

Inqu[ee]ry across the Curriculum

Two colleagues—one from math, one from ELA—collaborated to consider how to “queer” their curricula.

As I (Brandie) monitored my eighth-grade math students as they worked on an assigned set of problems, a student called from across the room.

“Ms. Waid, how would you define a couple?”

Initially, I wondered whether my recent “coming out” to myself, my friends, my colleagues, and my family was a topic of discussion among my students. However, the puzzled look on the girl’s face reminded me that one of the problems in the assignment asked a question about couples: “At a school dance, there are X boys and Z girls, and there are more boys than girls. How many different possible couples for dancing are there?” (Asdourian et al. 15). The student’s question caught me off-guard. I recognized immediately my failure to question traditional gender conceptions when I assigned the question. Despite identifying as queer, I had not considered that students might question the definition of “couple.”

This moment could have been an opportunity for my students and me to interrogate the assumptions in the mathematical text, assumptions that evolve from social constructs. I could have engaged the class in conversation about gender—suggesting that not all couples are heterosexual, that not all individuals identify as male or female, and that a culture of acceptance is necessary. I could have prompted the students to see how they might solve the problem if they did not define “couple” as female/male.

But, the moment slipped by because I was not prepared to queer the curriculum. In sharing

the experience with Kristen, my ELA colleague, I lamented the lost moment. Kristen admitted that though she had learned much in her twenty years of teaching about creating a curriculum that was responsive to the needs of individuals of different races, ethnicities, religions, cultures, and binary genders, she still lacked confidence in her ability to address LGBTQ+ issues in the classroom. She said she noticed apprehension in her students as well. It was harder for adolescents (and preservice teachers) to interrogate gender identity and sexual orientation than racial identity, for example.

Our shared desire to do better prompted a collaboration across disciplines, which began with me sharing much of what I have learned from the existing literature on supporting LGBTQ+ students in K–12 settings, particularly the concept of mathematical inqu[ee]ry (Rands) that had helped me to queer the math curriculum.

QUEERING THE CURRICULUM

Typically, two approaches are described when the discussion focuses on supporting queer students in K–12 settings. The first follows tenets of Emily Style’s theory of curriculum, and proponents of this method advocate for increased representation in the curriculum to serve as both windows (a view into someone else’s life) and mirrors (a view of oneself). In this way, queer students can see themselves in the many texts of school; they feel represented, and non-queer students learn to understand the diversity of

the world in which they live. In English language arts, Rudine Sims Bishop discussed similar notions of windows and mirrors in literature, stating that the windows in books can also be seen as “sliding glass doors” where “readers have only to walk through in imagination to become part of whatever world has been created or recreated by the author” (ix). While representation and inclusion play an important function in the classroom, there are questions related to this form of support for queer students. All queer students do not enact the same identity; teachers must make decisions about which representations are worthy of inclusion and which are not. The very nature of deciding, then, undermines the efforts to be inclusive.

These critiques have led to a second approach for supporting queer students: using principles of queer theory in classroom pedagogy. Queer theorists hold that identity, particularly sexuality and gender identity, is unfixed. Instead, these identities are seen as performative and tied to other elements of identity such as race, gender, and class. Queer theory also suggests that interpretations of sexuality and gender identities are shaped by culture. These ideas lead to a queer theory that “call[s] into question conventional understandings of sexual identity by deconstructing the categories, oppositions, and equations that sustain them” (Jagose 97).

To bring queer theory into classroom pedagogy, teachers and students question the nature of knowledge and learning, interrogate the concept of “normal,” and examine all facts and the assumptions surrounding them. This kind of approach is consistent with the principles of inquiry (Nelson 377).

Kai Rands has discussed what queer-informed inquiry looks like in the mathematics classroom. Rands calls the approach “mathematical inq[ue]ry,” “questioning the tasks, the strategies, the very ways of thinking and doing mathematics as well as the way mathematics is used to interpret and act in the world” (186). For Rands, mathematical inq[ue]ry requires that educators and students adopt a questioning stance to their learning and to the knowledge presented to them.

ADDRESSING CROSS-DISCIPLINARY QUESTIONS

Inquiry is at the heart of the English classroom. From books such as *Disrupting Thinking: Why How We Read Matters* by Kyleen Beers and Robert Probst, which outlines a questioning stance for reading, to the full program of the NCTE 2019 Annual Convention, *Spirited Inquiry*, examples of the work in inquiry being done in English language arts classrooms abound. But what happens if English teachers look outside our discipline, borrow Rands’s concept of mathematical inq[ue]ry, and work with our colleagues to queer the curriculum? We asked ourselves this question

to explore ways to move beyond a windows and mirrors (and sliding glass doors) approach to affirming LGBTQ+ identities. Our conversations led us to develop a set of questions that allow for such inquiry across academic disciplines and that focus on issues of gender (see sidebar).

