, this is not a kind of othering that I care about. Is that bad? I am not sure. On the one hand, I think part of the reason that white supremacist groups have been able to make a comeback has been in part due to the “very fine people on both sides” rhetoric espoused by people like Donald Trump.² Our

² Donald Trump made these comments during a speech on August 15th, 2017 after white supremacist violence in Charlottesville, VA (Holan, 2019).
reticence to label these groups as neo-Nazis, instead opting for labels like “alt-right” has led to a kind of normalization of these movements. Maybe a willingness to call people like Richard Spencer terrible people rather than portraying him as a “dapper white nationalist” would resist some of this normalizing. On the other hand, does this run afoul of the goals of the class to resist othering?

My biggest concern with this framing, and the concern that I brought to these students, was that it intimates that this is the only way that people can be racist. For the Reading Leaders assignment, students were required to send me their slides so that I could look at them beforehand. In the slides, the activity that immediately followed the slide about “terrible” people was an implicit bias test that the class could spend some time taking as individuals. In an email to Britt and Monica before their presentation, I drew attention to the order of the slides: “don’t get me wrong — those people are terrible and racist. But I’m concerned that it kind of sets us up for the idea that like, racism is an individual thing and not a systemic thing.” Worth noting here is that in my written communication to the students (and also during the class period) I did not push against them calling the people pictured terrible and racist. Without hesitation, I affirmed their categorization of the folks on the slides (which, again, is a form of othering) and suggested that the real issue with this might be that the rest of the students would not see other and more insidious forms of racism. I connected this to the Beverly Tatum article that we read earlier in the semester, drawing a parallel with her example of children drawing racist pictures of Native Americans. I wrote in the email, “It’s not that those Kindergarteners were terrible – it’s that they’ve been inundated with racist imagery. Right? … Thoughts on that?” My bigger concern was that folks in class may have the idea reinforced that the pictured actions are the only ways to

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3 Since deleted, news outlet *Mother Jones* tweeted “Meet the dapper white nationalist riding the Trump wave” which linked to its article on Richard Spencer (Harkinsson, 2016).
be racist, and so the implicit bias test might not pack the same punch. In the class itself, Britt
took up the suggestion to bring Tatum into the conversation and highlighted the differences
between individual acts of racism and systems of racism. Britt and Monica, in their speaker
notes, qualified their comments to align with the discussion that we had had in class so far. Britt,
who was reading almost verbatim from the speaker notes in the slides, made the following
statement when we switched to this slide:

Britt: So here’s a— some photos of some you know not terrible terrible people— I mean
they’re not great but um although they’re like terrible and racist we just wanted to remind
everyone that um about what Tatum said early in the semester about how not everyone is
terrible but that everyone has internalized systematic racism to an extent it’s not an
individual thing although it definitely can be um but it’s more that embedded systematic
association.

Britt’s statement here is interesting because she was kind of walking back the comments that the
students had already put on the slides. In her speech, she clarified that these are not “terrible,
terrible people” but then immediately followed that by reiterating “although they’re like terrible
and racist.” As I am struggling here with some of the implications of calling the people pictured
terrible and what the consequences of this might be, Britt was also struggling with this to some
extent as well, as she switched back and forth between labeling these people terrible but not
“terrible, terrible” as the slide suggests. Her comments also focused quite a bit on the individual
versus systemic implications. While this is obviously prompted by my comments over email, this
emphasis and elaboration on internalized racism is a choice made by the student. I think this is
probably also due to the fact that the next activity in their lesson was an implicit bias test, which
is a really concrete way to see that we all have some internalized biases that contribute to
inequality while falling short of the kind of “terrible racism” that Britt described here. Given the cycle of feedback for this assignment — where the students created a product, I responded with feedback, and then they incorporated that feedback into the presentation — this approach to student led class time helped both me and the students involved (and hopefully the whole class) think more deeply about what we consider to be normal and what counts as racism. It also leads me to think more about the role of othering in the classroom, and whether any kind of othering is acceptable in the classroom.

I will now turn to a case of students resisting othering by calling on their classmates to question stereotypes. Nasir, who wrote at length about the oppression he experienced both at CU and in his high school, as an example of resisting othering began an activity that questions stereotypes about Muslim students. In the Reading Leaders activity, Nasir put the rest of the class in groups and had them each watch a film clip that portrayed a Muslim character. He showed a scene from *Iron Man*, one from *American Sniper*, one from the television show *Lost*, and finally the trailer for *Jack Ryan*. The following discussion questions were discussed in small groups after they watched the films: “What stereotypes did you notice? Were they positive or negative? Why do you think Muslims are portrayed in the way they do? Do you think the stereotypes that are often portrayed in media affect people’s perceptions of social groups?” In the whole class discussion, students described the stereotypes seen at various points as “negative,” “infantilizing,” and “questionable,” and that Muslim people in the clips are framed using “they versus us language,” “fear,” “Islamophobia,” and “xenophobia” to describe a people that are “evil or helpless [with] no in between.” For the most part, the students in the class who reported out on their group discussion did not try to portray the stereotypes in the film as accurate or fair,
and some compelling discussion unpacked some of the differences between how Muslim people are portrayed and the impact that this might have on youth.

This was a powerful experience in class and an example of a student leading the class to engage in critical consciousness building using their own lived experiences, the class reading, and popular media representation of Muslims. Using an article that we read for class focused on supporting Muslim teens, Nasir pivoted the activity to examining stereotypes that exist in the media around Muslim people. At one point, Nasir also drew attention to the fact that one of the clips is a trailer and the significance that this might have:

Nasir: “I just find it interesting that it’s a trailer and— and it’s really trying to kind of show that oh this show is going to be about people like Americans killing terrorists do you think like that’s— that’s being in the forefront of the advertisement of the show do you think that has any significance in any way?”

The rest of the students are not necessarily sure how to answer that question, but it is an important idea that questions the kinds of media that people want to consume. In a later Social Context Journal entry, Nasir related that many of the courses that he is enrolled in deal with film and that “many of my movies center around my identity.” As I will discuss later in the chapter, Nasir’s identity is not positively embraced in his film classes, and so he was able to bring this critique from other aspects of his academic life at the university into our classroom using the Reading Leaders assignment. While I have placed this in the resisting othering category, there is obviously a quite ambiguous line between this code and that for critical consciousness in class.

**Critical Consciousness**

In addition to ways that students trouble stable notions of ‘the other,’ the reading leaders project also provides insight into the critical consciousness that students bring to these topics as
this is the most student-driven assignment of the class. Returning to Britt and Monica’s discussion on school segregation, they asked some discussion questions for the rest of the class to think about: “Have you ever had a personal experience or witnessed segregation in schools? How does this impact the students educational experience?” The framing of this is powerful because they take as a starting point that schools continue to face harsh segregation (based on our readings and based on the data that they present). The question under discussion, then, is to what extent students have felt the impacts of this and what the impacts are on our educational experiences. While the first half of the question is somewhat binary, the second half leaves open the variety of ways that this could impact students and classrooms.

The students then went into breakout rooms on video chat to discuss the questions. In the breakout room I was in, two of the students were trying to tackle the idea about segregation being systemic but also being maintained by personal choice. In the room, Kelly asked “in that podcast didn’t they say like um like it’s systemic.” She then mainly answered her own question by explaining how she understood the podcast, saying “Like the parents are gonna choose to go to like a private school or something yeah I don’t know … but like if there’s a better option for your kid and you have money, you’re gonna choose that.” This is an interesting discussion because Kelly first identified the issue as a structural one, and then as an example of this talked about what parents will individually choose. I think that this conversation is starting to get at some of the relationship between structures and individuals and how structures are somewhat maintained by individual choices. When we returned to the main room, we heard from Jamie, who was one of the few students in my class pursuing a teaching certificate and has been in other

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4 The podcast she referenced is an interview on NPR on segregation in New York schools (Gross & Hannah-Jones, 2017).
Education courses at our university. In relation to segregation, Jamie spoke about some of her past experiences as a student teacher:

So this past semester I was working in a school that’s about 30 minutes um away from [the university] and it’s a turnaround school which means that it has five years to get it’s test scores and everything on a state level or else they’ll have to either intervene or shut the school down. And um across the street is a different school, and I was looking at the demographics and for the turnaround school it’s 68% of low-income families with 60% of the population being Hispanic versus across … the street you have a school that’s only 8% of low income families and 70% white and the other school is just completely successful like no issues whatsoever so that’s pretty staggering.

Jamie referenced a school experience in the area, although this is an interesting example because this is not a school that she attended. In this example, Jamie carefully made a connection between the topic at hand, segregation in public schools, while also bringing in an analysis of income and also the pressure of standardized test scores and their importance in schools.

In preparation for the breakout rooms, Monica had some personal answers to the question on the slides in the speaker notes, and I am particularly interested here in looking at her own response to the first question about segregation. When her group came back from their breakout room, Monica talked about this a bit. Reflecting on the discussion in her breakout room, she said, “a lot of us have witnessed a lot of segregation” and after summarizing some of what her classmates said she continued, “I went to a private school from when I was three years to 12th grade and like especially when we were younger it was like mostly white people but then it got a lot better as I was older.” When Monica says that “it got a lot better” she seemed to be talking about more students of color joining the student body at her private school. Her moves here were
similar to the way that I try to model sharing my own experiences with students since I am asking that from them as well. She had similar comments added in the speaker notes in the slides, but also highlighted that “My educational experience improved as our classmates became more diverse because then we had different perspectives.” Her preparation notes show some of the similar thought processes that I go through when I am planning for more personal questions like this, including referencing some of my own experiences with the topic in order to illustrate that I am willing to do the same things I ask of students. In this way, she was able to make the topic relevant to her own schooling while also providing an experience that the whole class could consider as they discussed the topic. Monica’s discussion about her private schools seemed especially poignant, as many students in my class related having attended a private school.

Sharing some personal experiences with students in regard to my own identity and education is crucial to my queer literacies approach to teaching the course. For one thing, there is a real concern that asking minoritized students to provide the class with their experiences can be harmful or tokenizing (Furrow, 2012), and so providing a wide variety of experiences including my own can possibly work to alleviate that feeling. I also see this as connected because the students and I are all part of a learning community in the classroom which involves vulnerability from myself as the instructor to model this for students. Seeing students leading the class take up this approach in their own teaching, I understand as them collaborating with me in the endeavor to encourage vulnerability.

Another important aspect of this for Monica was how her own education improved when the student body became more diverse. In this way, she was not just viewing race and segregation as an issue faced by people of color (although Black and Latinx students do undoubtedly feel the keenest impacts of this); she saw segregation as an issue that negatively
impacts all students because of the loss of learning. This also feels important for understanding the critical perspectives that students bring to class. Rather than viewing a lack of diversity as an issue for people of color, Monica framed this as a negative impact for the entire school, including herself as a white student. Monica’s discussion was also quite thought-provoking, as there are many inequities in private school education that often get overlooked by those who attend them. Oftentimes, students from private school backgrounds in class suggested that we need a way to make some of the positive outcomes of private schools available to all school children; it is much rarer to see students pointing out shortcomings of a system that served them quite well academically. Monica’s comments about her school experience being marred by a lack of diversity troubled taken for granted ideas that private schools, because of their funding, are inherently better than public schools, instead highlighting the very real shortcomings of such a system.

A second Reading Leaders discussion facilitated after our transition to remote learning focused on discipline in schools and how these policies disproportionately impact students of color. The readings I had assigned for this week included an article that lays out some basic facts about zero tolerance policies and then a second article that focuses on the school-to-prison pipeline (Burdge, Licona, & Hyemingway, 2014). The students responsible as reading leaders for this week were Dee and Steve, and they took it upon themselves to focus on the disparate impacts of zero tolerance policies on racialized students, which was a choice they made without prompting on my part. Expanding on the readings that I brought to the class, Dee and Steve had two slides labeled “Zero Tolerance and Race.” The first slide showed a pie chart from the report on Civil Rights and the School-to-Prison Pipeline in Oklahoma (Oklahoma Advisory Committee, 2016) breaking down the enrollment by ethnicity and expulsions under zero-tolerance by
ethnicity. The pie charts showed that Black students particularly are impacted by zero tolerance policies, and the students highlighted this finding by adding on the slides that “African american [sic] students tend to be disproportionately negatively impacted by the zero tolerance policies, while white students to be disproportionately positively impacted.” The second slide titled “Zero Tolerance and Race” showed more figures from the Southern Poverty Law Center website (Losen & Skiba, 2010) detailing suspension rates by race. Theirs was one of very few presentations that brought in outside statistics from beyond the class, which was not a requirement for this assignment. Interestingly, I saw a marked increase in students who brought in statistics after the switch to remote learning. In fact, none of the five presentations done in person had resources from outside of the course readings and all three of the Reading Leaders presentations conducted remotely used outside sources. Given that this pair was the first group to conduct their Reading Leaders assignment remotely, it is possible that the student reading leaders who followed them in the remote classroom found their approach powerful and attempted to emulate it.

I also saw connections between these students’ choice to highlight racial disparities within zero tolerance and the unit on identity and education we had completed just prior. Given that there are other threads that they could have focused on within the discipline disparities unit, they opted to focus on critiques that followed from the previous unit, where we had read and discussed the importance of identity to learning, histories of oppression in schools for marginalized students, and schools’ limited understanding of who counts as a ‘normal’ student. This extends to Dee and Steve’s personal conclusions, which they drew from the data that they had seen. On a slide titled “What We Thought,” they expressed their concerns with zero

5 This is obviously too small a sample to make any kind of causal claims, but the trend is interesting.
tolerance policies, writing that “treating students like criminals will cause them to act like criminals” and “Zero tolerance is racially biased.” My organization of the course — where students learn about racial, class, and gender disparities in education before moving on to different educational policies — is designed to prompt students in this direction, although the results in the past have been somewhat mixed. One thing that the Reading Leaders assignment allowed me to understand about students, as this example illustrates, is what specific aspects of the reading students found truly interesting or compelling. By bringing in outside sources and concluding their presentation with concerns that echoed the research (both of my choosing and their own), Steve and Dee were able to position themselves as experts and direct the class to focus more on the racialized impacts of zero tolerance policies and their role in the school-to-prison pipeline. By focusing on the inequalities in discipline policies such as zero tolerance, the students in this reading leaders project display critical connections between policies, which are often framed as value neutral and applied even-handedly, and the students on whom these policies are frequently unevenly applied.

I focused here on two main themes for the Reading Leader assignment. The first is the kind of othering that happens in narratives about schools and students. We see one example with the work of Nasir of how students can resist othering in their own work. In Nasir’s case, he built on readings that I brought to class of how Muslim students are stereotypes by their classmates and then reframed for the rest of the class popular narratives that have traditionally positioned students with his identity as evil and as enemies of the United States. In addition to seeing ways that students resisted othering in their own work (and Nasir’s presentation was just one example), the assignment also led to students challenging my queer theoretical understanding of resisting othering in the classroom. I had initially framed othering as something to be avoided
and resisted, but the moves by Britt to other white supremacy in her presentation on segregation troubled this simplistic approach. I still am unsure to what extent any kind of move to place groups of individuals as ‘other’ fits within a queer pedagogies framework, but Britt and I were both faced with the discomfort and hedging that our decision on this point allowed.

