

‘Queer Goings-on’: An Autoethnographic Account of the Experiences and Practice of Performing a Queer Pedagogy

Mark Vicars

University of Sheffield, UK

In this paper, I use autoethnography to reconstruct scenes from my experiences of working as a teacher of English and Drama in an international British Curriculum Secondary school. I employ literary and poetic devices to create an impression of the experiences of performing a Queer pedagogy and focus on a series of incidents to tell of the ways in which the rigid dichotomies of identity are policed within educational settings. In this paper, I question one key incident in an attempt to illustrate the ethical and moral dilemma faced when the division between sexuality and pedagogy, teacher and student is breached. I attempt to tell of the relationship of the periphery to the centre and of the tensions that emerge when a heteronormative regime is resisted.

If you want to know me, then you must know my story, for my story defines who I am. And if I want know myself, to gain insight into the meaning of my own life, then I, too, must come to know my own story. I must come to see in all its particulars the narrative of the self and the personal myth that I have tacitly, even unconsciously composed over the course of my years. It is a story I continue to revise, and to tell myself (and sometimes to others) as I go on living.

(McAdams, 1993: 11)

A text can only come to life when it is read, and if it is to be examined, it must therefore be studied through the eyes of the reader.

(Iser, 1971: 2–3)

Address for correspondence: Mark Vicars, Department of Educational Studies, University of Sheffield, 388 Glossop Road, Sheffield, South Yorkshire S10 2JA, UK; Email: aldous38@btinternet.com

IS IT ALL ABOUT ME? HOW QUEER!

What am I trying to do with this writing? I have never found writing easy, never quite sure out of which voice I should speak, Hallet (1999). I feel nervous in experimenting with a methodological approach that ‘denaturalises conceptions of “appropriate” forms of educational theorizing, practice and research’, Miller (1998: 371) to tell of my experience as a ‘queer’ teacher. Brandt *et al.* (2001) thinks that my feeling is a predictable state but suggests that it is useful in that ‘such states give us direct access to the ways in which what is felt internally as “personal experience” is intimately connected to the institutions outside the self that foster and promote such feelings’, Brandt *et al.* (2001: 21).

I would like to engage the active reader, for them to produce their own pleasures of this text, Barthes (1976). However, I am mindful of the personal and professional risks involved in such an endeavour, of laying myself open to ‘the trivializing charge of self-indulgence that is so readily levelled by mainstream academics’, Sparkes (2003: 73).

I am attempting to create impressions of places and people that led me to question the ways that I belong, act, speak and represent myself as a Gay/Queer man and as a teacher. I am finding it impossible to reproduce a neutral account veiled in an objective representation. An attempt to do so would be mechanistic, technical and methodologically invalidate a critical reflexivity weaved within the process of identifying and reconstructing the contexts which formed my reality of the events, McNamee (1993: 5).

The claim has been made that reflexive authors are paradigmatically circumscribed, Pollner (1991). In gazing once again at past events, I find myself doing this autoethnography from a Queer perspective that uses what Hill (1996) has called ‘fugitive knowledge’. Fugitive knowledges are forms of knowing that are used to disrupt heterosexualizing pedagogies. Queer, as a term, a theory and a way of being, is increasingly being contested and usefully problematized. The potential of Queer as a conceptual tool is that it can productively fuse the divisions between practice, politics and theory. Within the academy, it has shot out disruptive rhizomes that have challenged orthodoxies of knowing and generated discursive activity that has focused critical attention on the ways in which the regime of the normative habitually constructs and naturalizes within everyday practices of life. To adopt a Queer stance is to resist essentialist notions of sexual identity. It is a position that abruptly reconsiders the politics of identity by reconstructing allegiances across disparate communities that are framed, found out and made visible by their differences. Queer embraces the provisional in its refusal to be pinioned by any one single definition. It can be rooted in embodied experiences that inform, propel

and fashion meaning around its use. In this context, it has been employed politically to agitate, the most notable illustrations being the direct action taken by the protest groups Queer Nation, and Act-Up. Theoretically, it has been utilized to analyse the effects of communities of practice (Lave and Wenger, 1991), on dissident subjectivities and as the anonymous author of *Queers read this*, a leaflet distributed at a New York Pride march in June 1990, states: 'Being Queer means leading a different sort of life. It's about defining ourselves. Using "queer" is a way of reminding how we are perceived. Queer can be a rough word but it is also a sly and ironic weapon' (Anon, 1990: 1). I offer my understanding of it as positionality that focuses on actions not actors (Britzman, 1995) and epistemologically as a way of knowing, rather than something to be known (Kopelson, 2002).