These questions adopt Rands’s stance of inq[ue]ry by challenging assumptions of “normal.”

To bring queer theory into classroom pedagogy, teachers and students question the nature of knowledge and learning, interrogate the concept of “normal,” and examine all facts and the assumptions surrounding them.

CROSS-DISCIPLINARY QUESTIONS FOR GENDER-BASED INQ[UE]RY

- What do we notice?
- What do we wonder?
- What is the context?
- What genders are represented and how are they presented?
- Who is included in the represented genders and who is not?
- What other genders exist?
- What would considering other gender identities (not just male and female) add to our understanding?

They provide a heuristic for examining any text in any content area, regardless of the nature of that text. The first two questions are frequently used across disciplines. (See Ray for math, Beers and Probst for ELA, and Project Zero for a general “See, Think, Wonder” routine.) Probing students’ noticing and wondering provides teachers with a window into students’ initial thinking and engagement with a text.

The third question, “What is the context?” may be adapted depending on the teacher’s goal for the discussion and may refer to the context within the text, the author’s identity and the time period or place in which the text was created, and the sources used or consulted during the text’s creation. Considering these contextual factors signals the teacher’s beginning attempts to guide students in their “questioning [of] the tasks, the strategies, the very ways of thinking” (Rands 186) presented in the text and its relation to the contextual factors. The fourth and fifth questions allow students to consider representation in the text, connecting that representation back to the contextual factors and/or the initial noticing and wondering questions.

The sixth question is included to prompt students to think outside the gender binary, considering people who may identify as nonbinary, gender-fluid, agender, transgender, or as other genders. The question serves to elicit students’ initial conceptions of these identities, so that the teacher may address any misconceptions and/or build on prior understandings. The final question helps students begin to make connections between the text (contextual factors and representation) and the complex world in which they live. These questions offer a starting point for class discussion and might lead to other questions that serve to have students critically engage with notions of gender.

INCORPORATING INQU[EE]RY IN ELA

As I (Kristen) considered using the cross-disciplinary questions to queer my ELA curriculum, I decided to revise a unit that combined inquiry with a focus on women’s voices in literature and society. For more than two decades, I had asked students to interrogate

the relevance of the Equal Rights Amendment (ERA) in various contexts when they were working on debate and developing arguments. With recent votes in Nevada, Illinois, and Virginia to support the 1972 constitutional amendment, gender equity is, yet again, an issue of current interest. The focus on gender in this topic made it ideal for inqu[ee]ry.

Up until this point, students in my classes, regardless of the context, focused their inquiry on the relevance of the ERA assuming male/female gender constructs. To queer this curriculum, the focus turned to *gender*, rather than *women*, with the construct of gender being a core concept in the inquiry. This work begins with an inqu[ee]ry approach to the question, “Is the Equal Rights Amendment (ERA) relevant today?” Using the cross-disciplinary questions, students begin by reading the text of the ERA: “Equality of rights under the law shall not be denied or abridged by the United States or by any State on account of sex.”

Students start with the questions, “What do you notice?” and “What do you wonder?” If they notice or wonder about the term *sex*, I facilitate a discussion that helps students to define the terms *gender* and *sex*, distinguishing between the two. Alternately, I could present definitions, like the following from Teaching Tolerance’s (www.tolerance.org) *Best Practices for Serving LGBTQ Students* (Collins and Ehrenhalt):

Gender (noun): A set of social, physical, psychological and emotional traits, often influenced by societal expectations, that classify an individual as feminine, masculine, androgynous or other. Words and qualities ascribed to these traits vary across cultures. (42)

Biological sex (noun): A medical classification that refers to anatomical, physiological, genetic or physical attributes that determine if a person is assigned male, female or intersex identity at birth. Biological sex is often confused or interchanged with the term “gender,” which encompasses personal identity and social factors, and is not necessarily determined by biological sex. (41)

Ultimately, students need to grapple with and define the word *sex* in the ERA and its relation to the social construct of gender. With a definition in

mind, the class can hypothesize answers to the cross-disciplinary questions:

- What is the context?
- What genders are represented and how are they presented?
- Who is included in the represented genders and who is not?
- What other genders are there?
- What would considering other gender identities (not just male and female) add to our understanding?