The second theme I identified was how students were able to use their own critical approach to the subjects at hand to guide the class discussion. In the example from all three Reading Leaders Presentations, students chose the focus for their projects, which then allowed them to explore the approaches that they already bring to class and also lead the rest of the class in those directions. While I initially imagined the Social Context Journals as the primary space where students could explore their critical responses to the course content, as in the previous sections I see that my goals for one assignment frequently blend over into other assignments. What I saw from the presentations of Britt and Monica, Steve and Dee, and Nasir was a focus on specific aspects of the readings and discussion that they extended into a critique of structures in their own experiences. Monica discussed how the examination of segregation played out in her own school and created to a negative class environment; Dee and Steve brought in new sources to the discussion that I started with the readings I had selected, and then they chose to focus on the racialized aspect of zero tolerance; and Nasir related our shared reading to popular culture representation of individuals with his shared identity.

One final note is that I initially conceived of the Reading Leaders activity as a way for students to, at least temporarily, assume the role of teacher in our classroom setting. While I have focused on the two themes above to organize the analysis, one important focal point across these trends is tied back into the critical pedagogy goal of students taking control of their own learning. I saw enacted in the Reading Leaders assignment several strands of this that I touched
on throughout this section. Students were able to position themselves as experts and leaders of the class by bringing in outside sources that extended the conversation that I directed in choosing my readings for class, as in the case with Dee and Steve and in the remote presentations that followed them. Students also brought their own lenses to the material, as in the case with Nasir, who brought his media studies interest to our discussion on the stereotypes facing Muslim students. Students were also able to make connections between their own experiences and inequality in the school system. While this is a commonality throughout much of what I discuss in this research, I find it of specific importance in this particular assignment because students used their experiences to guide the learning of their classmates. As mentioned previously, this reflects a move I made as the instructor to position my experiences and identities as examples and to model vulnerability for students. Whether or not this was intentional mimicking of my example I am not sure, but I do hope that it indicates a classroom environment that honors students’ lived experiences and stories, and troubles traditional ideas about knowledge making only residing in academic texts.

**Social Contexts Journaling and Unresolved Tensions**

I turn now to the journaling assignment, the last of the three assignments that I discussed in Chapter Four. I focus in this section mainly on two themes across the assignments. As with the Reading Leaders project, I continued to see tensions in students’ discussion of ‘other’ identities, namely that this work is not perfect by any means. I argue that the Social Context Journals gave me and the students in my class a way to further unpack these tensions. I partially attribute this to the structure of the entries, with the back-and-forth model of writing and response: the students first discussed systems and their role within them in their writing, I responded, and we were both required to investigate more deeply those points of tension that I highlighted. The second theme
to highlight has to do with student performance. In Chapter Four, I wrote at length about my understanding of student performance and my attempts to disrupt the more traditional understanding of this performance. The journal assignment provided me with some examples of how students themselves understand their own performances in the classroom, and how those performances are interpreted and impacted by others’ perceptions of them and their identities. Importantly, I also see moments where the course content and structure helped some of them to disrupt a normative understanding of successful performance. I conclude this section with a brief note about students bringing the topic of the Coronavirus pandemic into their writing. While I intended the Reading Leaders project to be the primary space for students to take control of the direction of the course, student engagement with this important part of our daily lives encouraged me to take up the subject more in my teaching and feedback.

The Role of Othering

Before turning to the student work from the primary study semester, I want to look at a piece of feedback that I received during the pilot study semester that really made me think deeply about how students (particularly students from the culture of power) feel when marginalized voices are front and center. After having gotten through the second unit on social contexts in education and after students had turned in at least some of their Social Contexts projects, I solicited anonymous feedback over Google forms. Amid the general comments about the workload and structure of class, I received a much longer response in answer to the prompt, “Other suggestions on how Christine can improve our learning in the class”:

I think some of the readings have been really inappropriate. Specifically the ones last week. They made me cry while reading them and I found the author to be biased and insensitive towards other students troubles [sic]. I think they need to not be so biased and
one sided when reading about hard things. Especially the bullying aspect. I almost didn't show up to class because of how upset the author made me.

My first reaction upon reading this was to immediately step back and think what I had done wrong that this student felt so uncomfortable. The strong reaction to bullying in this response suggests that the student themselves was feeling some powerful and painful memories related to school bullying, either for themselves or for someone they were close to. However, after re-reading the comment several times, reflecting some more, and speaking with other instructors, I concluded that a large part of what I was seeing was a student feeling really troubled by minoritized students being the focus of study. First, the reading the student referenced in the feedback is Kaia Tollefson’s (2010) “Straight Privilege: Unpacking the (Still) Invisible Knapsack.” While the article is somewhat disturbing in that it discusses LGBTQ students driven to suicide by bullying in schools, this was not the part of the reading that this student took issue with. Instead, the problem was that that reading is too biased, which I take to mean that the reading focuses on bullying and harassment only as it relates to LGBTQ students. The thing that really stands out to me here is their saying “I found the author to be biased and insensitive towards other students [sic] troubles [emphasis added].” In this case, Tollefson takes as a focus the experiences of LGBTQ students in schools, as most of our readings in this unit had centered the experiences of students marginalized by the school system in some way; it seems to me that this student was feeling othered by this focus. Now, the ‘other’ is students who do not identify as LGBTQ. To me, this suggests that the student was feeling quite othered by this reading in particular and was upset that they were having to feel this way, as they labeled it a problem that I need to address.
This reading of the comment is reinforced as the student continued to talk about the Social Context Journaling assignment. They wrote that “some of the readings for this unit have been difficult to write for our specific identity … perhaps the topic should have been if we’ve seen this in education or can understand the problem with these topics in education.” The student here expressed, in so many words, that the topics in this unit are not things to which they can relate. This echoes the fairly common theme that a discussion about race must only be relevant to people of color or that a discussion about sexuality can only be relevant to queer people. While I do not know for sure which student made this comment, I am certain that this student has a race. I am also certain that this student has a sexuality. What I take away from this feedback is that this student is not seeing how things like race or gender or ability impacts them – I would guess because their identities are seen as the norm. They experienced extreme discomfort that they were no longer the focus of content, or rather that their voice was not the center of the conversation. The last part of this comment makes me think that, at the heart of this, this student was being made uncomfortable by being confronted with the harm that schools are doing to marginalized students. Maybe that is not a generous read of the situation. Regardless, I took this comment to heart and turned my gaze and questions on myself as the teacher. I include this response from the pilot study because it was one of the catalysts that encouraged me to rework the social context journaling. In some ways, refocusing the assignment to examine structures of power in schools is similar to what this student is suggesting. On the other hand, it is still incredibly important in the assignment (which is reflective of its importance in the class as a whole) to reflect on our own place within these structures. As I mentioned in Chapter Four, a goal for this assignment is for students to look both at structures and their roles within them, and
this included a conscious reframing of the class and the assignment to resist separating marginalized students into a neat box to study.

Turning to social context journal entries for the semester under study, I found echoes of that previous student’s struggles in students’ journals. Here, I provide examples of a theme of tensions between how students frame the people they read about in class as “others” and also the way that they resist these practices. The design of the Social Context Journal assignment seemed to provide opportunities for those tensions to manifest and be explored together. One important aspect about the above piece of feedback is that I had no opportunity to talk to the student about what they were feeling in relation to the reading. A similar dynamic manifested in class projects where I provide feedback that students may or may not return to. One of the aspects of the journal assignment that I will examine across the examples that follow has to do with the dialogue that is made possible by requiring students to respond to my feedback. Not only does this prompt further dialogue between myself and the students (as I discuss in this section and also in Chapter Six), but it also furthers the queer literacies approach that writing is never finished and so always in conversation with reader and writer. In other examples, students show some grappling with these tensions and contradictions themselves without my prompting.

In one example from Raylan’s entry on socioeconomic status, there was some tension about pushing beyond stereotypes about low-income students, but also some places where he ended up embracing the stereotype. In our class time, we spent a decent amount of time talking about some of the myths around poverty and student performance. There was some framing in the writing that makes me think that he saw these students as inherently at a disadvantage. He opened the paragraph up by writing, “If school was a foot race, low-income students are starting this race behind everyone else with their shoe-laces tied together.” His words tread dangerously
close to only seeing the struggles that these students face while not considering their strengths. He continued that low-income students “do not have access to many of the things that wealthier students see as a necessity like a safe home, steady meals, access to technology, and a parent who can help them with there [sic] homework every night.” While this piece of writing did engage with many of the obstacles that we discussed in class, such as the idea that engagement from low-income parents may be due to a lack of opportunity to engage rather than a lack of interest (Gorski, 2008), it also suggested that all low-income students lack a “safe home,” which is another kind of stereotype about poor students. However, he concluded the section by returning to the myths we had discussed in class and highlighting how these myths are harmful. He writes that “When we add these false cultural notions around poverty and low-income students, we are telling these students that it is their fault that they are starting behind everyone else.” In this final example, while low-income students are still “starting behind,” he also critiqued the myth of meritocracy and the ‘bootstraps’ idea of personal accountability for poverty. This ultimately shows how imperfect the work is, for the students and also for myself.

Another student entry, this one focusing on LGBTQ students in schools, shows further internal contradictions. Kelly, who had mentioned throughout the course of her entries that her family had lived in the Pacific Northwest, the Mountain West, and the Southeast, discussed some of the regional differences around treatment of queer folks. She started her journal entry by writing that “the first idea I had was that students who identify as LGBTQ+ are more oppressed in schools in the South.” She continued that “I want to make clear that I am making a generalization from what I have seen in my personal experience. For the sake of this essay, I will assume this generalization is valid.” This framed the remainder of her response. Although she acknowledged this viewpoint to be something of a generalization, it still categorized one area as
‘worse’ for LGBTQ students and people. On the other hand, the fact that she named her subjectivity rather than presenting her experience as fact (as so often happens with norms that we do not stop to interrogate) is helpful in supporting her readers in understanding how to approach her analysis. I noted this in my comments to her. I also supported her in wading through some of the messiness here. I acknowledged first that this framing does have some merit, “I tend to take this view as well, having grown up in Texas. Also, there is some research that agrees that the South is a very specific environment where religion more heavily impacts LGBTQ experience.” I then switched to a critique of viewing the country in this way, where the North is more enlightened than the South. “I get concerned that framing like this lets Northern states off the hook for their role in discrimination.” I then used the (overplayed?) example of Martin Luther King Jr. and his chilly reception in the North, noting that “I don’t have specific examples for LGBTQ people.”

I wonder about a couple of things related to this exchange. First, I see this as a form of othering on some level because the student essentially labeled Southern states as more homophobic. There is data to back up some of the claims she made related to critiquing the South and its Biblical influence. After all, most “no promo homo” laws that still exist are in the South (GLSEN, 2018). There are also some problems with this thinking, of course. Using a similar viewpoint to the one discussed in the previous section where I pushed our reading leaders to move beyond the idea that only people holding angry racist signs can be racist, I similarly here asked Kelly to think about who is exempt from self-reflection if we use this kind of framing. Overall, these two examples are illustrative of the theme of messiness in understanding identity and learning about/with/for the ‘other’ (Kumashiro, 2001b). I see these two examples as pointing to a struggle in the class as a whole to balance between seeing issues as systemic, where systems
unequally distribute opportunity, and ignoring the cultural capital that marginalized students do have. Given students’ grappling in their journals, I suspect this is still an issue with my framing of the course. In Raylan’s piece, he seemed very cognizant of the systems of oppression at play, but also emphasized only the trials facing low SES students. For Kelly, she provided an example that was rooted in experience and truth, but also advanced stereotypes about tolerance in the United States.

**Student Reading of Academic Performance**

Turning to the next theme in my analysis of the SCJs, throughout the journal entries, students reflected on their performance in schools and how that performance (both academic and social) was affected by their identities and the ways that those identities were read by classmates and teachers. While students were clearly able to articulate the ideas prior to their enrollment in my course, the course readings and discussion seemed to provide words and terms for these experiences that might help to clearer articulate those experiences.

In Nasir’s first entry, he wrote about how discrimination against him because of his identity has led to less interest in his classes. He relayed one instance about the way his peers treated him during high school that had an impact on his academic performance. He wrote that “I had a class that I really loved and I had a lot of friends in that class. At first, teasing me about my identity was done for laughs and it did not bother me much.” While he did not get into detail about the specific class, he did find it important to mention that he enjoyed the class and his peers in it for a while. However, this feeling did not last. He continued, “the jokes became more insensitive and I started feeling self-conscious about my identity in a way that I should not be. The topic and the people became much less interesting and I disengaged.” He related this experience to the readings from the course, arguing that “When students get discriminated
against, they feel isolated and could disengage from the class, the subject or the school in general.” It seems that in this high school experience, his peers were mainly the cause of this isolation. What started out as comments about his identity “for laughs” ended up causing him to feel self-conscious about his identity “in a way that [he] should not be.” A subject that he once enjoyed became “less interesting” based on his experiences with discrimination from his peers. This also tied into much of the discussion in our class that critical education, one that is culturally relevant and sustaining, is important to help students engage with the content at all.

His negative experiences continued at the university in this study, but in this case his instructors were the driving force behind his loss of interest. “Some of my professors would say things that are discriminatory without realizing it, and in those classes I end up losing focus or interest or both,” he related. He identified this as the first barrier to success, and as something that had even caused him to “ponder dropping out of the program and really hating” the university in this study. He wrote that “this somehow put a wall between me and everyone else … Not just between me and the professor, but the students as well … This was not something that I only faced in class, but on campus in general.” This reflection feels important (and troubling) because it very closely mirrors results from a campus climate survey that was conducted by the university in recent years. It appears that the university is not improving quickly enough to make marginalized students feel welcome. He concluded this reflection by noting that what improved his experience was finding “some good friends and a comfortable class environment that I felt more comfortable with being a college student at [the university].” Funnily enough, when that happened, even my grades improved.” In this example, Nasir took something in the readings and related them to his own life experience (which is necessary in support of centering marginalized voices in higher education). For me, this also served as an
example of meeting one of my goals in the redesign of the class, i.e., that my class gave students space to explore these ideas through the lens of their experience. Nasir in this entry reflected on taking some of his passions and frustrations about film and the racism in how people with his ethnicity are portrayed on screen and incorporated it into the Reading Leaders activity (discussed in the previous section) when he was a class leader, illustrating again the permeable boundaries between the assignments in the class. As he concludes, “it really does matter that students are interacting and learning in an environment that feels welcoming to them.” Thinking about this from a performance perspective, Nasir was thinking deeply about what makes for a ‘good’ and ‘bad’ student; he recognized that his grades and attention to the material was directly tied to how his fellow students and teachers treated him, amount of microaggressions that he had to endure in class, and his ability to connect with friends who shared his identity. In this case, Nasir suggests it is the environment that prevents him from succeeding rather than some internal driving force, which connects to my goals for how students would frame these ideas in the course content.