A Queer reflexivity raises the significance of employing ontology for unsettling thinking about reality, agency and ways of being and relating. Leonard (1997) has pointed out that a 'Queer theory urges the discovery of subjugated knowledge, and the positing and exploration of sites of resistance within the pressured "subject" who knows' (1997: 4). Ways of being, traditionally categorized as perverse, are able to be explored without pathology. Queer is a process of constant becoming and movement and Morris (1998) suggests that 'A queer identity is a chameleon-like refusal to be caged into any prescribed category or role' (1998: 279). Honeychurch (1996) has commented that:

A queering standpoint in social science research is a vigorous challenge to that which has constrained what may be known, who may be the knower, and how knowledge has come to be generated and circulated ... [and] queers participate in positioning themselves through both authoring and authorising experience.

(Honeychurch, 1996: 342)

If, as Chia (1996) suggests, reflexivity can assist in understanding the process of becoming, the recovering of emerging experiences, and the making strange of what is familiar, then it finds a home within this text that attempts to complexify as opposed to simplify and question instead of answer the contradictions and dissonances between the social roles I have come to inhabit. A Queer reflexivity would resist the appeal of constructing an authorial identity to unify narratives told of a sovereign self, Crawley (2002). I am conscious that in placing myself within this text as a speaking subject I have been constituted and reconstituted by discourse, embedded in a intricate network of social relations (Foucault, 1972) and am spoken by language (Lacan, 1977). My voice has become a necessary fiction from which I am able to speak back and about the

multiple subjectivities of self that have been discursively constituted and reiteratively performed. Talburt (1999) has commented that:

For ethnography to engage queer theories can be a difficult task, particularly when voice, visibility, the self and experience have inherently mediated forms and when knowledge and ignorance do not readily offer evidence of their workings. A difficulty is to discover how epistemologies that rely on seeing and hearing can be brought into dialogue with epistemologies that question what is seen and heard.

(Talburt, 1999: 529)

In trying to overcome the difficulties, I am attracted by Heidegger's (1966) appeal to employ 'meditative thinking' as a way of opening up possibilities and to query the orthodox rules that discipline what questions are asked and how we seek the answers. Meditative thinking offers a space in which truth and knowledge are constructed as a dialectical social practice (Cunliffe, 2001). It requires me to think about my own practices of self as a process of continual negotiations (Butler, 1997; Probyn, 1996) in relation to the knowledge derived from performing rigid, dichotomous identities' produced out of social categories (Evans, 2002). Talburt (1999) suggests,

Queer theory pushes the limits of ethnography ... that seeks to understand the formation of subjectivities and practices in relations of power, in that it explicitly draws presences from discursive silences as it questions the constitution and effects of social and institutional norms.

(Talburt, 1999: 537)

What, then, are the potential sites in which a Queer identity can find expression within everyday experiences of teaching and learning and within schools? It is perhaps in the refusal to be pinioned by the weight of professional role, one that rigidly delineates student from teacher, private from public, that I can come to articulate what I mean by a Queer pedagogy. Thomas (1993) has commented that: 'It is difficult to separate convincingly and reliably, self from professional persona. It seems ... to be in the nature of teaching, that the mask of the role player is likely to slip' (Thomas, 1993: 239).

It would seem to me that a Queer presence in pedagogy would trouble 'the very relationships of the day to day lived experience of school life' (Morris, 1998: 285) and 'offer an alternative to move beyond the limiting homo/hetero binary' (Quinlivan and Town, 1999: 253). In doing so, making possible a critique of what is constituted as normal behaviours, roles and expectations.

In critiquing my professional practice as a teacher and of the social and cultural contexts in which my sexual identity had been constituted, I have

come to realize that schools and classrooms are places where I become invisible or am made to become invisible. It seems to me that I have always felt pressured to legitimize and explain what it is that I am and what I do, especially to myself. Tierney (1997) suggests this feeling could be a product of a heterosexualizing culture and discourse, one in which: 'The widespread notion that heterosexuality is normal and that everything that is not heterosexual is somehow aberrant and has placed queers in a constant existential state of questioning ourselves, our identity, and how we should act' (Tierney, 1997: 39).