This initial interrogation of the text of the ERA leads to the question, “Is the ERA relevant today?”

To expand the inquiry, I might then pair nonfiction expository texts that provide societal context with literary narratives (both fiction and nonfiction). For example, in discussing readings from *A Queer History of the United States for Young People* (Bronski), such as those identifying Pauli Murray, Rita Mae Brown, and Gloria Anzaldúa’s contributions to fighting for women’s rights, the class could pose the following questions (as well as the cross-disciplinary questions posed earlier):

- How do these texts further our understanding about the fight for women’s equality?
- Who was considered a “woman” in these texts? How does that shape our understanding of the fight for women’s equality?
- Whose voices has the women’s rights movement sought to uplift? Was this inclusive of *all* women?

Students might also compare the text of the ERA with the Equality Act of 2019, which was passed by the House of Representatives in May 2019 (see www.congress.gov/bill/116th-congress/house-bill/5), and further explore the terms *sex* and *gender* as defined in this bill. In addition to the cross-disciplinary questions, students might consider the following:

- How does the Equality Act define terms such as *gender*, *sex*, and *sexual orientation*? Who is included in these definitions and who is not?

- Is the Equality Act truly inclusive? How about the ERA?
- Which legislation does more to protect individuals (ERA or Equality Act)?

To augment the nonfiction texts that provide societal context, English teachers can offer students a variety of literary texts that share voices on gender. In addition to—or perhaps instead of—selecting a text for full-class study, such as *I Am Malala*, teachers might consider asking students to interrogate young adult literature. Figure 1 provides a sampling of books. Students can examine these lists for gender representation. Then they can select a text to read independently or as part of a book club with the purpose of hearing a voice that they have not read before. To critically engage with the representation of

**YOUNG ADULT LITERATURE
FOCUSED ON WOMEN’S HISTORY
AND FEMINIST VOICES**

Women’s History and Women’s Lives—
Children and Young Adults
socialjusticebooks.org/booklists/women/

Fifty Crucial Feminist YA Novels
www.barnesandnoble.com/blog/teen/50-crucial-feminist-ya-novels/

Eleven Young Adult Books for Stoking the
Feminist Fire
nymag.com/strategist/2017/01/good-feminist-books-for-teenage-girls.html

Toward Creating a Trans Literary Canon
www.theparisreview.org/blog/2018/10/23/toward-creating-a-trans-literary-canon/

Seven Books Like *Juliet Takes a Breath*
to Add to Your Latinx Feminist
Reading List
www.bustle.com/p/7-books-like-juliet-takes-a-breath-to-add-to-your-latinx-feminist-reading-list-32325

FIGURE 1
Teachers can find curated lists of young adult literature that highlights women’s history and feminist voices on the Internet.

gender and identity, the students could reflect on the following questions:

- What voice is amplified in this text?
- How is gender represented?
- What voices are not necessarily considered?

Through their work with nonfiction and literary texts, students gain an appreciation of the context of the Equal Rights Amendment, reflect on its relevance today, and consider whether *all* genders would be protected under it.

The final step asks students to draw on evidence from across texts to craft an argument (e.g., debate, essay, public service announcement) that speaks to the relevance of the ERA today. By examining the legislation, students will be poised to move from inquiry to “social action” (Zemelman 1). To engage in youth activism, students can connect with their local, state, or federal representatives to advocate for policies that are inclusive or participate civically in any of the ways documented by Henry Jenkins and colleagues in the book *By Any Media Necessary: The New Youth Activism (Connected Youth and Digital Futures)*.

ESTABLISHING INQU[EE]RY

I started on a path to queer the ELA curriculum because of a conversation with Brandie, who shared her own aha! moment and the subsequent research she had done to learn to queer her math curriculum. The cross-disciplinary conversation ultimately allowed for an interdisciplinary collaboration about queer inclusive instructional practices. The collaboration was important in helping us both interrogate our assumptions and past practices, yet the process evolved organically. Even so, it is possible to replicate this kind of cross-disciplinary work.

START WITHIN

English teachers sit in the perfect space to begin inqu[ee]ry. It is possible to approach nearly every text in the classroom by questioning it through a lens of queer theory. The cross-disciplinary questions presented in this article reflect the questioning stance of Beers and Probst and other leaders in the field of reading. Inqu[ee]ry can begin within the walls of a single classroom by following these steps.