Eric was another student who reflected on what it means to be a ‘good student.’ Eric wrote in his journaling and freewriting about his experience in schools as a white cis man, but also reflected on his family’s low socioeconomic status growing up. Over the course of several Social Context Journals, his initial representation of himself as an underachieving student shifted. In his first entry, Eric characterized his performance in school in a quite disparaging way, writing “I wasn’t the best student so I had to take the additive classes to improve my English.” In the marginal comments in the paper (which students were not required to respond to in any way) I asked him about the framing of this piece of writing. I asked, “I’m also thinking about how this relates to your point above about not fitting in with what counts as normal. Do you think you were outside of what counts as normal … Why do you say this?” Eric did not
respond to this formally, and I reminded him in the comment that he did not have to address it. I was mainly trying to disrupt the negative self-talk and also the binary of good and bad students. I was also interested in hearing what he meant by saying that he was “not the best student.” What makes for a good student? What goes into this performance for him? I did not necessarily need to hear the answer to these questions, but I did want to give him the space to think about it for himself.

In his third entry, he did end up elaborating on this more. I do not know if his choice was in response to my prompting or the readings that we had done about social class that now resonated with him. He again used the phrasing of the “best student,” but unpacked it a lot more this time:

When I was younger my father had to work seventy hours a week, it was the only way my parents could save money and keep two kids fed at the same time … Now this isn’t a sob story, but unfortunately I wasn’t the best student either. I had to drag my parents to mandatory meetings during worktimes, so needless to say I was scolded a few times. I believe it was because I wasn’t a normal student for the school I was in. I went to public school in [town in our state]. Of course, there were many families who were more well off than my family was. I wasn’t a normal student I didn’t have the help most other students did, I never did my homework. I think my teachers never liked me for that and other reasons. I had a fifth grade teacher that would send me to the second grade classrooms because I wasn’t ‘well behaved enough.’

His transition over the course of just a few weeks feels important because it shows a shift from stating as fact that he was not a good student, to a longer analysis of how school achievement and good behavior are normative performances. He attributed some of his disengagement with
school to not being a “normal” student in the school environment he was in. He also highlighted that his teachers did not like him because he was not “well behaved enough.” It is significant that he put this part of the response into quotation marks because it highlights the fact that he understood that what counts as good behavior is an arbitrary construction.

Finally, I turn to Kelly’s second journal entry as another example of this theme of performance and identity. Kelly wrote about her experiences as an Asian American adopted into a white family, and how this impacted her academic performance. She highlighted that her neighborhood was all white, her family was all white, and her school was all white. She then offered up a few different ways of how she makes sense of her race and her family experiences. She wrote, in relation to identifying as “Asian American,” that “I do not really like that label with regards to my upbringing. Because I was adopted and was raised in the U.S., I see myself as just American, and actually ‘White’ because I grew up in that environment.” She further noted that this “is different for other Asian Americans because they might have immigrated and brought their culture to America.” Here, again, there is a sense that race is somewhat performative, and also that when she encountered others’ perspectives of what it should mean to be Asian American, she felt the pressure to perform her Asian identity ‘correctly.’ Her experiences in a white household had caused her to identify with those aspects of herself more strongly than a sense of Asian identity. She was careful to point out that this is contrary to other Asian Americans who may have “brought their culture” with them. She seemed not to connect with this. However, she did discuss how her Asian American identity impacted her school experiences. She referenced a quote that I had presented in class from an Asian American student in Lee’s (1994) research on model minorities: “They [whites] will have stereotypes, like, we’re smart – They are so wrong; not everyone is smart.” In relation to this, Kelly wrote, “Asian
American students are seen as the ‘model minority’ but not all Asian American students are like this. I related to this a lot because I do not have the natural smarts, but I work really hard.” This seems to separate how she viewed her own identity from how others view her identity. Earlier in the entry, she asserted that she did not feel very comfortable with identifying as Asian American, and more closely identified with white identity. However, in this section, she pointed out how the expectations set for her in school mirror this “model minority” stereotype that she did not see herself as being a part of.

**One Last Note About the Impact of COVID-19**

While this is not something that came up extensively in students’ social context papers, it is worth noting that I saw throughout the course an increased awareness of the impact that COVID-19 had and is having on schools and students. I brought some of these points up for students in the questions that I asked them in relation to their Social Contexts Journaling, and I was mainly triggered to do so by a reflection that Raylan wrote at the end of his final entry. He concludes his entry by addressing the “effect that COVID-19 is having on low-income students and their nutrition,” writing that “It is estimated that 22 million students rely on their free or reduce-price lunch that they receive at school as their source of nutrition for the day. When schools are shut down, these students go hungry.” After his reflection, he had also included some links at the bottom that redirected to news articles that we had not discussed in class. It feels clear that he felt compelled enough to bring this into his writing that he went and did outside research to make it relevant to the content of socioeconomic status that he was already discussing. In fact, he ended up using this topic of student nutrition and COVID-19 as his final assignment project regarding a problem present in schools and what communities and schools are doing to combat that problem. As we also saw in Jessica’s free writes, she brought into her
definition of racism the example of blaming certain races of people for spreading Coronavirus. This came up in discussion during class quite frequently as we went along.

When I designed the course, I intended the Reading Leaders assignment to be a place where students could take some control over the direction of the class. As I discussed in the early sections of this chapter, there was much more permeability among the assignments and the intentions that I set for them. My redesigning of the course to honor a queer literacies framework involved not just taking the lead from students in the spaces I had set aside for them. After seeing this interest from students in the impacts of Covid-19, which at the time was in the quite early stages of the pandemic, on the public school system that we had spent so much time studying. In this sense, I see this as another opportunity for students to co-create the course and its focus. As I saw students engaging with Covid-19 and its impacts, I brought this topic more into our class discussion, and also began to ask questions related to Covid-19 on students’ papers. Earlier in the semester I would frequently ask students in their journal entries about how what they were discussing might relate to structures; I pivoted this later in the semester to ask students how the impact of the pandemic related to the topic under discussion. This is an instance where I abandoned the structure I had planned for the course before the semester began and instead tried to focus on material that students identified as important to their lives.

Conclusion

In highlighting trends within and across the student work in these three key assignments, one thing that became clear is that it was somewhat difficult to isolate themes within individual assignments as there is quite a bit of overlap. There is also significant overlap between coding, which is apparent through the themes I discussed across the assignments. Free writes let me see patterns in student written performance over time, namely in their refutation of easy answers and
in laying out their thought process over the course of multiple projects. The Reading Leaders activity and Social Contexts Journaling showed the constant struggle to resist othering and also places where the students and I still brought an othering framework into the material. The Reading Leaders activity also allowed students to bring in their own critically conscious approach to the material. The Social Contexts Journaling provided students with space to examine their academic performance in schools and what makes for a successful student, as well as gave them an opportunity to engage with the overwhelming presence of Coronavirus in their lives and in the U.S. school system. I saw multiple students tying their perceived success or failure as students to the expectations laid out for them in relation to their racial and ethnic identity and also their socioeconomic status. While all three assignments gave students an opportunity to share their experiences in relation to the material, the social contexts assignment provided the opportunity for the students to not only make extensive connections to the material, but also to engage in one-on-one conversation with me to further unpack their writing. One overarching theme that I identified across all the assignments, and that I mentioned at various points in this chapter, is that the students and myself brought a great degree of vulnerability to the assignments. I designed my queer pedagogies (at least in part) to model this vulnerability for students and provide students with the opportunity to draw on their lived experiences and identities to help make sense of the structural inequities our class explored. Sharing our personal experiences can be quite difficult, especially if those experiences are othering. That this genuine engagement came up so frequently in students’ work suggests that I may have created a space where students felt comfortable bringing their lived experiences to class. Having identified some trends shared by many students in the course, I now turn to focus on case studies of two specific students in the class.
CHAPTER VI

DISCOMFORT, EXPANSIVENESS, AND CRISIS: TWO CASE STUDIES

Introduction

This chapter will focus on two students from the study semester of my required diversity course. I have decided to focus on these two students, Alex and David, as case studies because, while they were both students who fit with more traditional metrics of ‘successful’ students, they engaged with the assignments outlined in Chapter Four in very different and yet fruitful ways. In addition, my interactions with them show my different engagements with students at various points on the spectrum of critical consciousness, as well as spaces where these students pushed me on my own understanding of the course content. These students illustrate the opportunities opened up by an approach that favors ongoing conversation around topics of diversity in education and especially the value of meeting students where they are and pivoting teaching approaches accordingly. Additionally, I highlight my queer literacies approach that views writing as an ongoing process that is always in revision and the classroom as a space where students can engage using their multiple fluid identities. Alex and David are examples of two very different styles of engagement with the course content and style, but whose experience with this queer literacies-based diversity course seemed impactful.

The first student I will discuss, Alex\(^1\), is someone who had already given a lot of thought to their own identity and how that identity operates in schools. Alex identified as non-binary and

\(^1\) Pseudonym chosen by student.
was quite open about that with the whole class. Alex was almost always willing to jump into
class conversation in small and in large groups and showed genuine engagement with the
material; they are someone who fit into the more traditional umbrella of participation in large
group discussion. I will focus my discussion of Alex in this chapter mainly on the submissions
from their Social Contexts Journal assignments and my responses to them. My feedback to Alex
shows one approach for students who have spent a significant amount of time thinking about
their own complex identities and how those identities are always related to privilege and
oppression in the U.S. school system. My responses and feedback to Alex usually directed them
to examine structures in education and think more about how systems shape the ways our
identities function in school. Additionally, I will also look at the Reading Leaders project of
which Alex was a part, and I will highlight their presentation as a case where I was pushed to re-
examine my own interactions in the classroom and also to expand my actual practice of students
directing the class.

The second student, David, contributed in ways that differed from Alex. His vocal
participation in class was mainly in smaller group settings, and almost every class period (while
we were meeting in person) David would stay behind to discuss one aspect of the day’s resources
or discussion with me, at least briefly. My experience of David is that he was quite analytical and
viewed the material in class through a more scientific lens. His parents were both attorneys, and
having this information gave me a window into what I read as a focus on fairness in the
education system. David, who identified as white, had had quite strong negative experiences in
the education system as a student with learning disabilities and as a result had trouble
disentangling that experience with oppression from other aspects of his identities that gave him
significant privilege. My discussion of David’s work in this chapter largely focuses on his Social
Contexts Journaling but also extends to a discussion that took place after one class period (in fact, our last class period in person) where we continued a conversation that started in his first Journal entry. Rather than focusing on systems, my interactions with David focused primarily on intersectionality and how to make sense of the myriad ways that our different identities cause us to interact in schools.

**Alex**

**Fluidity in Identity**

As I discussed in Chapter Four, the Social Context Journal assignment provided a context for students to explore structural oppression in the education system as well as reflect on the ways in which they were implicated in the learning. Alex’s first journal entry was written in response to our readings on language and identity, specifically responding to works by Anzaldúa (1987) and Delpit (1988). Immediately, Alex began making connections between this topic and aspects of their identity that they had spent more time thinking about. In their first entry, they wrote:

I thought it was very interesting to read about the different types of language. Normally I think of language as something like English, Spanish, German, etc. Languages have clear lines and boundaries, they each have their own vocabulary, and generally they’re associated with a culture. But both authors write about language in a different way than how I’ve thought about them in the past. For Anzaldua [sic], language is not just a binary where this language is English, this language is Spanish, but any combination of traditional languages. To her, Spanish and English are just as much languages as Pachuco or Tex-Mex. I have never thought about languages in such a fluid way before, which strikes me as odd given so much of my identity is based in fluidity. I think that’s likely
because for me, as a mono-lingual English speaker, I’ve never had much experience with more than one language.

I think this example is important for several reasons. Alex first clearly labeled how they thought about language before the readings, then picked out how Anzaldúa breaks down the binary between Spanish and English and related that back to other parts of their identity, which were “based in fluidity.” Together, these responses illustrate how Alex was making sense of the readings using the reflections that they had obviously already done on their own identity and their fluidity. I drew attention to those connections in my response to Alex’s writing: “I appreciated hearing about the fluidity of language in your piece. As a queer woman of color, I’m sure that this is something that [Anzaldúa] is getting at in her writing.” The above paragraph acted to trace the way that Alex moved from thinking about language more traditionally – having “clear lines and boundaries” – to understanding it as more fluid. This realization seems in large part driven by other aspects of Alex’s identity that they saw as fluid, a fluidity that Alex shared somewhat frequently in class in small groups, in their other written assignments, and in their private conversations with me.

One class period right before we transitioned online was one example where Alex shared aspects of their identity in class as we were all unpacking gender norms together. In the class period focusing on gender and sexuality in schools, Jamie, our Reading Leader for the day, was directing the class in a discussion about how students know what gender rules to follow. This discussion followed a screening of the animated short Tomboy (Taylor, 2008) about a girl who likes to do “boy things” and is criticized by her peers for it. In a testament to the power of student-led classroom spaces, the students had the following conversation without any prompting on my end:
Jamie: So how do the students know the expectations of what she should be doing or shouldn’t be doing?

Eric: Well [in our small group] we talked about society and how like even the books they’re reading and stuff so they– they get influence in the movies they’ve watched and even from their parents too. So I feel like those can have an effect on the students ...

Jamie: Yeah [calling on Alex]

Alex: It was pretty heavily from the peers too in this one. Like there was um one of the girls and one of the boys who were like very clear like, “I know what the roles are” and then other kids that were like, “I didn’t– I don’t know is red a boy color or a girl color?” And it was like, “oh it has to be pinkish red to be a girl color” and like oh ok I guess that’s how it is.

Jamie: Yeah [calling on Steve]

Steve: It just occurred to me um when you guys said society that um like our bathroom signs [Pause, agreement noises from the class] are like it’s a dress– for a girl it’s a dress but like I mean [he gestures around]

[Laughter from class]

Alex: I’m the only one I think wearing a skirt and I’m not a girl!

[More laughter]

This moment to me feels important in terms of the entire class and how they were constructing meaning around gender norms in schools and even in our own classroom. Steve listened to the examples from the video (that Alex and Eric had been discussing) and brought his own example (bathroom signs) from the world that we are familiar with every day. He pointed out that even something as banal as bathroom signage can reinforce stereotypes. When he gestured around the
classroom after making the point about the girls’ bathroom sign showing a figure in a dress, he called us to examine how the vast majority of the students in the class are not conforming to such an image. As Alex then astutely pointed out, they were the only one wearing a skirt and “I’m not a girl.” Steve first highlighted that no one in the class was ‘correctly’ adhering to these gendered stereotypes, and Alex playfully took this example a step farther in troubling our collective notion of who is allowed to wear ‘boy clothes’ and ‘girl clothes.’