My unaccomplished performances of normative gender and sexuality in educational settings have subsequently continued to shape and provide a pattern to how I have come to have an experience of what it means to be a teacher who is gay. My feelings of being an outlaw in the educational process have a genealogy. Constantly being positioned in relation to the force of dominant institutional discourses and agendas is how I have come to understand and interpret the intersections of the personal on professional practices (Vicars, 2003; 2005).

In this text I have chosen to reconstruct and critically reflect on a key moment from my past. The slippage of the private into the public disrupted the social and cultural roles I was expected to perform and problematised my cultural identities as teacher and Gay/Queer man. Said (1989: 225) suggests that '... the crossing of boundaries are experiences that can therefore provide us with new narrative forms'. By experimenting with writing, with ways of representing lived experience, I hope to be able to assimilate the cognitive and emotional sources of my knowledge to tell of the dilemma I found myself in when binaries of personal/professional were breached.

TELLING TALES: REVISITING THE PAST IN THE PRESENT AND TOWARDS THE FUTURE

Conscious and unconscious are asymmetrically co-present: the inner structure maps the outer conceptualisings. This mapping is above all governed by linguistic experience.

(Wright, 1984: 107)

I reorganize the space at my desk in order to begin writing. Does the coffee pot need refilling? Do I have another packet of cigarettes? Have I remembered to switch on the answer phone? I start to tap away at my keyboard scouring experience, aware that it already exists as an 'interpretation and is in need of interpretation' (Scott, 1992). As I settle down in front of the computer screen, the taste of bitter coffee is blended with cigarette

smoke and I reach for the mediating forces of memory and language and wait for them to assert authority on my unconscious.

I am getting lost in past imaginings and struggle to find the language to share and interpret my world. How do I start to give a form to a narrative that will hopefully reveal how my identity as a teacher and my educational practice has been constituted through 'material, cultural and intersubjective relations' Smith and Watson (2001: 25). Grasping at images from the past, I selectively revise scenes and reorder fragments in an attempt to make sense of those critical, defining transitional moments located in a multiple embodied life. What order can I impose on the illusions of myself and of others that claim to be truthful expressions? I am becoming aware how the events I select are constantly up for negotiation. With each churned and filtered motion, they recoil from immediate analysis. Hesitantly, they emerge into words, phrases, sentences and paragraphs that require structure and 'emplotment' (Bruner, 1990; Polkinghorne, 1988; Ricoeur, 1984). It is in the writing that I find the interpretation is being formed. It is through this developing narrative that I hope to be able to find the threads of my story. I light another cigarette and draw deeply, pulling the nicotine-laced smoke deep into kippered lungs. I observe the yellowed surface of the monitor tarnished by numerous nocturnal sessions spent reading and thinking in this room that I converted to a study on my return to England. I recall the comments of a friend, an ex-smoker, who on quitting claimed that smokers are people who suppress unresolved emotional conflicts. I light another cigarette and think about my father who lay dying from emphysema in a flock-wallpapered room for 13 months. I returned to his house having spent 10 years overseas teaching. On my return, I obstinately clung to the remnants of a life I had known, a life I had created. Artefacts from that life (hand-crafted Japanese fans, earthenware sake sets and stone-carved Theravada Buddhas) clutter this new space that I have consciously created in my father's house. Garishly announcing their origins, they reside in stark contrast to my father's collections of porcelain figurines and are a visual reminder of the distance and differences that existed between us and that neither of us managed to breach.

I never wanted to be a teacher. I based my perceptions of the profession on the grey suited, pallid-faced disciplinarians of my youth. They embodied the substance of control that was my secondary educational experience. Even today, the dictums of the maths teacher, 'silence is golden', and taunts of the PE teacher ring in my ears and sound the death knell for any endeavour vaguely mathematical or activity in which I have to compete physically.

Five years ago I had arrived at a strange airport with no job, nowhere to live and I created a life for myself. I carved out a home amidst

the chaos of that uncanny city. Beguiled by the charms and anarchy of the metropolis, I quickly adapted to the myriad ways of knowing this exotic geography and its difference imprinted indelible patterns on my psyche. The pungent aroma of spices blended with eye-watering carbon monoxide fumes that infused skin, bone and connective tissue, worming a way through my outer defences. I embraced its toxicity. It was a place that I thought at the time I would never want to leave.

