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Adam J. Greteman, Karen Morris & Nic M. Weststrate

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COMMENTARY

Countering Epistemic Injustice: The Work of Intergenerational LGBTQ+ Dialogues

ADAM J. GRETEMAN  and KAREN MORRIS

School of the Art Institute of Chicago

NIC M. WESTSTRATE 

University of Illinois at Chicago

We write as collaborators with a shared interest in the educative need for and potential of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, and other sexual and gender minorities

(LGBTQ+) intergenerational dialogues. In Greteman's (2017) article, "Helping Kids Turn Out Queer: Queer Theory in Art Education," he pondered what it might mean to think seriously (and perhaps playfully) about the work of helping queer students come into presence. Rooted in queer theory, his argument recognized, as Richard Ford (2007) noted, "If one is born straight or gay, one must decide to be queer" (p. 479). Yet how does one decide to be queer, particularly within

“There is a need to begin creating models that do not reproduce school practices that merely include LGBTQ+ issues, but counter schooling practices in ways that build on queer traditions, practices, and stories.”

Correspondence regarding this commentary may be sent to the first author at agreteman@saic.edu.

educational institutions whose purpose is, in part, to socialize subjects into social norms (Foucault, 1977)? What is the work to be done in making such a decision, of both learning to recognize social norms and developing alternatives to them?

These questions are not merely conceptual questions, meant to provoke. Rather, they are questions that inform the work of the LGBTQ+ Intergenerational Dialogue Project, which takes seriously the need for helping queers come into presence across the lifespan in an educational dynamic that assists in the recognition, production, and transmission of queer knowledge and practices. Central to this is the work of art. Student participants, upper-level undergraduate and graduate level, are themselves artists who, in collaboration with one another and elder participants, engage in a range of artistic practices, including collage, photography, digital illustration, and podcasting to help process the dialogues in small intergenerational groups, make meaning of such collaborations, and document these lessons for a broader audience. This documentation is made visible on our project website,¹ which is designed and managed by a student participant, who is now an alum and art educator.

In this commentary, three scholars—a philosopher of education, a cultural anthropologist, and a developmental psychologist—reflect on an embodied queer pedagogical project that centers relationality, engages the senses, and foregrounds intergenerational connection (Morris & Greteman, 2021). The LGBTQ+ Intergenerational Dialogue Project, founded in 2019, fosters sustained educational and artistic opportunities for LGBTQ+ people across generations. It brings together diverse cohorts of LGBTQ+ college-aged students and LGBTQ+ older adults (60+) for themed dialogues, storytelling sessions, shared meals, and collaborative artmaking. A collaboration between an art and design college, a public research university, and an LGBTQ+ community center, the project combines

academic and artistic practices of education rooted in the cultivation of intergenerational relationships within the LGBTQ+ community.

Through this work, the project seeks to counter what feminist philosopher Miranda Fricker (2007) has called epistemic injustice, a concept she coined to get at the ways marginalized groups are unjustly treated as knowing subjects. Such wrongs, she explored, fall into two main types: testimonial injustice and hermeneutical injustice. Testimonial injustice addresses how “prejudice causes a hearer to give a deflated level of credibility to a speaker’s word” (p. 1) while hermeneutical injustice “occurs at a prior stage, when a gap in collective interpretive resources puts someone at an unfair disadvantage when it comes to making sense of their social experiences” (p. 1). Countering epistemic injustice, she argued, asks that we cultivate our “everyday epistemic practices: conveying knowledge to others by telling them, and making sense of our own social experiences” (p. 1). The LGBTQ+ Intergenerational Dialogue Project utilizes these everyday epistemic practices between younger and older members of a marginalized population who rarely have such a chance to interact to bring to life LGBTQ+ histories and politics.

Present Circumstances

We have seen in the 21st century limited progress within education around LGBTQ+ rights and representation. Students have gained protection from discrimination and harassment through antibullying and antiharassment policies (Sadowski, 2016). Additionally, access to gay-straight alliances has expanded into middle schools, providing students at younger ages with extracurricular opportunities to learn about gender and sexuality (Mayo, 2017). Educators, as well, have gained federal legal protections against employment discrimination after the *Bostock* decision in June 2020 (National School Boards Association, 2020). Within five states, including Illinois, the state in

which we live and teach, there was a legal mandate passed in 2019 that LGBTQ+ histories be included in school curricula.