In both of these situations, Alex relied on the fluidity of their own identity to both make sense for themselves how other aspects of identity (such as language) can also be quite fluid, as well as invite the class to observe that fluidity along with them. In the video, the children criticize the main character (also called Alex, coincidentally) for not conforming to gender stereotypes around clothing. In our classroom, this same subversion of gender norms—is met with appreciative laughter; of course. I argue that this discussion illustrates the ways that multiple performances of gender were present in the classroom and were being normalized in our classroom “society” (to use Eric’s language). For Alex, not only was the fluidity of identity coming up in private writing that only I see, but the fluidity of their identity in connection to topics in the course was also presented in the classroom for everyone to see.

Resisting Othering

As I mentioned in Chapter Four, one change that I implemented for the Social Contexts Journaling Assignment from previous semesters had to do with my concerns around how the course’s framing of the material may have been leading students to position minoritized groups as Other. Again, I do not see these categorizations as any kind of failing of individual students, but rather a disconnect between the way I famed the issues in education and my own commitments to resist othering. I now highlight one specific section of Alex’s first journal entry.
to illustrate a way that students can resist language that is othering. In this section Alex focused on Delpit’s (1988) idea about making the culture of power explicit for students from marginalized populations. Alex tried to unpack an experience that they admit they have not lived themselves:

Although I don’t have experience with misunderstanding question-commands directly, I can imagine how confusion around language and phrasing would result in being coded as a bad student. If I thought something was optional or didn’t understand why I needed to listen to someone, I wouldn’t do what they told me to. I wouldn’t be trying to be difficult, I just wouldn’t understand what was expected. But conversely, if I thought I had very clearly told the class something and the majority of the children did what I had asked, I would probably think the child who didn’t react was trying to misbehave, not that they didn’t understand.

This phrasing strikes me because I routinely see students discussing experiences with which they are not familiar using us/them language binaries. However, in this case, Alex acknowledged first that they had not had such an experience as they described. Then, instead of talking about how another student might feel in this situation, Alex tried to place themselves in the students’ position and discuss what kinds of effects such a positionality might have on a student and their learning. In this section of the entry, Alex used a lot of “I” pronouns, signaling that they did not see the students in Delpit’s article as others in a binary. To be clear, just the presence of “I” pronouns does not necessarily automatically mean that students are authentically engaging with experiences with which they are not familiar. In Chapter Two, I highlight Owen’s (2005) experience teaching diversity courses and criticize her assertion that students’ using first person pronouns leads them away from othering by default. The examples that she presents I find to be
essentializing religious experiences rather than fully understanding their complexity. However, Alex’s use of “I” pronouns felt more exploratory. Alex noted at the beginning of their first entry that they do not have any lived experience with the kind of language minoritizing that Delpit describes. In the above passage, I see Alex attempting to put themselves into that position, while at the same time acknowledging the hypothetical nature of their framing, using words like “I would probably think.” I think this framing resists the kind of stereotyping that I am concerned with in role-playing exercises, while also attempting to feel the emotion of being in another’s position. Also considering the general fluidity with which Alex views their identities, I feel that their phrasing was an attempt at refusing yet another binary: the us/them binary.

Additionally, Alex tried to put themselves into the position of not only the language minoritized child (Delpit uses the example of an elementary aged child, which I see Alex drawing on here as well) but also the teacher. It is very important to a queer theoretical approach to situate issues of inequity in education not with individuals but instead with systems (Kumashiro, 2016). In the realm of Education, this misdirection can often paint teachers as the problem while ignoring the greater systems in which teachers are embedded. Blackburn and Clark (2011) resist the impulse to see individual teachers or individual classrooms as “wholly liberatory or wholly oppressive” (p. 244), and I also strive for a similar presentation in my own classroom. I feel an attempt to hold teachers in community in Alex’s journal entry as they also attempted to understand the viewpoint of educators in such a scenario. Alex saw not only how it can be confusing for children who do not understand that commands in the culture of power are often couched as questions and also how teachers can miss how their words and phrasing upholds the hidden curriculum. Instead of rushing to blame teachers for not being clear, Alex attempted to put themselves (even temporarily) in both spaces.
Writing in Conversation

As mentioned in Chapter Four, framing our writing in the course as more of a dialogue between myself and the students was a focus of my restructuring of the Social Contexts Journaling assignment as this approach somewhat queers the expectation that any writing assignment is truly finished. In focusing on my questions to Alex’s journal entries and, in return, their responses to me, I read the exchanges like a conversation between us happening textually. A few things strike me about the following examples in a broad sense. One of my goals with this kind of dialogic feedback is to respond to students wherever they find themselves on the spectrum of critical consciousness. In Alex’s case, pushing them to examine more deeply about their own identity did not feel horribly fruitful because they had already, as shown in the previous discussion, put quite a significant amount of thought into their own identities and how those identities impacted them in school. Instead, most of my comments and questions to Alex focused on how what they were writing about related to structures and institutions. Additionally, I believe that our conversations began to perform a dialogic spiral (Kinloch & San Pedro, 2013) rather than the pervasive norm of top down, evaluator/evaluated hierarchy between teacher and student, as we both carefully pushed on and expanded each other’s comments and writing.

In Alex’s first journal entry discussed in the previous sections, they focused on language. Because their first entry was already so deeply self-reflective, I did not feel it particularly necessary to ask questions that requested introspection, as I did with many other students. Instead, in my terminal comments to Alex’s first entry, I posed the following question based on their writing:

[If] we want to change the culture of power … what order does this go in? Do we need to change how we teach and what kids learn, and then they will go out into the world and
change the way the workforce works? Or do we need to change the rules of power out in the workforce, and only then teach children to resist the culture of power?

My questions on Alex’s papers were very focused on thinking about how what they were saying on the individual level can be moved into a more structural level. This is one example of how I adapted my feedback to students to meet them where they are. In Alex’s case, I felt that the best way for us to continue our written conversation was to shift that thinking towards school structures and institutions. I also engaged them in a discussion that is still ongoing in the field of education: while Delpit’s (1988) paper suggests that students who are not fluent in the rules of the culture of power need to be taught those rules directly in schools, other authors like Young (2007) argue that Delpit’s proposal will keep the rules of power from ever changing. My question echoed this debate and tried to bring Alex into the academic conversation. At the same time, in reflecting on my response presented in this chapter, I am now quite aware that I had posed this question by using the word “or” in quite a binary way: does change happen in one location or another. This binary framing did not really leave room for the possibility that they might both be happening at the same time. It is quite hard to avoid thinking in binaries!

Apart from focusing on structures, in our written conversations Alex showed that they felt comfortable pushing back a bit on my position and asserting their own. In Alex’s second journal entry, they wrote about how in their nannying work with one child, they had been able to have frank and honest discussions with the child about being trans and how these conversations had been educative both for Alex and for the child that they nanny. At the end of the journal entry, I posed the following question: “what could parents or just the general population do [to educate kids about LGBTQ identities]? One example from my own experience is going to school board meetings as a member of the community or as a parent. Other thoughts?” In my response, I
was again moving Alex to think a bit beyond their own experiences and instead reflect about big picture movements to resist normative notions of gender. I used the example of a school board meeting as something that I personally had done in my free time to give a jumping off point. Alex’s response shows some of the tentative performances involved in resisting the instructor-as-authority paradigm. They began their response by writing “I think that going to board meetings is a great way to push for change within schools.” While it appears that Alex is agreeing with me, the rest of their response suggested a more generic agreement because I as the teacher had presented the idea.

They then immediately pivoted to why my example was not actually a great one, using my home state of Texas (a fact which the whole class knew at this point in the semester). Alex instead suggested “voting or pressuring state and federal governments” as an alternative, and then moved on to highlighting the problem with my initial suggestion. They wrote, “In places like Texas with the ‘No Promo Homo,’ it would be useless to strike up a conversation in a school board meeting about including queer topics when it’s actively against the law to do so.” Alex pointed out one limitation to my suggestion, pushing me to reflect more deeply about the ways that I was imagining community engagement. They concluded with a sophisticated critique of voting and the government as a way to enact structural change. Alex finished up their response with, “But I’m also against just relying on the government and voting to enact change – the process is slow at best and does nothing at worst.” Alex’s concluding sentiment reminds me a great deal of Spade’s (2011) caution against relying on government and laws to secure rights for trans folks. It is interesting because I actually agree with Alex on their last point, although after reading their response it is quite clear to me that I did not present that kind of framing with my initial school board meeting suggestion.
I believe that the above exchange indicates some of the performances in schools between teacher and student, and in this case shows a bit of shift in the more normative performance of those roles. In Alex’s pushback to my example and redirection, some of the traditional hierarchy came through, as Alex was somewhat compelled to tell me that my example was good. But I argue that the hierarchy broke down somewhat as they disrupted my idea about what makes for advocacy work. Alex knew the way that higher education constructs a good student is having a certain degree of respect for authority, in this case me as the instructor. They must agree with my suggestions on some level to maintain a ‘good student’ performance. But I am hoping what this exchange shows is that I have also opened up space for students to critique the ideas that I put forward and thereby disrupt some of these rigid performances toward different ways of performing what ‘good student’ can mean. Alex’s offering up an instance where my suggestion would not be effective as well as critiquing to some extent the framing of the entire question (that is, critiquing traditional avenues of community engagement such as voting), shows them pushing me to rethink some of the ways that I frame material for the class. In future semesters, I have attempted to put even more emphasis on the kinds of advocacy work that stakeholders within school systems do, as well as thinking about approaches that move beyond policy changes.

**Discomfort**

In addition to instances where Alex’s comments compelled me to expand the course content, their class activity for their Reading Leaders assignment was another instance of tension. The following classroom interaction stands out to me as a gap-space between my internal desire to, in Kumashiro’s (2000) language, lead students into crisis, and my reaction when I am not the one facilitating the crisis. In his article, Kumashiro discusses how
“‘Education’ is not about repeating what we already know, or affirming what we already believe … education … can be a very discomfor ting process … Educators should expect their students to enter crisis” (p. 7). In other words, learning that we are part of an oppressive social structure (in the case of my class, in schools) and that we participate in and benefit from this oppression in various ways is likely to make students uncomfortable, a kind of crisis. I had my students read Kumashiro’s article because I think it reflects a lot of my own goals for the course (at least in theory), and also because I made very clear to my students that, of all the philosophical traditions we had read about, this critical pedagogical approach was the most closely aligned with my own philosophy.

Two students, Alex and Amanda, were the Reading Leaders for this class period where we had read Freire’s (1970) chapter from Pedagogy of the Oppressed on the banking model of education as well as the above-mentioned Kumashiro (2000) article. For the conclusion of their class time, Alex had created a Jeopardy game for the class to play in relation to the readings. They labeled the questions in the game multiple times as “spicy”\(^2\) and at one point I replied, “that’s good I like spicy.” However, it quickly becomes clear how uncomfortable I was with true spiciness. At the end of the activity when a student requested the category “Kumashiro for 500,” the following question appeared on the screen: “When is a time that you stereotyped someone without realizing it at the time?” Immediately after the text appeared, there was a chorus of “whoa,” “wow,” “oh,” and other noises from the class along with laughter.

Jessica \(\textit{[from the audience]}\): These are some spicy–

Alex: I told you they were!

Christine: No this is– this is good

\(^2\) In Alex’s usage in this context, spicy seemed to mean controversial or feisty.
[Laughter from class]

Alex: I’m trying— I’m trying to do the Kumashiro thing and like make people kind of go in a place of crisis and think like, “shit when– when have I done that cause I’ve probably done that.”

Christine: Maybe we actually— this might be a good thing to end on maybe we don’t have to share–

Alex: Everyone can think about it

Christine: Let’s just take— let’s just take like a minute or two to think about this “when is a time that you stereotyped someone without realizing it” and we don’t have to share it but let’s just think about it internally

Alex: They’re more food for thought than please share your traumatic moments in front of the class

[More laughter] (Class recording, 2.4.2020)

Now, I do not think it is possible to convey how uncomfortable I sounded (and felt) during this interaction. I could imagine in my head a chorus of students stating stereotypes they had about their peers, and immediately moved to shut it down, as we can see from this interaction. Even though Alex attempted the exact kind of pedagogy that I value, the “Kumashiro thing,” and I stated in the interaction “this is good,” I still shut the conversation down completely. I immediately reframed the question and instead asked students to “just think about it internally.”

Except for laughter, there was however no quiet time between any of the above comments in which students could do this kind of introspection. Alex explained their thinking and then before anyone could respond, I immediately asked us to “think” about when we have stereotyped others. However, after saying this, the remaining time of the students’ presentation was taken up with
either myself or Alex or Amanda saying something, and so there was no quiet time with which to stop and reflect about one of these times. Because I did not expect this interaction, I panicked about how it might play out and stopped it from happening. Even though my intention with the Reading Leaders activity was to provide students with an opportunity to exercise control over the class environment, that control only extended so far.

Immediately after the class ended, I felt like I had made a misstep. When I returned my feedback on the assignment to Alex and Amanda, I included the following explanation of the interaction.

I’ve also been thinking a lot about your question to the class about thinking about a time that we've stereotyped someone. [Alex], when you mentioned after class that the intention was to lead us all into crisis, I was immediately like, “I messed that up.” I was caught off guard, and I got scared thinking about what was going to happen if we all talked about a time when we had stereotyped someone. So I shut it down too quickly because of that discomfort I was feeling. I wish that I’d taken y’all’s lead on that instead because you were both embodying critical education much more than I was in that interaction. (Email, 2.9.2020)

It was important to me for these students to know that, even though I had been reactionary in the class, that I had appreciated what they were trying to do and would take a different route were such an interaction to happen again. Ultimately, while I think I still would be hesitant about students “sharing traumatic moments” in a large group setting, as Alex put, I do think that I took away an opportunity to really think about how we ourselves are implicated in the learning and doing this same kind of activity in small groups would definitely have been a good use of our time. When I think back on that class and I try to focus on the emotions that I felt, the loss of
control over the learning environment is the feeling that stands out to me most. I know that there are times in my own teaching and lesson planning that I deliberately ask difficult questions of students, questions that I know will make them uncomfortable. This instance to me was different because I was not expecting such a question during the class period. I think that discomfort on my part is what prompted me to shut down their activity in a way that was incongruent with my pedagogical commitments.

**David**

As I highlighted at the beginning of the chapter, David participated in my class quite differently than Alex and I believe experienced more of the “crisis” described by Kumashiro (2000) in relation to our course material. I structure this section almost exclusively around David’s first Social Context journal entry. There is a wealth of information in his original post, which was written in response to Beverly Tatum’s (2003) framework of active and passive racism and the idea that all white folks are inherently racist because of the society in which we live. His entry, followed by my gentle prompting to dig a bit deeper into discomfort, triggered a response from David that more explicitly laid out his concerns about Tatum’s framing and ultimately led to one of the most rewarding interactions in the class, from my perspective. My overall takeaway is that students in my class, Alex to some extent in the previous section and David in particular here, felt a level of comfort pushing back against things that they did not understand or. As I discuss below, while admittedly my first response is a bit of panic at the idea of outright conflict in the classroom, one aspect of my queer pedagogy is in opening a space to have these conversations. I obviously still have the goal of urging students on their critical thinking, but I also try to meet students wherever they are in the process. I argue here that this
Discomfort in Student Writing

With his first journal entry, David began by discussing in his opening paragraph the difference between Tatum’s (2003) definition of racism, “a system of advantage based on race” and prejudice, “a preconceived judgment or opinion, usually based on limited information.” He acknowledged how “useful” the two terms are, but then turned to explaining how those terms made him uncomfortable. He wrote:

However, to be brutally honest, I’m uncomfortable because I don’t think I’m consciously prejudiced or racist. However, Tatum’s discussion of the meaning of prejudice and racism helps me understand how I personally benefited from systematic racism, a.k.a. White privilege, and how I’ve been almost pre-programmed from childhood to have a built-in prejudice. Personally, it is hard for me when people assume I’m racist or prejudiced. Actually, I identify with oppressed people. Being dyslexic has caused me to see the world in a different light. I have been oppressed by society and the educational system for not being normal. Not being normal allows me to see how the system oppresses those of us who are seen as different.