Three months after arriving, I had applied for a job teaching English and drama at an international school and I could not believe my good fortune when I got it.

Welcome to the smokers balcony!

Sue, a formidable Geordie who taught special needs took me immediately under her wing.

We're not really allowed to smoke but the head turns a blind eye if we are discreet.

Dipping in and out of conversations, she maintained a constant dialogue and was the lynch pin that kept everything and everyone together.

You canne hav any secrets on the balcony pet. I love it here, been here for three years now. The head is a good un and we're like one big family. Great place to work, kids are wonderful, staff is best I've ever worked with. Now tell me 'bout you.

Four years later and my leaving day approached. In the interim, there had been a change of leadership and the incoming Head had established a regime that reminded me of those tortuous times I had spent under the disciplining gaze of former PE masters. Increasingly, I felt I had nowhere to turn and just as I had aimlessly floundered on the football pitch I had for the past 12 months questioned whether I could sustain the humiliations that resulted from not being one of the lads. There had been a plethora of new appointments, all men and the emphatic performances of masculinity that I had believed secured them jobs in the first place had a dramatic impact across the school. Steve, the newly appointed Head of English, in a department of two, had recently allotted himself the role of captain for the newly formed staff football team and set about establishing his order on and off the pitch.

*Now then tiger, I've decided to start an English Speaking Club. The little bastards keep talking their own language and I've got to do Something to stamp it out. Here is how it works, every time one of the little fuckers uses ***** put their name on the board. At the end of each week the names will be collected and if a name appears more than once it will be published in the school magazine that is sent home to the parents. Naming and shaming tiger, that is what it's all about.*

And so it continued, aggression seemed to characterize his every act. I had grown accustomed to his commentary on my sexuality in terms of ‘was I able to sit down after the weekend’ and ‘had I had it up the arse?’ My resistance to what Steve represented, personally and professionally, was making my position within the school increasingly vulnerable. I worked hard to maintain my approach to teaching in the classroom and a way of being with the students that encouraged openness, challenged prejudices, and attempted to restore equity to the teaching/learning interface. This stance had attracted attention from the senior management team who had on more than one occasion commented that my pedagogic style would be better suited to the ‘progressive’ philosophy of education advocated by Alexander Neill’s Summerhill School. I knew that in their comparison of my classroom, and by implication my practice that I was being told I did not fit in with his concept of how a school should operate. I had a feeling that my days were increasingly numbered because I persistently remained sceptical of the changes that were being introduced. I disrupted the view held by senior management and Steve that in the classroom an effective teacher should only: ‘... deal with the part of the child that is above the neck; and ... the emotional, vital part of the child is foreign territory’ (Summerhill School).

The differences were to become more pronounced. That Steve tolerated me was apparent. Using the status of Head of Department, he asserted authority and I was informed of departmental decisions as opposed to being involved in creating policy. He increasingly started to question my choice of texts from the IGCSE (International General Certificate in Secondary Education) syllabus and began to regulate how it should be taught. With each confrontation, it became clear that his need to win was driving the encounter. Agreeing to disagree was not an option. Metaphors of football, of playing on the same team, were drawn upon and it was made abundantly clear to me that in ‘playing offside’ I was disrupting ‘his game’.

The time of year approached when timetables are suspended and there is a sense of the daily life of school shuddering to a stop. It was exam time. It had been decided by the Headmaster that subject teachers would invigilate their own exams. Steve and I were thrust together for a week in the claustrophobic assembly hall.

Look at em, a couple of shittas.

Eh?

Returning from giving out extra sheets of paper, I did not have a clue to what he was referring.

Them, a couple of shittas!

What are you on about now?

Them!

He gestured to where two Year 11 lads were sitting industriously working through the question paper.

For crying out loud, stop it, they're kids.

They're a couple of pussies. You know what they said 'bout me?

I knew that he was 'pissed off'. These students had asked to be transferred to my class two terms previous. Having to produce a valid reason for their wanting to move from what was the top set down to the bottom set, the Headmaster had demanded to know the reason. A meeting had been organized where their parents had explained that the two lads were uncomfortable and fed up with being made fun of. Both had long hair and wore hair bands to keep it out of their face.

It was at the annual sports day that the situation finally came to a head.

You're on shot-putt with Steve.