However, alongside this progress, there are six states with “No-Promo Homo” laws that prohibit talking about LGBTQ+ issues in a positive light in schools (GLSEN, 2018). There remains, as well, a range of challenges that LGBTQ+ people across the lifespan face. These include psychological and behavioral health disparities, such as feelings of isolation, loneliness, and engaging in high-risk behaviors. While one might imagine with the increased visibility of LGBTQ+ issues and people such disparities would decline, research continues to show such challenges are stubbornly persistent for youth and older LGBTQ+ people (Fredriksen-Goldsen, Cook-Daniels, et al., 2014; Fredriksen-Goldsen, Emler, et al., 2013; Russell & Fish, 2019).

While there may be a net gain in rights for LGBTQ+ people, those gains sit uneasily alongside the lack of progress for young LGBTQ+ people, and the continued challenges that LGBTQ+ elders face into retirement. Adding to this challenging landscape is the lack of contact across LGBTQ+ generations, beyond one-time events or fleeting encounters, that could provide complicated yet healing conversations that grapple with legacies of oppression. As curriculum inclusion mandates expand, there is a need to begin creating models that do not reproduce school practices that merely include LGBTQ+ issues, but counter schooling practices in ways that build on queer traditions, practices, and stories.

Countering Epistemic Injustice

“The idea of epistemic injustice,” Fricker (2007) argued, “might first and foremost prompt thoughts about distributive unfairness in respect of epistemic goods such as information or education” (p. 1). The heart of the LGBTQ+ Intergenerational Dialogue Project is its emphasis on providing a sustained space and time for education that recognizes the

importance of knowledge as it comes through both experience and scholarship. The project merges research about LGBTQ+ issues documented in book chapters and articles, documentary films (e.g., *United in Anger: A History of ACT UP, Gen Silent*), podcasts (e.g., *Nancy, Making Gay History*), and artists (e.g., Diana Solis, Marlon Riggs, David Wojnarowicz) with conversations with other generations and collaborative artmaking. A large portion of our participants have had little to no formal education about LGBTQ+ histories, issues, and cultures. However, access to information from and about LGBTQ+ histories, issues, and cultures has dramatically increased over the past decades through the proliferation of media. We believe amid such changing access to information that it is vital that people meet, and that they meet across generations. This simple idea recognizes, as Bingham (2012) argued, “Education is about human beings who meet” (p. 89). For LGBTQ+ people, such meetings have been fraught, due to the persistence of fears attached to queers evidenced in the history and present firings of LGBTQ+ teachers (Graves, 2009) and the spate of antitrans legislation in 2021 (Ronan, 2021). However, through meeting one another and the work of storytelling modeled in this project, we glimpse educative possibilities for countering epistemic injustices and sustaining LGBTQ+ stories and experiences.

Centering an embodied pedagogy—remixed via Zoom amid the COVID-19 pandemic—that brings people together to tell their stories and centralizes the relational role in education addresses the need and work of challenging epistemic injustices as they have impacted LGBTQ+ people. We think about the history of LGBTQ+ people not being believed when they come out, made to think “it’s just a phase,” or the lack of access to LGBTQ+ histories in schools, which cuts LGBTQ+ people off from understanding the social conditions and possibilities of LGBTQ+ cultures. This reality causes many

LGBTQ+ people to feel like they are “the only one” or that they don’t have a community of which to be a part. The harms of these forms of epistemic injustice are that they make it difficult for marginalized subjects to make sense of their experiences and have those experiences taken seriously. LGBTQ+ people have, importantly so, made some headway amid this, having developed their own concepts that do justice to their expanding sense of selves and contribute to expanding conversations around genders and sexualities. We think here of the attention around pronouns (e.g., they/them/theirs) along with other critical terms, such as cisgender (Serano, 2007), heteronormativity (Warner, 1993), quare (Johnson, 2005), and compulsory heterosexuality (Rich, 1980), each of which provide “queers,” embodied in diverse ways, with interpretive tools to describe and understand the self and the world.

The LGBTQ+ Intergenerational Dialogue Project starts with the recognition that epistemic injustice exists, builds on legacies of LGBTQ+ practices, and works to create an educative model to undo legacies that have thwarted LGBTQ+ realities and histories from being seen as viable forms of knowing and ways of becoming. Given the racial, economic, age, gender, and other forms of diversity within the group, there are challenging and important issues that participants—including ourselves—have to unpack and address. Such work is multidimensional, and it requires, as the community continually explores, being mindful of privilege, but also recognizing the importance of bravery (Arao & Clemens, 2013). This is all to do justice to both the common realities LGBTQ+ people face and the specific realities that are tied to unique identities.