In the previous paragraph, David laid out how useful Tatum’s definitions of racism and prejudice are, so it is not that he was rejecting the idea outright. Very understandably, as a person who has been marginalized, he also had a lot of complicated feelings about being called racist. In the book chapter that David referenced here (and that we read together for our class), Tatum acknowledges that this framing makes white people with whom she works quite uncomfortable. Tatum describes an exchange she often has with people learning about her ideas, when white
folks ask her, “Are you saying all Whites are racist?” … I am conscious that perhaps the question I am really being asked is, ‘Are you saying all Whites are bad people?’ The answer to that question is of course not.” I feel some of Tatum’s tension in David’s response as well. He did not see himself as a bad person; when he was confronted with the accusation that he was at least benefitting from racism he acknowledged it to be true. However, his understanding was complicated by the fact that he “[identified] with oppressed people.” When Tatum is asked if “all Whites are racist,” she reads the subtext of the question to instead illustrate a fear about all white people being “bad people.” In David’s response, the subtext to his question may be, ‘how can I be both oppressed by the system and also unfairly benefitting from the system at the same time?’ He seemed to also be understanding Tatum as saying that “all Whites are bad people.” My understanding is reinforced later during our in-person conversation about his journal entry when David asserted that people “should” have “super strong reactions” to the word racism.

In David’s writing, his experience of having a learning disability in school was something that he discussed quite a bit. In a later journal entry, he focused on a reading that discusses school policies such as the Individuals with Disabilities Act and individualized lesson plans. He writes as the very first lines of this entry, “Wow, this is about me in this article. [The author] is looking at my entire education and explaining it to me from the outside. I experienced all this from the inside.” There are a lot of ways to read the “wow” at the beginning of David’s paper, but I experienced it as surprise and appreciation that an authority – in this case, an author from our class – was writing about and validating an experience that David shares intimately. His identification with oppression and with disability I understand to be what was at the heart of this contradiction in David’s writing. It feels good to have our experiences and oppression validated,
but it feels bad to be told that we are part of the problem. How can we experience both things at the same time?

Going back to the first entry, David continued to unpack his complicated feelings by discussing the idea of active versus passive racism presented in the text. For Tatum, anything short of anti-racism is passive racism; she lists some examples, including laughing at racist jokes. David spent a lot of time discussing these definitions and their implications as well:

Using the above definitions of active and passive racism, all White people who aren’t blatant bigots, are probably passively racist. Personally, I have never laughed at a racist joke. Honestly, I don’t think I’ve ever heard one … Do I avoid difficult race related issues? Probably. In my defense, I’m reading and writing about this now and being asked to think about “difficult race related issues.” But honestly, tough conversations about race don’t come up much in my day-to-day life (perhaps that’s a reflection of my White privilege?). So maybe that means since I’m not walking against Tatum’s metaphorical moving sidewalk, I’m riding along passively.

Again, David was dealing with some very sophisticated concepts. There was no one in his world, at least that he could call to mind here, that would allow him to engage in these kinds of “difficult race related” conversations, so how could he enact some of the anti-racist work that Tatum is arguing is necessary for him to avoid being racist? However, he went beyond that to think about how even the fact that he did not have these kinds of opportunities in his everyday life might be a “reflection of [his] White privilege.” So then the question became not only how can I be part of the problem if I am also being oppressed, but also how can I enact these ideas if I do not have the network to do so? He also highlighted, rightly, that he was grappling with these issues now. Does taking a required diversity class and having these conversations count as anti-
racism? I can almost see David working through the feelings on paper in front of me, as even his observation about white privilege was punctuated by a question mark. In an interview conducted with David after the end of the semester, I was able to verify that I was correct in seeing the paper as a place to work through his thought process. David told me,

I always tried to make it so that it was not just a yes-man argument, so I’m not like ‘yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah’ and then a little bit of like push back. I never tried to be like—I know I mean I hopefully didn’t appear to be too indirectly like opposed to a lot of the issues. But I tried to do my thought process cause I understand that you were using this for your dissertation and you wanted like an actual thought process.

David did confirm my suspicions that he used the paper as a place to work through his complicated ideas on the subject of white privilege. However, he stated that he approached the assignment in this way not for his own benefit (although, he did mention in the same interview that identity and self-reflection were “all very important to like contextualize and write about”) but rather because it would benefit my dissertation work. I related to David in our conversation that this was something I had already noticed, and that I was excited that he had done this intentionally. His remarkable awareness of how sharing his complex ideas in his writing would give me the potential for really rich analysis seemed to show that he valued research and the inquiry process. This was possibly due to his identification as a research himself, as he related to me on several occasions his undergraduate research on insects. His comments here make me wonder what he would have written about if I were not conducting dissertation research in the class.

When I first read David’s paper, I was immediately drawn to the ways that he articulated being uncomfortable, specifically because we had read Kumashiro’s (2000) article about learning
through discomfort in a recent session. When I give feedback and questions to students, I try to think about what is most likely to lead to larger conversation. Since this idea about discomfort was what caught my attention and because we had just read a theoretical text with similar language, I decided to focus on that aspect of David’s entry. In reading it, I saw that he was somewhat struggling with the idea of learning through discomfort, but I also got the sense that he was not completely rejecting what Tatum and other authors are putting forward. He acknowledged the value that he saw in the writing, but also seemed to open himself up for further conversation. I asked at the end of his paper:

I’m struck by your repeated use of the term “discomfort” throughout this piece. I guess my question is, after reading this, how do you feel about Kumashiro’s idea about learning through crisis (which I would also maybe categorize as discomfort?) after digging into and expanding on these feelings? Do you agree with him that you are learning something? What is feeling this discomfort doing for you in terms of understanding the ideas in the course?

Generally, when I give feedback to students, points where we agree I treat with less depth than points of departure. I am more interested in where students are resistant to ideas – not necessarily because I want to change them, but because I want to unpack those ideas more.

My question really opened the floodgates to the longest response that he submitted all semester (in fact, this was the longest response that anyone submitted to a journal entry). I feel that it is worth reproducing his response in its entirety because of the passion and honesty that obviously went into it. David wrote:

Yes, I do feel uncomfortable. According to Kevin Kumashiro my discomfort is a good thing and that means I’m learning through crisis. But what am I learning? Yes, I am
learning about what Kumashiro calls “the dynamics of oppression.” But I’m feeling criminalized because I’m white/male/hetero. I have learned that Kumashiro thinks my privileges make me complicit with oppression (pg 58). When Kumashiro uses the word “complicit,” to me it implies I’m part of a crime. In your class, I am learning that I should be part of very needed changes. And I want to be part of the changes. Don’t you see, I’m already labeled as different and not normal because I’m dyslexic and ADHD. Lots of people believe there is no such thing as learning disabilities. We’re called lazy, stupid and fakers. I empathize with anyone marginalized. And now I am being criminalized, labeled, and prejudiced against for being white/male/hetero. I’m seen as the enemy, not an as [sic] ally. I’m branded as lazy, stupid, a faker for my disabilities. And now I’m being labeled a racist, a sexist (probably a rapist too), a homophobe and a hater. I know I am not those bad things, so of course, I’m uncomfortable. According to Kumashiro, my discomfort means I am in “crisis” and that it proves that I am learning that I really am all those bad things. I’m just too unaware and privileged, because I’m a white/male/hetero, to realize it. There’s some weird logic for you. If you don’t admit you are all those bad things, it just proves you are all those bad things because the accusations make you uncomfortable. Using Kumashiro’s logic, anyone thrown into crisis because they’re wrongly accused of murder, is a murderer because they’re thrown into crisis. I want to be part of building a better society. But if I feel criminalized, prejudiced against, and hated for being me, how can I feel welcome into the processes of change?

To be honest, when I first got David’s response, I panicked a bit. I read the response as a complete rejection of many of these ideas. There were some jumps in logic that I think come from more conservative circles, for example the comment about how he thought Kumashiro
would view him as “probably a rapist too.” But my advisor helped me to realize a couple of things. First, there must be a significant degree of trust between us if David was willing to discuss these complicated and somewhat conflicting feelings. Second, if he were not actually interested in grappling with these tough ideas then he would not have written this response, he would have written something generic. In the above response, David bolded and italicized the sentence “I want to be part of building a better society” so I could tell that he was feeling a very deep and genuine desire to be part of “a better society.” It is also clear that he had very deeply engaged with and felt the readings. Thinking about David’s response in terms of this deeply felt desire to be part of “building a better society” really helped me to look at his response in a different way. His writing also related back to his strong reaction to being called racist. Much like the people in Tatum’s piece, David seemed to very much be feeling that Tatum and Kumashiro are saying that he is a bad person because he is white and because he is male. So, in his experience, he was being treated unfairly by the system of power for having a learning disability and also being treated unfairly by marginalized people because of the privileged identities that he did hold. The frustration is one of the things that I feel most in this paper.

**Continuing the Conversation**

Rather than attempting to hash out some of the complexities over email, I decided that the best approach would be to speak with David in person after class. We had something of a precedent for doing so; after most class periods, David would stay after class for five to 10 minutes to talk about some aspect of the class discussion that had particularly resonated for him. I also liked the idea of continuing this approach because I was concerned that asking to meet up with him in office hours would make it seem more ominous than it needed to be. I hoped to continue the conversation that had been started in writing, and I also did not want to put undue
pressure on this discussion. As it would turn out, the class period right after David wrote his response was the last in-person class period that we would have that semester, as the rest of the class would shift to a remote setting. I also did not have to even suggest that we talk about his response, as David brought it up himself.

David started off the conversation by explaining how he saw the problem, which reflected many of the same tensions and complexities that he laid out in his journal response, including reflecting on his experiences as a student who was oppressed by the education system:

David: I said that I wanted to be part of the better part of society. Like that as a concept it’s only like people see like the skin tone as the first thing and that shouldn’t be their first thing they should– you should make other assumptions of who I am based on that. I grew up being called retarded and all that other stuff those are hateful mean words.

Now that we were talking about some of his concerns in person, I understood that his reading of Kumashiro is that race is the only thing that matters, saying that “people see like the skin tone as the first thing.” Kumashiro (2000) also discusses how students respond to him as a bisexual man, but I think that the impression that race is the only thing that matters points to one potential issue with the way this class is organized. During our unit on the social contexts of education, each week is centered on specific identity categories: race, gender, sexuality, disability, etc. It can make the identities feel very compartmentalized. Attempting to disrupt this effect to some extent, I began the unit on identity in education with a week completely about privilege and a critique of what counts as normal. However, the order of the syllabus, which had us discussing race before any other identity category, made that conversation seem to be based entirely on race. Immediately there is the sense that race is the most important identity category and that everything else, in David’s case his identification with oppression through disability, comes off
as secondary. I see the organization as one potential ‘failing’ of the course in the sense that, despite my queer framework that resists these kinds of neat categories, the course was very organized around them.

As David continued talking, he hit on another tension in the classroom: safe space. He said, “I mean like I just– it’s hard cause the safe space– cause whoever runs the safe space decides who is in that safe space.” David’s comments went back to my understanding of contested spaces, as this is in fact the exact concern that Ludlow (2004) highlights about her own class. Ludlow recounts an instance in her class where her students specifically challenged her conception of safe spaces. She asked her students for anonymous feedback on notecards. One student wrote, “You said you wanted this class to be a safe space. Well, I don’t feel safe here. You are always talking about homosexuals and their rights, and I hate homosexuals, so how can I be safe here?” (p. 41). Ludlow is rightfully troubled by the comment, but the interaction also causes her to rethink her use of the term “safe space,” writing, “When I had told the students I wanted my classroom to be a ‘safe space,’ … I had been thinking about providing safety for the students who do not occupy privileged subject positions” (p. 45). I feel very similar in my understanding of safety, and I know that I also used this framing of challenged or contested spaces on the first day of class. While I am in no way saying that David was expressing the hateful ideology of the student in Ludlow’s class, he raised a somewhat similar concern in that different students are going to feel different levels of discomfort with the material, and that I had made a conscious decision as an instructor to somewhat abandon the idea of ‘safety’ in favor of Kumashiro’s idea of ‘crisis’ in the classroom. David acknowledged that it is difficult to create a truly safe space in the classroom, because what counts as ‘safe’ will be largely decided by the person running the classroom. While I had tried to create a democratic classroom environment
that disrupted the traditional classroom hierarchies, it felt clear to me that I alone am the person who “runs the safe space” in David’s view. The complexities of safe space that we discussed is just another instance of the fact that a true collapse of the teacher-student hierarchy in the current systems of education is quite impossible (Ellsworth, 1989), or that attempts to reject the hierarchy completely can only result in a sort of queer failure (Rhodes, 2014). David’s rumination on safe space came after his discussion about feeling like he had been written off because of his skin color, and so I feel that the two points were probably intimately related.

The feeling that David was expressing, being judged by his privilege in one trait while also being the target of discrimination because of another, is not something that he was alone in feeling. Throughout the semester, I had been asking my students to potentially share quite personal things about themselves and their identities, and I had also done my best to model similar sharing for them in the classroom. In this discussion, I also related his frustrations back to my own experience to not only validate the tensions that David was feeling, but also to put us on a similar footing so to speak about what each of us was divulging. I said:

**Christine:** I’ll just use myself as an example, but like we all like have identities that are privileged and that are also like oppressed, and that like one of them doesn’t like trump the other one right? So like the fact that I’m white doesn’t like negate the fact that I’m a woman right? and I experience sexism as a woman. Um but I think that people like Tatum for instance would argue that ... well I’ve had these really negative experiences like as a woman um like and if that gives me like a pass to like not look at the other aspects that are privileged.