I inwardly groaned and made my way over to where a bunch of the less able and less physically streamlined kids were lining up.

Duuur, are you stupid or what, I told you to line up over there.

I was not quite sure if he was talking to me or the kids. I looked around to check and spied Pete, the music teacher, lurking in the shade eating an ice cream and resplendent in a specially purchased, and it has to be said, rather camp red ensemble. Pete was not in the least sporty but felt that he should at least look the part. The lucky so-and-so had been given crowd control and, as there was not that much of a crowd to control, had found a quiet spot to observe the proceedings.

That fat queer cunt!

Oh leave it out, what has he ever done to you?

He makes me want to spew. You know what I want to do? I wanna tie that fat queer fucker down to a chair and stuff my fist down his throat till he gags. I want to ram it down so hard that his teeth break and he starts to choke.

How very sexual! What phallic imagery! It sounds like you want to fuck him? Maybe that's it, you secretly fancy a bit of cock?

Fuck off, that's disgusting! Uurgh, is that all you think about?

I had had enough and walked away to join Pete and have a lick of his ice cream. As it was the time of year when contracts were up for renewal, I had decided enough was enough. My decision had just been made. In between mouthfuls of vanilla whip, I told Pete.

You're doing what?

I'm leaving.

Why?

Pete could not understand.

Look, I've had two years working with Steve and let's face it this is not the place it used to be. It is virtually unrecognisable from the school we started at four years ago. I don't look forward to coming in any more, yeah the kids are still great but it's the rest of it that is a nightmare. Steve has re-signed for another two years and I have had enough.

The last day of term arrived and I was running late for the ritual line up for the school photograph. Making my way along the bleachers, I shouted out my apologies to the sweating bodies bunched together in a forced pose of institutional togetherness. We were anything but one big happy family.

Sorry I'm late, soooooorry!

Watch yer back boys, Vicars is coming through!

I had made the right decision. I felt such a sense of relief knowing that I would no longer have to put up with any more of it. I returned to my classroom to finish off packing up my things.

Dahhhhhling!

Karla the art teacher announced herself, bounded into my room and gave me a hug. I was hustled out of my classroom to an awaiting taxi. I demanded to know what was going on. I had come to hate surprises considering the amount I had had to accommodate during the previous couple of years.

Now, close your eyes.

Clutching onto Karla I made my way up the narrow winding stairs.

Surprise!

Opening my eyes I found myself in a small restaurant packed with year 10 and 11 students. A buffet was laid out and ominously a karaoke machine was buzzing on a raised platform stage.

Isn't it fabulous! They organised it all. Happy leaving!

The next couple of hours were spent eating, drinking, saying goodbye and swapping email addresses. I was surprised to see Bank there, for the last two years he had been visibly reluctant to have anything at all to do with me. I had taught him at the beginning of year 10, he was in my English IGCSE set and we had always got on well. Steve had decided that those students who did not stand a chance of passing the exam would not be entered as it would look bad on the department's pass rate. They would be taken out of mainstream English classes and would have to

do extra EFL. I had argued against the decision but, as it was supported by the senior management, I had to tell Bank that he would be leaving the class.

But I don't want to Mr. Vicars, I will try harder, I really will.

I'm sorry, Bank, it has already been decided.

What if I got my parents to pay?

I'm sorry, Bank, there is nothing I can do.

I knew as well as he did that his departure from my class would be read by his peers that he was not that bright as only the less able kids were being creamed off and separated into the *sink* category.

Hello Bank, how are you?

I wasn't going to come. I hated you, you know! Why did you throw me out of your class? I was trying hard. ...

As I explained to him what had happened and that it had not been my decision, he started to cry.

I'm sorry, Mr. Vicars, I didn't know ...

How could I explain?

Why didn't you tell me at the time?

Visibly upset and crying harder, he went to put his arms around me.

Mr. Vicars, Karaoke time.

Saved by a song, I felt uncomfortable about being physical with Bank. I knew it was not appropriate behaviour for a teacher. I understood what he was trying to tell me and regretted not being totally honest with him at the time. Amid cheers and shouts of my name I was dragged to the microphone just in time to launch into Gloria Gaynor's Gay disco anthem *I will survive*.