Constructing Queer Joy

Through an embodied queer pedagogy, participants in the LGBTQ+ Intergenerational Dialogue Project grapple with an expanding body of LGBTQ+ knowledge and the bodies of

participants amid various life stages. Such work is done with an express interest in bringing such conversations into the world and engaging others in dialogue. This has importantly included drawing on the work of art not only to capture the stories of surviving in the face of diverse threats, but also thriving across the lifespan. The potential of such conversations and their challenges emerged poignantly while discussing Stu Maddux’s (2010) documentary *Gen Silent*, which followed the lives of six LGBTQ+ seniors in Boston, Massachusetts. For young participants, the documentary quite literally opened their eyes to the challenges that LGBTQ+ elders face, including, for instance, needing to decide if they will be “out” in long-term care facilities. Conversely, for the elder participants, the documentary cut too close to home, reminding them of the challenges they have or may soon face. Navigating such responses, an elder, Adrian, questioned the emphasis on the pain of LGBTQ+ lives, inviting us all to ponder what is joyous about being LGBTQ+.

With that comment, the dialogues began to take seriously the work of queer joy; this becoming the focus of a semester-long investigation rooted in intergenerational small groups tasked with utilizing art to explore, document, and illustrate “queer joy.” Such work was to use art as a process to capture and make meaning of stories about LGBTQ+ experiences across generations. The young people, all artists themselves across different media, became the project facilitators, helping keep production on track, and attending to the shape the projects would take in collaboration with elders. Each group’s process and project illustrated through art and storytelling the complexities and contradictions of queer joy.

For instance, in a visual anthology and essay project, participants utilized a virtual photo-shoot combined with storytelling in pairs. These were combined by a student artist painting or drawing on the photographs to evoke what they learned about the personality and life

experiences of those in them. Combined with these illustrated photographs was the transcribed story. Queer joy, as all the small groups explored, was not straightforward. As explained by the members of the small group project “Queer Transparencies”:

When first asked to articulate the meaning of queer joy, many of us struggled to find the language. Acknowledging both the joyful bits, as well as the difficult bits, felt most salient. Right away, we recognized the nuances—the wonderful, the awkward, the sometimes painful. Revisiting specific moments of queer joy helped make the notion a bit more tangible. In doing so, stories that perhaps felt too embarrassing to share before were revisited with a sense of endearment, allowing for a certain degree of rawness and transparency. (personal communication, December 14, 2020)

There was, we began to see and hear, a need to recognize the complicated realities of “queer joy”; these complications emerging at the interplay of storytelling, collaborative artmaking, and artwork that reoriented queer affective landscapes toward their messiness (Ahmed, 2006). These were rooted in experiences and histories of not being able to tell such stories, of being unsure if their experiences counted as “joy,” or having had such stories discounted by others in their lives. The injustices encountered that limited acknowledging queer joy became, at least

momentarily, undone through the work of storytelling and the making of art together.

Conclusion

The project’s emergence recognized that the lack of intergenerational contact and conversation between LGBTQ+ people contributed to a continued lack of cultural transmission between and within generations. LGBTQ+ people, young and old, lack critical access to practices and knowledges rooted in both the past and the present. This lack of cultural transmission reproduces epistemic injustice as LGBTQ+ individuals encounter not having access to LGBTQ+ knowledges or disbelief upon coming out as LGBTQ+. As we have learned, and continue to learn, intergenerational dialogues provide opportunities to learn from and with different generations and their stories. These opportunities open up space to learn both across and within generations while working to sustain queer cultural traditions and knowledges. The work of art, as it has emerged within the project, plays different roles as participants work collaboratively to not only process the dialogues, but also make meaning of their developing relationships and knowledges. Such work is neither easy, nor always joyous. Rather, it reveals the nuances, tensions, and awkwardness that arise when people under the LGBTQ+ umbrella meet amid legacies of different forms of oppression and injustice to see and listen to each other.

ORCID

Adam J. Greteman  <http://orcid.org/0000-0003-0115-3386>

Nic M. Weststrate  <http://orcid.org/0000-0001-5272-472X>

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END NOTE

- ¹ <https://generationliberation.com>.