I was trying to lay out a little bit my own journey in dealing with these complexities, and part of that was in my acknowledging that “I experience sexism as a woman” but that my experience did
not negate the other privileges that I do have. David and the rest of the class already knew that I have a disability, but I decided in the moment not to focus on that since he was already feeling that very deeply, and also because I know that my experiences with an invisible disability had not impacted my school experiences in the same way that his disabilities did, according to his writing. I instead focused on my experiences as a woman and how that cannot give me an excuse to not look at the part of myself that is privileged. Looking back on this interaction, I have sort of a complicated understanding of the idea about one identity category not “trumping” the other, as I put it. On the one hand, I do think that it is not useful to argue about what identities are more important in our life experiences. However, between this semester and now I have also come to think more about the centrality of race in the United States, and I think that I probably would not have emphasized that quite as much as I did during our interaction. Later in the conversation, we both reinforced the point:

**David:** But one [identity] category is– they’re equal categories

**Christine:** Yeah exactly– exactly I don’t think one trumps another for sure

While I used the phrasing “for sure” in responding to David, I do not know that I can say with certainty that race does not have an impact above and beyond other categories. Or rather, the intersection of race and all these other categories may be the one that has the most violent impact on folks in the U.S.

After this interaction, I immediately switched to reframing the question, because getting bogged down in guilt around our own privilege was probably not useful. I also got the sense that guilt may have been a big part of the resistance here:

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3 Although David later made this connection himself: “you being a diabetic you probably have checked that bar–mark– box off.”
Christine: And something that I saw actually on Twitter that I found was really helpful was that going forward we need to have like a “low guilt high responsibility” sort of response to it⁴

David: I’m better with– I like that

Christine: but that like– like as a white person like I’m gonna need to work like extra hard to be aware of the white privilege like even as I’m like being oppressed like as a woman like as somebody like with a disability right?

Again, I tried to take what we were discussing and relate it back to myself. I can be aware that I need to work extra hard as a white person while trying not to get stuck in guilt around the privilege that I do have. What strikes me the most is how immediately David identified with this example, saying “I like that.” I feel that his response had something to do with the initial tension: why should I have to feel guilty about white privilege if I am also a victim of systematic oppression? So, I think that, in this scenario, moving away from guilt and instead focusing on responsibility was helping David to interact with these emotions differently.

Despite the back and forth and despite the contention that had obviously arisen between our viewpoints throughout our writing and verbal conversation, I was overall left with a profound feeling that this conflict (if we can call it that) was helping us to not necessarily get answers to these big questions that we were asking, but to instead acknowledge the importance of having the conversation to begin with. The dialog at this point turned to thinking about the best way to garner allies in the work:

⁴ This tweet that I am referencing comes from Vernă Myers “Awareness is about low guilt, high responsibility” (VernaMyers, 2013).
**Christine:** I do sometimes wonder if it’s worth it on some level because like I think her point is that everyone—in a racist society that like we’re going to internalize some of it and there’s just nothing we can do about it. And so I think her response to that is to say that everyone is racist, but I wonder if given like the kind of response that’s gonna evoke if that’s like. I mean I think it could be a valid point, like ‘are there other ways to go about this?’ If we say that like everybody has some sort of internalized bias like based on our surroundings. Like is that a better—to like get allies and go about it um and I think it’s—it’s a question that’s definitely worth like thinking about

**David:** I don’t think there’s an answer to it.

We now reached an important juncture in the conversation because we were both moving away from trying to settle on one side of the issue or the other, but rather to weigh the costs and benefits to different kinds of approaches. Ultimately, a lot of the questions that I posed in this class did not have fixed answers. In the syllabus, I framed the work that we would do in class as a “struggle collectively and individually to forge provisional answers to these pressing questions.” I further emphasized that the goal was not agreement or reaching consensus, but rather an “aim … to develop our own critical and thoughtful views about education in the United States.” I feel some of that happening here. I do not think that David and I ultimately agreed on the right approach in terms of addressing racism. There are obviously a variety of different impacts to Tatum’s approach, and David was illustrating some of the strong reactions from people who would consider themselves allies in the field. He was actively involved in the dialogue— that is one of the things that he pointed out “to [his] credit” in his initial post. I agree. And even though here I posed a potential criticism of Tatum’s work that I had repeatedly heard
from students – that an insistence on Tatum’s definition of racism can be alienating – it is ultimately one that I do not agree with. But it does not really matter to me whether David agreed with me on this point at the end of the day, because I was more interested in the fact that it is “a question that’s definitely worth like thinking [and talking] about.”

Throughout the course of the semester, I asked students many times, “what is the purpose of education?” We mainly had this discussion when we are talking about philosophies of education, but it was important to our whole class. And in this conversation with David, it came up somewhat organically. As we wound our conversation down and packed up our things, David turned the discussion to his own experiences as an undergraduate science TA.

**David**: This is what school’s for

**Christine**: Exactly, right

**David**: I learned that like some of the like being a TA you have to learn some of this … ok this sort of helps with like sitting in class and trying to figure out like what to call the kid. So what I do is like I have a little note card and you write the name and you write what pronouns they want, write a fun fact. Because then it doesn’t have to be awkward so it’s sort of just a learning curve. So I mean this is why I think this cl– for me it’s sort of helpful for just trying to be like, not an educator per se, but like just like trying to teach science to kids. Like I don’t care, like you be you, I’ll support you. You like science, I like it too

**Christine**: Well and I think maybe that was the point I was, or what I was trying to get at with that question in terms of like, if we learn something that we like strongly object to or that like makes us like have these like really strong emotional reactions like can we still
get something positive out of that kind of learning, I guess? And like it’s– it’s really
difficult to answer that question um

**David:** I just don’t want to make any kid uncomfortable. Like and like I don’t know, I
mean cause that’s like awkward for everybody else. So you want to accept them for who
they are then you have some kids that’s very like religious. I had a Muslim kid that was
very against I guess trans homophobic people,⁵ and I’m like I didn’t know what to do

**Christine:** Hm yeah that’s difficult

**David:** I wasn’t taught like this. I’m not a school guidance counselor and you’re like I’m
being paid next to nothing to be a TA ... 

**Christine:** Although, I think as a parting thought I do wonder is like so was the student--
so like with that example like do we have any choice but to make that student
uncomfortable to like to– to– to think about like their transphobia? We don’t have to
answer that right now it’s just kind of a thought

David here positioned himself as an educator, although he did not want to call himself that “per
se,” and the rest of this discussion played out much like a discussion between colleagues. David
made a similar comment earlier in the semester after his group did their Reading Leader’s
presentation about how this class helped him with his own. The moment where David brought in
his own experience felt like a moment rooted in critical education, a la Freire (1970), where the
“teacher-student contradiction” (p. 72) was being resolved, to an extent. Or rather, David could
see himself in this interaction both as a student and as an educator. Even though I was very much
positioned as the one “running” the class at the beginning of our conversation, I feel that such a
divide was shifting a bit here as well. Also, I think this conclusion brought us full circle back to

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⁵ Based on the context here, I think what he meant is that this student was transphobic and homophobic.
the framing of the contentious space or the problem with safe spaces that David highlighted at the beginning of our conversation. One thing that he struggled with, in his own experiences as an educator, is the question of “how do I make this into a safe community” and how “in two hours that’s hard to do.” We returned to the idea of the safe classroom and how the safe space is defined by the person who is leading the classroom. In this case, David related with me about how difficult it is to enact these kinds of spaces.

In writing, and in person, we were still not in complete agreement with each other, but the interactions, together, suggest that each of us got something positive from our exchanges. In David’s words, the kind of dialogue in which we engaged is “what school is for,” which challenges normative ideas of educational success defined through grades or to check off a requirement (particularly striking in the context of a course that meets a diversity requirement). This conclusion to our conversation, again, highlighted some of the tensions that still existed. I still felt from David that the idea of learning through discomfort was not something that he completely embraced. He also talked about how, as a TA, he did not want to “make any kid uncomfortable,” and then immediately described a situation in which he would probably have no choice but to make a student uncomfortable about their homophobia. However, after our somewhat contentious verbal and written discussion, he himself concluded our chat with the statement “this is what school is for.” It is an interesting contradiction. In my concluding thought about whether or not it would be necessary for the transphobic student he describes to be made uncomfortable in class, I not only reinforced the idea that these are complicated questions with few answers, but also highlighted that I would like the conversation to be ongoing by earmarking it as something “we don’t have to answer that right now.” I did continue to question David on the space for crisis in his later journal entries.
One More Look at Crisis

After we had this conversation and after we had moved to an online class setting, David in his final entry returned to discussing his own experiences with disability in the school system. In his journal, he recounted the story of a teacher who did not support him and his disability and tried to prevent him from moving up to a higher achieving class placement. He wrote about the experience in this way:

Minimizing the impact of my disability and being included in general education were good experiences, but I definitely felt what [the author] calls the “negative culture towards disability.” This came from teachers, not other students. I had many teachers who assumed I was stupid. This is just one example; [sic] I had a high school English teacher who spoke to me very slowly and down to me. She always assumed someone else did my work for me.

David identified an important aspect of his experiences in education in that his teachers were the ones that reinforced the “negative culture” about disability in his school. His teacher, rather than his peers, treated him as abnormal and as not being smart enough to have produced his own material. In this exchange, I saw one other way to loop back around to the idea of crisis and think about what it might mean (for educators in this case) to learn through crisis. I asked David at the end of his final entry,

You and I have talked quite a bit about “learning through crisis,” and I’m wondering about that in these situations you describe. The teacher that you talk about here does not seem to have high expectations for students with disabilities. I guess I’m wondering what your thoughts are on whether some kind of “crisis” would be effective in helping this teacher see that she is contributing to a negative culture? Like, what would teachers need
to learn in general or to realize about their own assumptions to be better equipped to support students with disabilities?

Since he seemed engaged with the concept of disability (and because I know that he related very strongly with disability), I wanted to approach the ‘learning through discomfort and crisis’ idea again from this standpoint. I recognized the importance of continuing our discussion also because he could now stand on the other side of the discomfort and be the person to benefit from a teacher being put into that kind of crisis.

David, like always, responded in a very deeply thought out and engaging paragraph that suggested to me that he had put some considerable thought and introspection into the issue:

My first reaction is that the teacher I described had preconceived expectations for me and other students with disabilities, especially invisible disabilities, such as LD’s [Learning Disabilities]. For her and others like her, they obviously lacked what Kumashiro called the ‘the desire to unlearn.’ Honestly, I’m not sure what it would take for her to experience a ‘crisis’ that would catalyze change.

It is important from a queer pedagogical perspective to admit when we do not know the answer to something, and in this case, David was not sure what his teacher would have needed to engage with him more justly. I feel now that I probably could have engaged him in another conversation on the topic and continued this conversation over email. One issue related to Covid-19 is that I felt like students were inundated with emails and assignments, and so asking them to have more interactions outside of the class felt like a big ask. I felt like I had to weigh what students could realistically tackle given the realities of their lives. Also, I have stated multiple times that I was not necessarily trying to make students agree with everything I say, and so I did not want to continue pushing the issue so much that David would question that I was being truthful.
Regardless, however, these exchanges illustrated that our grappling with this material, in writing and in person, is in no way perfect. In reflecting on these interactions, David made some contradicting statements about the role of crisis in education, and I made some comments that do not completely represent my own feelings on oppression in U.S. society. Our conversations allowed us both, however, to understand more deeply the places where we were both coming from.

While I did not follow up with David in the way that I maybe would or should have had the class still been meeting in person (after we switched online, our brief chats after the class ended), I was pleased to hear that David continued to think about the topic of labels and white privilege in his classes after our course ended. During our follow up interview, I asked David what he thought about the idea of white privilege and learning through crisis now that he had some space from the class. He related an example of an instance where he was confronted with the topic once again. He established that he was “pretty vocal” about his learning disability in other courses, and that in one class another student told him “you’re not white you’re disabled; that’s a different category that you should be put in.” Rather than using this as an out to avoid thinking about white privilege, David said that “I thought that was very interesting that … a white male is not the category that these progressive people want to put me in”; instead, “they want to put me in a dis— like disability category which I'm like ‘ok I— I guess I don’t have a choice in this.” Again, David dug into the idea that there are multiple intersecting ways that our identities allow us to inhabit the world and that it is not so simple as either having privilege or not having privilege. This also shows that the ideas we discussed in the course came up in David’s everyday life and perhaps helped him put some words to the discomforting feeling of being placed into one box or the other.
Discussion

Unpacking the writing of these two students as well as specific classroom interactions has allowed me to see a few things about my own approach to teaching the class and what students may potentially be gleaning from these interactions. I see from the Reading Leaders assignment and other student-led class time that students were quite capable of developing some complicated critiques of education and society without my having to propose them first. In the discussion about gender roles, the entire class brought up some important ideas and then playfully highlighted how the class as a microcosm of society failed at adhering to those gender roles. Alex in particular used their own experiences with fluidity in gender in order to make that quite concrete for the class. These student-led moments also point to some of the (queer) failings in my own attempts at enacting queer pedagogies in the classroom. While students may theoretically have class time that is set aside for them to guide class, Alex’s Reading Leaders activity showed that I ultimately still exercised enough control in the classroom that I could prevent or allow certain kinds of conversations to happen. My ultimate control over the environment is just one of the inevitable failures of queer pedagogy, and when I look back on the whole semester that class period is the interaction that I most regret. However, I hope that the circumstances also allowed for a moment of honesty between Alex, Amanda, and myself where I could demonstrate for them that even though I made what I considered a mistake, that I valued their contribution enough to admit that to them. While neither student responded to that portion of my email, I still hope that by putting words to the feeling, I helped to chip away at some of the authority that I initially exercised in stopping the activity.

Other spaces that troubled the student/teacher performance came from the Social Contexts Journal entries. I make clear that my goal in the course was not to get the class all on
the same page as me, which would ultimately be quite colonial (Bawarshi & Pelkowski, 1999). Instead, my goal was to push students to exercise critical thinking in relation to what counts as normal in school structures. These questions, which I attempted to enact in class and in my responses to student written work, were tailored toward individual students and what aspects of their writing already tackled those topics. For some students, like Alex, this meant that my feedback was more focused on thinking about structures. For other students, like David, we benefitted from digging into places where we felt a lot of discomfort and guilt about ourselves.

In both Alex’s and David’s case, the data showed significant resistance to some of the ideas and topics that I presented to them. In each case, the resistance was generative through our ongoing interactions and relationship. Alex showed some pushback in critiquing the way that I framed institutional change, suggesting (albeit indirectly) that I was not going quite far enough. David and I never quite saw eye to eye about learning through crisis, although an interesting contradiction occurred in our agreement that these questions without answers are “what school is for.” We did not resolve that contradiction in any meaningful way. While in a more traditional framework such an uncertain ending might be seen as a failure, this inability to come to a neat resolution typifies the queer pedagogical idea that there is no such thing as stable and complete writing or identity. Instead, tensions, contradictions, and changes to what we know are an inherent part of a queer approach to education.
CHAPTER VII

CONCLUSION

As I conclude, I am most struck by the unexpected challenges of teaching and conducting research in a pandemic, the aspects of my course that surprised me (even after four semesters teaching it), and the changes I would still make after implementing the course design principles discussed here. In my introduction, I detailed some of the motivations that spurred me into this research. This included the inevitable disappointment in having ‘failed’ to bring students around to a social justice mindset, or at least, my idea of a social justice mindset. One goal I had for this required diversity class and the attendant research was to challenge my assumptions related to students coming to my class unaware of issues of diversity and leaving embracing critically conscious views of education. Not only was this not an accurate understanding of my students (it more accurately reflected my own anxieties around teaching), but it also set the class up to be a learning experience only for students who had not experienced inequality in the education system firsthand. While I still sense a certain amount of “bad feelings” (Awkward-Rich, 2017) surrounding the course and the way I handled certain aspects of it, I tried not to view those felt imperfections as a bad thing and instead tried to think of everything that happened as a potential learning opportunity for the students or for myself.