The whole room erupted with the refrain, Karla was being encouraged to join me on the stage and the amassed throng were on their feet dancing and singing at the top of their voices. Suddenly, Bank jumped on to the stage and started to take off his tie, then his shirt. Dancing around me to the cheers of onlookers, he flung his arms around my waist and planted a kiss on my cheek. What on earth was happening now? What did he think he was doing? What did I think I was doing?

Imagine this scene:

Dramatis personae:

SEXUALITY, an unconscious force

PEDAGOGY, a conscious force
PROFESSIONAL ETHICS, a controlling force
MINOR CHARACTER, a 17-year-old boy

A composite set represents the spaces of classroom and bar.

(Minor Character and Pedagogy are off stage. Professional Ethics is centre stage keeping control of sexuality who is walking slowly up stage out of sight of the audience. Suddenly music starts and sexuality moves down stage centre, Professional Ethics is unsure what to do and stands watching, helpless to intervene.)

PROFESSIONAL ETHICS: Stop it now!

SEXUALITY: (In a stage whisper) Relax it will be fine. (Starts to sing to the stoic figure of Professional Ethics) *First I was afraid, I was petrified, kept thinking I could never live without you by my side.*

PROFESSIONAL ETHICS (Glaring): This will end in tears, I'm warning you, behave!

SEXUALITY: *But I spent all so many nights thinking how you did me wrong and I grew strong, I knew that I would get along.*

PROFESSIONAL ETHICS: You are making a spectacle!

(Minor Character enters and walks over to Sexuality; Professional Ethics becomes increasingly agitated and concerned.)

PROFESSIONAL ETHICS: (Direct address to Sexuality) Enough is enough, it's time you made an exit.

(Minor Character starts to undress; Sexuality watches on bemused; Professional Ethics is furious.)

PROFESSIONAL ETHICS: I'm warning you.

(Sexuality continues to move to the music. Sexuality stops dancing for a moment, looks at Professional Ethics and turns to face the audience who are on their feet cheering, clapping, shouting encouragement and singing. Sexuality stands centre stage and is embraced by the Minor Character, the audience erupts once again. Sexuality and Minor Character look at each other and burst out laughing. They put their arms around each other and turning to face the audience they both start to sing.)

SEXUALITY/MINOR CHARACTER: *And now you're back from outer space I just walked in here to find you with that look upon your face.*

PROFESSIONAL ETHICS: Look at yourself, think what other people are going to say, think of your position.

SEXUALITY: *I should have changed that stupid lock; I should have made you leave your key*

PROFESSIONAL ETHICS: For Christ's sake!

SEXUALITY: *But I grew strong I learnt how to get along.*

PROFESSIONAL ETHICS: You shouldn't be here doing this, I don't know why you were invited?

(Minor character moves towards Sexuality and starts to remove his school tie which he swings around his head and flings into the audience. He then begins to slowly unbutton his shirt whilst dancing. He then removes his shirt and throws it over the head of Sexuality who all the time has been looking at Professional Ethics. Sexuality, holds the shirt that had been draped over his face in his left hand and tries to replace the microphone on its stand. He starts to exit the stage only to be pulled back by the Minor Character who is now simulating a striptease act much to the delight of the audience. Minor Character sidesteps Professional Ethics who has run on to the stage and is attempting to stop the performance. Sexuality is momentarily transfixed unsure whether to comply with Professional Ethics attempt to restore order or to go to the rescue of the Minor Character. He turns and walks towards the two characters who are grappling centre stage and his presence arrests the struggle. Professional Ethics glares at Sexuality who then turns to face Minor Character, they look at each other, both start to laugh and dancing they turn to face the audience.)

PROFESSIONAL ETHICS: STOP!!!!

(Sexuality, invites members of the audience on-stage and as the music gets louder the stage begins to fill-up with an assortment of figures who are swaying in time to the music, Professional Ethics is hidden from view but is still audible. Sexuality, Minor Character and assembled figures all start to sing)

SEXUALITY: *I will survive!*

MINOR CHARACTER: *I will survive!*

AUDIENCE ON STAGE: *I will survive!*

(The song finishes, Sexuality walks off stage followed by a defeated Professional Ethics. Pedagogy enters dressed in a Police uniform and walks around the set inspecting it as if were a crime scene. Note pad and pencil in hand, Pedagogy scribbles on the pad and moves down stage right. There is a prolonged silence.)