1. *Reflect*: To queer their curriculum teachers must reflect on their own identities and biases. (Resources for starting this reflection are located in Table 1.)
2. *Self-educate*: After engaging in reflection, teachers should begin educating themselves on terminology used within the queer community and ways to support queer students in the classroom, as well as matters of both historical and contemporary queer life (see Table 1 for a list of resources).
3. *Conduct a curriculum audit*: The first two steps arm teachers with knowledge to begin looking for opportunities to queer the curriculum. While this article has focused on queering related to gender and sexuality, true inqu[ee]ry, as described by Rands, is not limited to gender and sexuality. Instead, inqu[ee]ry is about pushing back against society’s ideas of what is “normal.” For example, Rands suggests that students consider the “normal” way of measuring “time” and other ways there may be to experience or measure time.
4. *Examine text(s)*: While the inqu[ee]ry that takes place in one unit or lesson might differ greatly from that of another, ask the following questions in relation to a specific text:
 - Are there concepts or terms in this text that are easily defined because they are considered “normal” in social constructs (e.g., male/female; race/ethnicity)?
 - What assumptions do I have about these constructs? What am I considering “normal”?
 - In what ways has the text oversimplified the constructs?
 - What other definitions or perspectives of the construct might exist? Who or what am I not thinking about?
 - If I approach this text with a different mindset, how does my interpretation change? What would that mean for presenting this text to students?
5. *Engage in inqu[ee]ry*: Use the cross-disciplinary questions to interrogate the text.

TABLE 1

Resources for Self-Reflection and Education

Links located at tinyurl.com/inqueryacrosscurriculum



Reflect on own identities and biases	Self-educate about the queer community
<p>The GLSEN Safe Space Kit This resource contains a questionnaire to reflect on your own LGBTQ+ bias on page 7 “Straight Privilege: Unpacking the (Still) Invisible Knapsack” by Kaia Tollefson Tollefson outlines a number of privileges afforded to straight individuals. While some of the items in Tollefson’s list may be outdated since the passage of marriage equality, there are a number of items that still apply. <i>About Gender Identity Justice in Schools and Communities</i> by sj Miller This book outlines how teachers can work toward gender identity justice in their schools and communities. Chapter 2 is especially helpful in understanding (and reflecting on) the dangers of a cisgender assumption and privileges afforded to cisgender individuals.</p>	<p>Teaching Tolerance’s guide <i>Best Practices for Serving LGBTQ Students</i> This resource provides resources for teachers to support LGBTQ+ students in relation to classroom culture, instruction, and family/community engagement. The guide also provides resources for checking and improving school policies to become more LGBTQ+ inclusive. <i>Queer America</i> This podcast, from Teaching Tolerance, provides a historical perspective of LGBTQ+ life and LGBTQ+ people. <i>Making Gay History</i> This podcast, hosted by historian Eric Marcus, provides portraits of influential historical figures that were instrumental in the quest for LGBTQ+ liberation. <i>One from the Vaults</i> This podcast focuses on the stories of transgender individuals throughout history. <i>Nancy</i> This WNYC podcast provides a contemporary look at queer life. <i>Strange Fruit</i> This podcast, from Louisville Public Media, touches on issues of race, gender, and LGBTQ+ identities (and their intersections) in contemporary life and politics.</p>

It is important to note that all of these steps are essential to begin engaging in inquiry, even for teachers of queer identities. While the first two steps may seem less applicable to queer teachers, one teacher’s experience as a queer individual may not be the same as another’s. As Brandie’s anecdote demonstrates, having a queer identity does not preclude an individual from bringing their biases into the curriculum. Her experience as a Latinx cisgender lesbian is particular, and she knows it is important to educate herself on the experiences of others within her community.

BRANCH OUT

After individual teachers do their own work, they can branch out to other colleagues. We began an

interdisciplinary inquiry after Brandie mentioned how her biases had surprised her in the “couples” math problem. As she shared her process of reflection and self-education, I (Kristen) was inspired to begin my own process. Our story highlights how two teachers—one mathematics and one English language arts, one queer and one straight—worked together to determine how to queer their curricula. It is our hope that this story, along with the cross-disciplinary questions presented in this article, will both inspire and guide teachers of all disciplines (as well as orientations and genders) to engage in similar collaborations. We strongly believe that such inquiry across the curriculum is a valuable tool to begin honoring the diverse experiences of every student in our classrooms. **EJ**

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READWRITETHINK CONNECTION Lisa Storm Fink, RWT

Whether or not your students identify as LGBTQ+, the social justice issues surrounding the characters in LGBTQ+ fiction will be motivating and generate opportunities for discussion and writing. This activity includes a list of age-appropriate books, a discussion-starter guide, and ideas to extend beyond the books. <http://bit.ly/2RAIGSr>