The idea of queer failures has been quite central to this work, and so I wanted to open this chapter by thinking about the failure that still exists in the present work. However, generative failure is far from my only takeaway from this research. In this concluding chapter, I will
summarize the main themes that I noticed in each findings chapter, as well as discuss how those themes traveled across chapters. With those themes in mind, I will turn to areas that I see for future research in the same vein as this study. Finally, I conclude by thinking about the implications for practice for other folks teaching required diversity courses or centering queer literacies in pedagogy. There are certainly many things that I learned while conducting this research that I will carry forward as I have continued to teach other sections of the same course. I hope there will be important implications for those of us teaching about diversity.

Themes Across the Chapters

I now turn to reiterating themes that appeared across the findings chapters. This is a somewhat messy endeavor because, as mentioned in the analysis, as sometimes limiting experiences and writing in the course to one particular theme felt somewhat arbitrary as the lines between these themes become blurred. To summarize, Chapter Four framed the findings on student learning by describing in detail my course design strategies, particularly for the syllabus and for three of the required assignments from the class. These assignments were an interesting array because the free writing had changed relatively little across the sections of this course, the Social Context Journaling changed extensively from when I first assigned it, and the Reading Leaders activity was completely new to the course during this study semester. Using my discussion of the design elements of these projects, I turned in Chapter Five to a thematic analysis across the different assignments. I identified several themes in relation to the complexity of resisting othering in our classroom spaces; ideas about the performance of identity; and the wide range of perspectives, experiences, and critical consciousness that students brought with them into the class setting. Although, as I quickly became aware, the neat analysis of each project as a separate entity proved to be somewhat impossible as students’ ideas and experiences
permeated the many aspects of the class. My final findings chapter explored deeper some of the ideas discussed in Chapter Five and investigated the work of two case study students. In Chapter Six, I analyzed the work of Alex and David independently as two different cases, noting themes of exploring identity in relation to the material under study, discomfort and the implications of this feeling for our interactions together, and the power of vulnerability and conversation to bridging some of those tensions to reach even deeper understandings (for both the students as well as myself).

I will now turn to the various themes that emerge from these chapters, as I will organize this section of the conclusion by theme. The order of these themes does not indicate their importance to the study, but rather I follow the same ordering as the data analysis strategy framed in Chapter Three, in addition to new themes that emerged from the conceptual framework. The four themes I see across and through the chapters are 1) students’ critical consciousness and students’ consistent use of their own lived experiences in relation the material; 2) my framing of and student reflections on performance, which also included the complicated, sometimes-hierarchical, sometimes-dialogical relationship between the students and myself; 3) the prominent role of discomfort and failure, in students’ experiences as well as my own; and 4) the difficult task of resisting binaries and othering narratives, including that it is not at all easy to do away with this framing.

Critical Consciousness and Student Identity

In Chapter Four, I discussed how I particularly imagined the Social Contexts Journaling and the Reading Leaders assignments as ways for students to bring their own lived experiences into the classroom. I reframed the Social Contexts Journaling to require students to not only engage with their own relationship to education structures, but also to dive into the way that those
structures themselves operated. On the whole in my planning and instruction of the course, I attempted to view student learning and work as on a spectrum of critical consciousness, and not as an inadequate understanding that needed to be changed. In the opening chapter of this dissertation, I discussed interactions with one student that encouraged an adversarial relationship with students. My first experiences teaching a required diversity course were marked with hostility from students about the content and a rejection of the idea that inequality persists today. As I discussed in Chapter Four, many of my decisions around the course assignments and how to frame the course had to be reworked to avoid the class being tailored to only support those students who had never experienced oppression at the hands of the U.S. school system or in convincing students that racism/sexism/homophobia exists. This leads to only one kind of student getting anything positive out of the class, and it almost assures that folks who already have experienced oppression in the current system will learn less. Viewing student learning on this spectrum, rather than seeing students as monolithically coming to the class against the material, helped me to reframe the assignments to draw on experiences that students already possessed.

In Chapter Five, I saw examples of students teasing out nuances in the seemingly straightforward questions I asked, bring in their own critical approach. Jessica appeared especially adept at this, as many of her responses pushed on the sometimes intentionally binary nature of my prompts to students. While I primarily discussed this in relation to Jessica, I was frequently surprised by some of the depth and nuance that both Jessica and Matt displayed even in just a ten-minute portion of class time. This goes hand in hand with perspectives that students brought to their roles as reading leaders. Nasir’s presentation especially is a great example of students using their own experiences and areas of expertise to support the learning of the rest of
the class; in Nasir’s case, this included both his experiences as marginalized on the campus under study and also his extensive knowledge as a film student. The Reading Leaders assignment gave students the opportunity to direct the class and to choose which strands of analysis to take up, in a way that was not possible without this component. However, this approach was not perfect, as I discussed in detail in Chapter Six.

I also saw this theme of students critically grappling with the course content and their own lived identities in Chapter Six. Both Alex and David used their understanding of their identities and thought about them in relation to the material. This is just another instance of students demonstrating different aspects of critical consciousness in the classroom, and in these interactions, I was able to tailor my responses to each individual student to support them however they came to class. For Alex, the concept of fluidity and ambiguity in identity was nothing new. They were able to make connections between identity categories that they had already spent a lot of time thinking about. In their case, they identified race and gender as two such categories and linked those intuitions to other identity categories, such as language, that had been left relatively unexplored. With Alex’s Social Contexts reflections, I crafted my responses to support them in linking these complex understandings of individual identity to broader systems of oppression and how those systems might play out for students. For David, his experience of navigating the school system with a learning disability made him acutely aware of the feeling of being excluded or oppressed in the U.S. education system. His lived experience also led to some conflict around identifying as a person who both benefited from and was oppressed by the current systems at work. My responses to David’s pieces were more tailored to working through those conflicting and sometimes distressing feelings to see the perspective of authors like Kumashiro (2000) and Tatum (2003), even if he did not ultimately end up agreeing
with them. A queer perspective encouraged me to value students however they came to class on the spectrum of critical consciousness and to support them in exploring their intersecting identities and lived experiences as they related to our course material.

**Performances, Dialogues, and Hierarchies**

One aspect of the course planning that I actively engaged with prior to the start of the semester was in unpacking the performances I encouraged from students, the norms that accompanied those performances, and how this understanding related to the dialogic rather than hierarchical class community that I aimed to create. I was inspired by a fellow graduate student to approach my syllabus as a feminist document that reflected a commitment to students rather than acting as a contract. From a queer literacies perspective, I saw this shift to the syllabus as commitment-not-contract as resisting an institutional approach and instead embracing a pedagogy built on love. This reframing helped me to think about the ways that my own teaching and pedagogy were sometimes at odds with the university as a colonial institution. In recreating the syllabus, one major change across the semesters of my course planning had to do with participation. I originally viewed participation as only talking in class and was subsequently disappointed with sections of my course that were not as comfortable with the large group conversation format. Taking a queer literacies lens to my course, I was able to stop and think about the normative constructions of this value. The work of Stacey Waite (2017) was crucial in this understanding. I tried (to varying degrees of success) to retool ‘active participation’ to include a much broader spectrum of activity. If I viewed students’ participation in the classroom as a performance, I aimed to expand the kind of performance that I labeled acceptable or successful for students. This change, I found, was especially crucial after our switch to remote learning due to Covid-19, as large group speech became less a part of our everyday class time.
Students also showed interaction with the idea of performances. I saw this especially in the Social Context Journals, where I was excited to see student reflections on their own performances, particularly performances of race and academic performances. Sometimes this meant reflecting on the expectations for marginalized students and how students reacted to them. The negative interactions that Nasir dealt with caused him to withdraw from his studies until he could find a community on campus to support him, while the high expectations put on Kelly as a “model minority” caused her anxiety, but also seemed to push her to work harder. Other times, students in the class reflected on how they were labeled in classroom settings and moved towards complicating those labels. This was especially the case with Eric, who over the course of the semester shifted his description of his performance as a low-achieving student to one that recognized the stereotypes that some of his teachers may have attached to his behavior. While I spent a significant amount of time prior to the start of class thinking about the kinds of performances that my requirements elicited from students, it was abundantly clear that the students themselves were acutely aware of the performances that their teachers expected of them, even if they did not specifically use the language of performance.

The assignments for the class were also retooled or created keeping in mind the goal of disrupting normative performances as more desired performances. The Reading Leaders project was adopted for this class specifically to align with my queer and critical pedagogical goals of giving students more control in the classroom and to disrupt the rigid student/teacher performance. Part of the rationale for this assignment was to break down some of the hierarchies between me, up at the front of the class teaching, and students, out in the classroom working on activities. The students and I, on the first day of class, co-constructed the learning goals for the assignment, and I used these goals exclusively to grade the projects. I was also interested in the
direction that some of the students chose to take (as I discussed in Chapter Five), as I would never have thought of many of their ideas and directions. Several students even brought in their own material in the forms of other studies that were relevant to class or multi-media to help make sense of the readings we explored together. However, there were still some issues with my level of control over these assignments. I particularly discussed how my discomfort totally shut down the activity led by Alex in Chapter Six.

Thinking about the aspects of the free writing assignment that stand out to me from a queer framework, the repetition of including this assignment across many courses reminded me of Blackburn’s (2002; 2003) literacy performances and led to my data analysis of this assignment. I also wondered how my own performance as the instructor signaled the importance of the free writes to students. I always returned written responses to free writes, which I think signaled that I was reading them carefully and taking the ideas within them seriously. However, when we switched to remote instruction, I announced that we would not be spending class time on the free writing any longer, and I believe that this telegraphed to students a change in their importance. Also, the topics of the free writing after our move online became much more factual, and it felt like I was falling back on the concept of the comprehension check. These prompts and students’ responses post-Covid-19 were less capable of fitting into my framework of literacy performances, as can be seen in my analysis of the free writes in Chapter Five. The other two assignments in the course were analyzed across the in-person and remote modality, which allowed me to observe how I continued to implement my queer literacies values in the remote environment. I cannot say that this is true for the free writing assignment, as applying my codes to the free writes after the move online became much more difficult. I attribute this more to
changing performance on my part rather than a change in student literacy performances after the switch to remote learning.

Finally, I was interested in positioning writing assignments as part of an ongoing process that never signaled a stable endpoint or stable identity. The Social Contexts Journals most direct addressed this, as students were able to return to their writing over the course of several weeks. This was a big adjustment from previous semesters, and it gave us the opportunity to have more conversation around the ideas presented in students’ writing. As can be seen in Chapter Five and (particularly) Chapter Six, the conversation in response to my feedback to students was often ongoing. I made this change to align with my queer literacies approach of writing as ongoing and never quite finished: a performance that resists the idea of finished narratives.

This conversational element, which I argue worked towards troubling the boundaries of teacher-as-expert were evident in Chapter Six in my interactions with Ales and David. In Alex’s Social Contexts Journal entries and my responses to them, there was a significant degree of back and forth. Given my concerns highlighted above about the student/teacher hierarchy being reinstated after my rejection of their reading leader activity, I was pleasantly encouraged by their willingness to challenge me on some of my framing and to build on my questions with more complicated answers. I think this dynamic in writing was helpful in establishing that Alex brought a framework to the table that was oftentimes more radical than my own. Returning to David’s work, our reflections together after his first journal entry were much more than I could have imagined in designing the project. While most responses to me were about a paragraph, David’s initial response was over a page long, and this continued into our lengthy discussion together after class. We also returned to the topic of crisis in later journal entries in the question and response phase. After the above written and oral discussion with David, we did not come to
resolution, but we got to spend more time digging into the discomfort. I think both instances highlight the artificial nature of coming to an endpoint in writing, which was partially my goal with the Social Contexts Journal assignment. I also hope that this encouraged a dialogic approach to student work that continued across multiple assignments and modalities.

**Discomfort and Failure**

Discomfort and failure were important concepts to this whole study, both for students and for me as the instructor. I have discussed already the sort of failure I perceived in my change to the free writing assignment, and it points to the added difficulty of this kind of teaching during a pandemic. I would also argue that learning to embrace and accept on some level the aspects of failure in this course as it played out during a global pandemic was necessary for the students and myself to survive during the months documented in this dissertation. Still, discomfort was one area that I anticipated needing to contend with even before the semester started, while being unable to plan for it as discomfort seemed to emerge at unexpected times.

One aspect of the free writing assignment that I really grew to appreciate from this analysis in Chapter Five was the fact that I could see some of the students’ thought processes playing out on paper as they did not have time to revise in this short span of time; frequently, this process especially entailed aspects of the learning with which students were struggling. This seemed especially true in Matt’s case, as he first introduced me to some of his difficulties to take Tatum’s (2003) definition of racism seriously. Then in his journal entry, he expanded on this concept in much more detail. This hints at the idea of discomfort. Tatum’s definition of racism as something that only the dominant group can display was often met with resistance and skepticism by students, especially white students. Matt’s responses put that skepticism directly in front of me, but then explained some of the ways that he worked through that original feeling of
exasperation. I am hopeful that the class and the readings provided students with a way to work through some of that discomfort. After all, as instructors we do not want to abandon students in this crisis (Kumashiro, 2000).

In Chapter Six, both students from the case studies sometimes experienced discomfort or crises with what they learned or read about in class. Alex expressed some surprise and discomfort with the fact that they had not made connections between the complexity of some aspects of their identity and the topic of language. The journal writing activity itself gave them some space to address some of those feelings and to hash out some of the similarities and differences in the intersections of their identities. This discomfort was especially evident in David’s and my ruminations on white privilege and its intersection with other forms of oppression. David was quite clear about the intense discomfort that the readings evoked. Ironically, Kumashiro’s (2000) article about crisis that we read together elicited a kind of crisis in David’s writing, largely prompted by my gentle prompting on the issue. However, we were able to work through that discomfort together (as I was often made quite anxious by the ongoing discussion) over written responses back and forth to each other and finally in-person during an after-class conversation. I saw in speaking with David after the conclusion of the semester that he was still grappling with some of the ideas from my class in other courses in which he was enrolled.

One other important aspect of the topic of discomfort was my own. I was mainly made uncomfortable by my perceived failures in how I worked with Alex on their Reading Leader assignment. Alex’s project elicited a knee-jerk reaction of dread, which immediately caused me to shut down their line of questioning about the class’s times stereotyping others. Many of the trends in this class did not become apparent to me until I started the data analysis portion of the
research, but in this instance, I knew immediately after it happened that this incident was one into which I wanted to delve deeper. Mainly I thought about how my own discomfort disrupted the student-led nature of the class that was the purpose of the Reading Leader project, a kind of failure of my queer pedagogy. I also wonder what this failure opened for us as a class rather than just focusing on what it closed down.

