

Pushing the Limits of Innovation and Scholarship in the Teaching of Spanish and Portuguese: Insights from Queer Theory

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A response to “Once Again ‘On the Threshold’: Innovative Scholarship in *Hispania* in the Twenty-First Century Invests in Pedagogy and Partnerships”

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Relecting on the innovative and transdisciplinary work of world language (WL) programs in spite of a decrease in funding, Brady (2018) calls for Spanish and Portuguese educators to “adjust to meet students’ needs (e.g., to create career-focused curriculum, experiential learning opportunities, etc.)” (490) and “to offer dynamic programs that contribute to helping students become well-rounded, creative thinkers who do good in their communities and in the world” (490). As such, Brady’s discussion of “boundary crossing” (490), or transdisciplinarity, has been taken up recently in scholarship related to Second Language Acquisition (SLA) and Applied Linguistics (see Byrd Clark 2016; Douglas Fir Group 2016) so as to validate disciplines but to also encourage conversations across boundaries (Douglas Fir Group 2016: 20). While the affordances of such transdisciplinary conversations have “inspired new lines of pedagogy scholarship” (Brady 2018: 491) in journals such as *Hispania* whereby the arts, linguistics, film, history, etc. are utilized together rather than separately to generate different lines of inquiry, an area often absent from such conversations is that of queer theory/queer inquiry/queer pedagogy in world language education (WLE). Whereas the field of Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages (TESOL) has invited queer inquiry into research and practice (see Nelson 1999) and the study of literature in Spanish and Portuguese has often engaged with sexuality and gender, WLE largely remains mostly heterosexual in the curriculum, materials, and pedagogy. While I concur with Brady’s assertion that Spanish and Portuguese pedagogy and scholarship, as well as *Hispania*, seek to foster innovation and a more well-rounded citizenry, it is imperative that we do not forget the insights offered by previous research on gender, sexuality, and queering the language classroom. Furthermore, engaging with such aspects in scholarship and pedagogy can ensure that Spanish and Portuguese, as well as WLE more broadly, do not dismiss the centrality of such identities and issues

in pedagogical and scholastic innovations.

In the articles highlighted by Brady's (2018) review of innovation in pedagogy and scholarship in *Hispania*, Brady emphasizes the affordances of the multiplicity of sectors in encouraging a "variety of perspectives" (493). While I concur with Brady's assertion that communication between sectors such as military and civilian WLE is essential to developing a citizenry that is critical and creative, I do, however, encourage WLE to transverse other disciplinary boundaries, such as gender and sexuality studies. Before discussing how the disciplines of gender and sexuality studies have been utilized in WLE and can be productive for such an endeavor suggested by Brady, it is necessary to briefly mention identity. In the fields of Applied Linguistics and SLA, identity-related research (see Norton Peirce 1995; Norton 2013) has approached identity not as a static, fixed part of the humanistic conception of the individual, but rather, as contradictory and multiple (Norton 2013). In contrast to prior SLA research that centered upon what the learner could do, thereby positioning the learner as a "language learning machine" (Pennycook 2001: 143), the emergence of identity-related scholarship has emphasized the centrality of the social world of the learner. In contrast to cognitive perspectives that locate language within the individual, identity-related research and specifically, poststructuralist perspectives have encouraged scholars to reorient notions of language, discourse, and the subject. In relation to gender and sexuality, then, Judith Butler's (1990) *Gender Trouble* and Michel Foucault's (1978) *History of Sexuality* introduced the notions of gender as performative and sexuality as discursively produced.

In language education, such theoretical influences have encouraged scholars to examine the ways in which norms, particularly heteronormativity, operate within the language classroom and beyond. In contexts such as Spanish and Portuguese studies, however, the influence of colonization, and its impacts and intersections related to race, gender, and sexuality, is also a salient aspect that is ripe to consider when confronting normativity in the language classroom. Therefore, considering intersectionality, or the entanglement of social categories (Norton and De Costa 2018), can be productive for examining legacies of colonization and heteronormativity within the target language and culture. Moreover, as the language classroom is a space where acts of identity are accomplished through listening, speaking, reading, and writing (Nelson 2009: 13), scholarship in TESOL and WLE began to interrogate the ways in which heteronormativity was reproduced in the classroom discourse (see De Vicenti, Giovanangeli, and Ward 2007; Liddicoat 2009; Nelson 1999, 2009) and how instructors could challenge the heteronormative context through queering their pedagogy (Curran 2006). Queer Theory, which disavows labels as it draws upon poststructuralist reticence towards fixed categories, has been one such approach to confronting classroom and curricular heteronormativity. The theoretical and methodological insights of intersectional approaches, or the interrogation of

the mutually inflecting categories of race, gender, class, nation, and sexuality (Cho, Crenshaw, and McCall 2013), can illustrate how such social categories are “overlapping and interdependent” (Norton and De Costa 2018: 94), while being productive in examining power relations (Cho, Crenshaw, and McCall 2013). More specifically, Nelson’s (1999, 2009) work has encouraged scholarship and pedagogy to engage with queer inquiry in the classroom. Queer inquiry, developed from the insights of Queer Theory, serves as a way to problematize the production of all sexualities (Nelson 1999). Taking upon Brady’s assertion to engage with transdisciplinarity in teaching and research related to Spanish and Portuguese, Queer Theory and queer pedagogy/inquiry invite us to consider what is normal and how normal has been produced in and through the target language and culture. Moreover, the transdisciplinary nature of the articles in *Hispania* highlighted by Brady can be a form of queering our research and pedagogy as we remove rigid, fixed disciplinary boundaries, and instead, invite fluidity in and through our pedagogy and scholarship, thereby stretching the boundaries of what is thinkable and permissible.

Through the insights of Queer Theory and queer inquiry/pedagogy, Spanish and Portuguese teachers and scholars can invite their students to question “normal” and how normalcy produces exclusion for LGBTQIA+ and other students who may not align with such normative notions. As there is a dearth of research related to sexuality in the language classroom (see Nelson 2009), it is imperative that language scholars engage more with the insights of Queer Theory in their research so that we do not continue to perpetuate inequality by ignoring underrepresented groups in the classroom. Moreover, in the classroom, it is thereby essential to begin considering the affordances of queering pedagogies so as to destabilize classroom heteronormativity. For example, queering the classroom may not just be the inclusion of non-normative sexual identities, but rather, examining and problematizing the norms of the target language and culture. In a recent presentation that I conducted on queering the language classroom with WL educators, an audience member discussed how she was able to engage with sexuality in her high school level Spanish class. To accomplish this task, the teacher showed the students a picture of two women holding hands in a Spanish-speaking country. By asking students why these women might be holding hands, she invited an array of responses and questions about the target language and culture. After explaining that it is a cultural norm to do so in that country, she then was able to confront students’ homophobic assumptions related to the photo. As a language educator and emerging scholar who believes that the classroom is a space for developing not only communicative competence, but rather, examining the social rules implicated within the target language and culture, I believe that it is time for not only Spanish and Portuguese educators and scholars to engage with Queer Theory, queer inquiry, and queer pedagogy, but rather all WL educators. The implications, then, for engaging with such

concepts are tied not only to fostering the “well-rounded creative thinker” (490) to which Brady (2018) refers, but rather, creating a space in research and pedagogy that invites us to question normal and to ensure that we do not perpetuate inequalities in the classroom and our research.

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