PEDAGOGY: (To the audience who have returned to their seats) What did you witness? Come on who will be the first to speak, I demand to know! What is your understanding? Really, I am interested. What, you think I won't listen, that I have already made up my mind. How hard can it be to tell me what has been going here? You ask what I am going to do with the information. (To the audience) That sir/madam is none of your business.

(Pedagogy stands waiting as the house lights are brought up and remains standing as the audience leave their seats and exit the auditorium. As the last person exits through the doors, Pedagogy can be heard beginning to talk.)

PEDAGOGY: Well, I'm waiting!

PICKING UP THE PIECES

Clough (2002) asks the question of function and purpose of stories in educational research and proposes that narrative can disturb ways of

knowing, it can be used to reframe the enquiring gaze. Contexts of the familiar are rendered strange and the strange can become familiar. He comments:

... in setting out to write a story, the primary work is in the interaction of ideas; in the act of thinking, tuning in, decision making and focusing on the primary intent of the work ... writing a story ... is not carried out outside of a need, a community, a context.

(Clough, 2002: 8)

By challenging conventional assumptions of what constitutes legitimate pedagogical knowledge within educational research (Bridges, 1998, 1999; Husu, 2002; Whitehead, 1997), I wanted to create an authentic voice (Errante, 2000, 2001; MacDaniels, 2000) embedded in an embodied form of knowing. I have wanted to create an accessible and ‘writerly’ text that is immediate and captures the attention and interest of whoever is turning the page (Barthes, 1988). Sparkes (2003) has spoken of the effects of using voice in this way to situate a specific response in the reader: ‘I don’t want readers to sit back as spectators. I want to engage them and evoke a response. I want readers whatever their positioning in relation to me, to feel care and desire when they read my stories’ (Sparkes, 2003: 67).

In questioning the ethical and moral implications of performing pedagogy that enunciates a ‘vulnerable self’ (Ellis, 1999; Ellington, 1998), I have tried to draw together the fragments of lived experience to construct a narrative where lifeless data is transformed into a lived landscape (Oates, 1999). Smith and Watson (2001) suggest that:

Embodied subjects are located in their bodies and through their bodies in culturally specific ways – that is, the narrating body is situated at the nexus of language, gender, class sexuality and other specificities, and autobiographical narratives mine this embodied locatedness.

(Smith and Watson, 2001: 38)

I am aware that in using autobiographical incidents the story I have written of myself will become a ‘story-telling performance shot through with conflicting cultural meanings’ Chapman, (1997: 7). Each memory that has been triggered, its interpretation and analysis is already imbued with a situated morality and ethics. I have been careful to obscure factual traces and have used fictitious names, other than my own, to fashion what I hope could be considered as a substantial representation of experience.

In actively disrupting allegiances of belonging, in crossing over and becoming part of the stories that are told, I am inhabiting the borderlands that Rosaldo (1989: 207–08) considers as ‘sites of creative cultural production’ and I have been mindful of Laurel Richardson’s (1990: 12)

remark that: 'No textual staging is ever innocent, we are always inscribing values in our writing, it is unavoidable.' I have tried to be a good informant (Sikes, 2001) by creating scenes that draw on literary and poetic devices to illuminate for the reader my perceptions and experience of the events (Ellis, 1995; Richardson, 1990). In using dialogue in different forms to show and produce verisimilitude, I have hopefully extended an invitation to the reader to engage with my reconstructed account of experience, one in which language ceases to be objective and the self becomes simultaneously object and subject. I have tried to illustrate how a Queer reflexivity can be used to frame autobiographical writing and I have challenged the notion of a unified subject with agency, in doing so problematizing lived experience as a site of self-hood and writing. Denzin (1997: 140) has noted that 'Stories are not waiting to be told; they are constructed by the writer who attempts to impose order on perceived events' and Winterson has commented that:

Everyone, at sometime in their life, must choose whether to stay with a ready-made world that may be safe but which is also limiting, or to push forward, often past the frontiers of common-sense, into a personal place, unknown and untried.

(Winterson, 1991: xiv)

Reconceptualizing the act of writing as a performative act, I am attempting to make available representations of experience that are informed by and emerge out of an understanding of how writing operates as an enactment of freedoms and a way of resisting systems of domination. I have experimented with different modes of composition to address the problem of trying to make queer voices visible within the largely heteronormative framework of hegemonic educational discourse. Disrupting the doxa (Bourdieu, 1984) of normative representational method has enabled me to explore and represent aspects of pedagogy previously unthinkable. Challenging the legitimacy of the symbolic capital of the academic field has meant thinking about the ways texts position readers in relation to claims of truth and authority. I have found that by utilizing creative and dramatic modes that is it possible to attend to the social/cultural habits of being/doing that are performatively constituted through language and that shape and influence the textual practice of representing identities.