**Binaries and Othering (and Failure Again?)**

I started this class with the intention of doing away with binary thinking and supporting students in resisting othering. In my reframing of the course material, I tried to think about the ways that I thought of the course and its goals differed from the institutional agenda for a required diversity course. However, viewing my course and the institution in which it was situated as only at odds with one another upholds a binary framing that I am not sure is useful or possible. One of my objectives in redesigning the Social Context Journal assignment was to encourage students to think deeply about systems of oppression rather than individual identity. Moving away from individual privilege and oppression and focusing on structural inequality aligned with my goal to push students to think of structures rather than individual acts of oppression. In my findings, I did see students making references to structures, and I also felt that there was quite a bit less of a reliance on narratives that pitied students with marginalized identities.¹

What I did not realize was how thorny this attempt to move away from binaries and othering would become, both for the students and for myself. As discussed in Chapter Five, there were still instances where students struggled with these othering narratives, which I think just emphasizes that the work is by no means easy, and that perfection can never be the goal of these

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¹ This study in no way aims to compare instances of this with previous semesters, so this is more an overarching feeling I got from the responses in the study semester rather than a direct comparison.
pedagogies. However, I do think the way that students framed their own identities felt more in line with their experiences as part of structures (like education). Much like with the Reading Leaders assignment, I again saw the complexities around talking about students’ own identities in relation to the school system as whole. In their entries, students positioned marginalized folks in the education systems as deficit in places, but also important concepts in others. I am thinking specifically of the work of Kelly and Raylan as examples of this, although the trend occurred in many student essays. The continued struggles from students show ultimately how difficult this work is and how it is an ongoing process across our lives. Again, this ties into the idea of students as arriving in class at various places in relation to their understanding of critical consciousness.

One trend that I highlighted had to do with the complicated relationship with othering in the classroom. I was surprised to see White Supremacy positioned as other in the class by students, and I did not realize the extent to which I sanctioned that framework until after the class had ended and I conducted data analysis. My main concern with the narrative presented by Britt and Monica in this instance was that students might get the impression that White Supremacy was the only way to be racist. The students and I both struggled with the “terrible, terrible” nature of white supremacy and how to label those people participating in this narrative. After analyzing the data, I was left wondering how this approach fits in with a queer pedagogical framework that allegedly resists othering. Is doing away with the idea of ‘the other’ the goal? When Kumashiro (2001b) discusses an approach that examines why certain groups are othered in the first place, how do we make sense of those performances that we do not want as part of our society? To what extent do we tolerate intolerance?

Areas for Future Study
In thinking specifically about the data presented in this study, there were a myriad of avenues that I could have chosen to delve into the students’ work. Following from my research questions, I focused extensively on student writing, with the understanding that the discussion that goes on in class could not be divorced from that writing. The Reading Leaders activity was one major exception to this. However, given the large corpus of data I collected connected to and beyond my questions for this analysis, I have additional data related to class discussions that I facilitated or activities that I designed for students to work on in class. As I consider future directions for building on this study, this audio data from class discussions could be analyzed in order to better understand the classroom dynamic in large and small groups. It would also be interesting to think about the students/teacher dynamic in moments in the class where I was more traditionally leading the activities. The timing of this study is also important as the data collection occurred during the switch to remote learning due to Covid-19. Although I attended to aspects of addressing Covid-19 in the college classroom in this dissertation, it was not my main area of focus. However, future work with this data could pay particular attention to the tensions in conducting a once-in-person class remotely and the pedagogical approach of learning through crisis (Kumashiro, 2000) in a moment where everyone in the class is already in a state of crisis because of the impacts of a global pandemic. I have also seen in more recent classes that some of the liveliest discussion came when relating existing issues of inequity in the school systems as they were exacerbated by Covid-19.

In the future, it would be interesting to compare my findings with other courses. In a sense, this whole dissertation is a case study of one semester of one course, and so seeing other courses and other instructors who consciously take a queer approach specifically to their diversity courses would be impactful. In thinking about the work left to be done in understanding
the impact of university required diversity courses, as I mentioned in the literature review, there are not many studies that take a qualitative approach to required diversity courses. Specifically, there is a veritable absence of studies that examine student writing or projects in these classes as main data sources. My research here has attempted to address this absence from a queer pedagogical framework and dig into student work submitted as part of a required diversity course. However, more studies that focus on the experiences of students in these courses is necessary to understand the impact of required diversity initiatives as they increase in popularity across the country.

Implications

I will now conclude by discussing some implications that my study has for the practice of educators in higher education, for research in the field of required diversity courses, and for the theoretical applications of queer literacies. For practitioners, I have several takeaways that inform design and pedagogies in undergraduate courses. First, I learned and demonstrated the need to constantly revise our approaches, as no one teaching strategy can work in all environments. Also, meeting students how they came to class and using our own lived experiences as instructors was also incredibly important to this teaching philosophy; however, I also recognize that the extent to which instructors will be able to enact a queer literacies approach in their own classrooms will be impacted by institutional and individual factors. As I explored in more depth earlier, this study shows how instructors can and must learn just as much about our teaching from our failures as our successes. My study also holds implications for research in the field of required diversity initiatives. One key implication from this work is that required diversity courses risk positioning students of color outside of the central goals of the course, thus impacting their opportunities to learn relative to white students. I argue here that the
philosophy of viewing students entering your class as being on a spectrum of critical consciousness is important to working against this trend. This study also works to fill the existing gap on research that uses student writing to understand the impact of diversity curricula. Finally, I call for more of a bridge between the fields of queer literacies and required diversity literature, as the two have not shown much interaction. In what follows, I discuss these implications in more depth.

In thinking about the implications of this research for the practice of other instructors, one important thing to keep in mind (and one thing that I hopefully emphasized throughout the findings) is that the approach presented here is not a one-size-fits-all solution to queering diversity courses. Instead, this undertaking ultimately presents one possible approach that I took to teaching my required diversity class, in my individual context. If I were to teach this course again with the exact same planning structure, at the same university, and with similar general enrollments, the individual moves that I made in the classroom and on student writing would be quite different. In fact, I have continued to make changes in the semesters teaching the course since I conducted this study based on my reflections here.

There were complexities and ultimately failings to this classroom approach as well, and they may be equally instructive. I spent a lot of time thinking about and revising my class material and what the syllabi and project assignments projected about what I value from students. Despite these revisions, many of them designed specifically to broaden and unpack my implicit values as presented to students, aspects of my class expectation remained quite normative. There is still an element of in-class verbal participation that is emphasized in the syllabus and in the ways I led class. I also wonder about the values that are still buried in my course material that I did not explicitly flag for students. It is important to consistently return to
our course material and question the normative assumptions that we may not have realized
ourselves. One aspect of this that I think about is the free writing assignment, which did not
follow us into the remote modality. Looking back on this decision, I do not know that I
necessarily regret it, but I do think that there was a statement of lessening of value for students
that I did not really intend. As remote and hybrid courses continue (and perhaps even grow in
popularity) as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic, we as instructors will have to revisit our
instructional material to maintain our commitments to critical pedagogies. This approach can
also be considered for teaching during any sort of traumatic experience, and how to balance
student learning with student mental, physical, and emotional well-being.

Another complication of the course was that, on some level, the topics and content were
outside of my control. The course is an odd hybrid of sorts. The way that the university in my
study delineates required diversity courses is quite loose; the courses do not have to focus on
oppression in any way and instead must merely focus “substantially” on one form of diversity.
So, the decision to focus on inequality in the education system and use a critical education
approach is one largely dictated by the education department in which this course is housed and
on the initiative of the individual instructor. On the other hand, there are specific assignments
that must be completed for this course (for example, the Ethics Paper which I did not discuss in
this research), certain topics that must be covered, and an organization that loosely needs to be
followed to meet those requirements. While I was allowed a substantial amount of leeway in
changing some of these aspects for this study, one holdover is that the course is arranged into
very neat categories. I am somewhat concerned that efforts to emphasize intersectionality suffer
given this structure. More than a failing, I just find this to be one complexity that needs to be
addressed in thinking about a course that is partially designed before my arrival. The degree to
which individual instructors would be able to enact a queer literacies approach in their classrooms would depend largely on their designation in the university, the support of institutional actors, and requirements for courses outside of their control. However, I think that my course shows that even with restrictions on content and objectives, components of queer literacies can still be implemented.

One big aspect that was important for me – and would be important regardless of the class and the students – was modeling the same kind of vulnerability and love and openness for students that I hope to encourage from them in my class. If I expected students to share with me aspects of their identity and how those identities fit into the framework of the class, I had to be willing to participate in that exchange as well. We see this particularly in my conversation with David in Chapter Six, but it was really woven into every aspect of my teaching, from comments in class to feedback on student papers. I tried to always use myself as an example in a way that felt genuine to me, especially in those instances where students may have been made uncomfortable by the material. That being said, my identity as a white woman in front of the class probably led to students viewing me with a certain amount of authority and expertise. We know that student perceptions of Black instructors are vastly different and that instructors of color are seen as more ‘biased’ particularly on subjects of race (Perry et al., 2009, for example). I did not have to deal with that suspicion from students in the context of my race, although that did not mean that my identity as a relatively young woman did not (negatively) impact students’ perceptions of me. The extent to which any instructor will feel comfortable performing this vulnerability for students will depend on a lot of factors, and there have been semesters where I was much less open with students because of the dynamics of the class.
The current study is also important for consideration when situated within the current body of research on university required diversity courses. In the literature review, we saw that the outcomes and learning tended to be different for students of color than for white students. While the studies in the literature review do not present a definitive reason for this, I cannot help but think that part of the reason for this outcome might have to do with the framing of the course as taking student-who-knows-nothing and teaching them about diversity. This is bound to teach less to students who already have lived experiences with oppression and inequality in the U.S. context. Using a queer approach that views students on a spectrum of critical consciousness is one way to keep in mind that all students should be getting something out of the class, and not just those students who come in with little to no knowledge of the reality of oppression in the U.S. schooling context. I think we see this most clearly in Chapter Six, where both case study students came to the class with varying levels of awareness of and responsiveness to principles of social justice. If the course were designed with just one student or the other in mind, the ensuing learning might not be as powerful. Both students from the case study got different things out of my course, largely because of what they chose to write about in their journaling and also because of my individualized interactions with them. Assigning writing that allows for students to select the strands that feel most relevant to them, giving space for students to grapple imperfectly with difficult ideas, and providing ongoing support and collaboration on student work are just some approaches in this study to supporting the learning of students from a variety of different backgrounds.

One important absence noted in the literature review in the lack of studies that examine student writing or work that students produce in required diversity courses. Winkler (2018) is the only study to spend time analyzing student writing, but even in this case, student work is not the
primary focus of her analysis. I think this may point to one issue with the framing of required diversity courses. As we can see from the magnitude of quantitative studies in this review, a major outcome in which these studies are interested is addressing student bias or prejudice (Bowman, 2010; Case, 2007a; Case, 2007b; Case & Stewart, 2009; Chang, 2002; Cole et al., 2011; Denson, 2009; Henderson-King & Kaleta, 2000; Hogan & Mallott, 2005; Radloff, 2010; You & Matteo, 2013). Therefore, I think it reasonable to argue that the main way that the “problem” is conceptualized is that students are biased against minoritized groups and that diversity initiatives should address this bias. While this is indeed an important goal, I believe there are setbacks to this approach. As I have discussed throughout this research, viewing students as coming into the class ignorant of issues of oppression and diversity can be problematic. Analyzing student work in the course allowed me to begin to understand some of the impacts that my pedagogical choices had on students. While a few of the studies in the literature address specific pedagogical choices of instructors (Duffee & Bailey, 1991; Martinez, 2014; Perry, et al., 2009; Winkler, 2018), they do not examine their pedagogical choices by using student response as a significant component of analysis. More work needs to be done on student experiences in these courses, especially in conjunction with pedagogical approaches and student products.

This leads me to the implications for queer literacies. In all of the literature reviewed on required diversity courses, none of them used a queer literacies or queer theoretical approach to their design of the course of the analysis. In the theoretical pieces used in this framework, there are relatively few that apply a queer literacies framework to college student writing, with McRuer (2004), Miller (1998), and Waite (2017) as notable exceptions. I argue that one application of this current research is to point to the fact that queer literacies may be too
contained. Considering that we see essentially no cross-over between the bodies of work surrounding queer literacies and required diversity courses, this research contributes to the ongoing conversation in both fields by attempting to bridge this divide.

I will conclude this dissertation the way that I concluded my class in this study (and the way I have concluded the majority of my classes). Students read earlier in the semester part of Freire’s (1970) *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, but I concluded the final class day by displaying a quote from Freire’s (1998) *Teachers as Cultural Workers*: “It is impossible to teach without the courage to love, without the courage to try a thousand times before giving up. In short, it is impossible to teach without a forged, invented, and well-thought-out capacity to love.” I deeply feel that none of the work of this dissertation would have been possible without a commitment to a pedagogy of love. Dealing with students’ emotions, working through crises, and addressing my own anxiety in teaching can be emotionally exhausting, and I believe is only possible with love for students. So, I concluded my class by sharing the previous quote with them and telling them that I loved them all and our class community together. This explicit commitment, which I argue is at the root of queer pedagogy as well as Freire’s critical pedagogy, was absolutely necessary to conducting this class in line with my queer literacies designs.
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APPENDIX A

INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

1) To be read at the beginning of the interview: The purpose of these interviews is to get a better understanding of your experiences in the section of [course] that you completed last semester. I’ve done a lot of writing and reflecting on my own about my experiences in class, so now I am hoping to see how that compares with your experiences, and what you feel like you got from this class. Your participation in this interview is completely voluntary, and you may decline to answer any questions. You can decide to stop the interview at any time. This interview is being audio recorded for the research and will later be transcribed. Do you have any questions before we get started?

a) In my study, I’m really interested in diversity requirements. In the rest of their framing in the literature, they are for the most part either measuring student bias on a scale, or they are talking about the impact on teachers. They don’t really focus on student writing, which is a really big focus of my study. I’m also interested in thinking about what kinds of knowledge and critical consciousness students already bring to the classroom.

2) Introductory information

a) What was your experience of the course? What stands out to you with these projects?

3) Assignments

a) Thinking about the Social Context journal assignments, what was your experience like with those? You and I had a lot of back and forth particularly about your first journal assignment, so I’m just wondering how that landed.
b) Explain why I’m interested in our discussion that was contentious. Can we look at your response to the first journal entry together and just think about it? As you look back on this, what comes to your mind?

c) One thing I was really interested about with our discussion was when we talked about safe spaces, and you said “I just it’s hard cause the safe space cause whoever runs the safe space decides who is in that safe space.” How do you think about safe spaces, yourself, as a TA?

d) What was the effect of the structure of this writing and response with the Social Contexts Journaling? Explain why I structured the writing in this way.

e) We’ve lived what feels like a really long since that class. Where are you now with your journey on these things that you describe in your writing?

f) Try to get at this at some point: Did you enroll in order to fulfill the university diversity requirement?