The reality in the story is mine and is filtered through my lexis and phrasings. That is not to say the representations are inaccurate or untrue, they are a synthesis of the days, months and years spent working alongside and with these people. They are my understandings of them through time, they are how I have interpreted motives and actions and they have been staged with the goal of recognition, communication and

hopefully connection (Tierney, 1993). Experimentation in this way seems to fulfil my readings and interpretations of events and travel in some way to realizing Tierney's (1993) suggestion that there are occasions when there is a 'need to create texts that enable the reader to reflect on his or her own life and see if the text resembles any sense of reality' (Tierney, 1993: 313).

The reconstruction of my journey in education resists teleological statements. Miller (1998) has suggested that:

... addressing 'self' as a site of permanent openness and resignifiability opens up possibilities for queering autobiography, for speaking and writing into existence denaturalised ways of being that are obscured or simply unthinkable when one centred self-knowing story is substituted for another.

Miller (1998: 368)

Bank's performance on that stage and our performance together caused/causes me to reconsider what happened to my identification as a teacher up to and on that day. I had never made a verbal declaration of my sexuality and I had not really thought about whether the students I taught knew if I was gay. I knew that they interacted with me differently from the other teachers, but I had put that down to the fact that I had made an effort to interact with them differently. After reeling from the initial shock of what was unfolding my immediate (professional) thoughts were that this should not be happening. I have come to realize this rupture of personal and professional was a critical incident in my development as a teacher.

The rigid, dichotomous identities of teacher/student, gay/straight had been breached and our performance on that day re-inscribed how we performed our given identities of student and teacher. Transgressing what could be read as appropriate or 'normal' behaviour, a heteronormative reading might present Bank as being 'at risk'. As the teacher, should not I have been acting to determine closure to the event? To what extent can I determine which of us unruly subjects were in a position of power and therefore agency? To be quite honest, I am still flummoxed by what happened on that day and I do not think that I will ever fully understand. It seems to me that we were both vulnerable. I had much to lose and so did Bank. I could have stopped him; I could have walked off the stage and reasserted my authority by stepping back in to the role of teacher. Bank could, if he had wanted to, have got revenge, by placing me in an awkward situation. It seems to me, with the advantage of hindsight, that we were both inscribing ourselves against hegemonic social discourses. Our performative refusal to be pinioned within and defined by a heteronormative matrix made it possible for us to eschew a normative regime of identity and identification by challenging personal and pedagogic boundaries.

However, I am loathe to provide a definitive interpretation, to close off and shut down the past. I leave it to live with me and maybe at some point in the future I will come to an understanding that might make more sense.

WHAT HAVE I LEARNT?

Apprehension.....fear ...pain.....doubttrust....friendship.....fearpain
.....couragehesitationdread.....reliefconfusion
acceptance.....doubtanxiety.....relief.....pleasure
.....confusion.....desireexcitement.....disbelief
.....angersadness.....outrage.....loss
.....resistancecompassion.....confusion.....love ...
.....griefcompanionshipbelonging.....rejection ...
.....humour...

WHAT AM I LEARNING?

When we write vulnerably, we invite others to respond vulnerably. Surely not every qualitative text that is written needs to provoke a vulnerable response in the reader; just as surely, however, some texts should.

(Tierney, 2000: 549)

I am 35 years old. I am male. I can be camp. I can be butch. I live in a small northern town. I binge eat. I am overweight. I smoke too much. I deny myself food. I can starve myself. I am white. I am a rice queen. I am a dinge queen. I speak English. I speak other languages not very well. I am 5 ft 6 in. tall. I am a student. I am a teacher. I am single. I am a performer. I am British. I exist in cyberspace. I am a gajin. I am a consumer. I watch musicals. I am a foreigner. I am an uncle. I live alone. I sometimes have relationships. I have sex. I fall in love. I fall out of love. I am consumed. I am a brother. I am a sister.

I am doing all these things all the time, over and over and over again. I repeat myself constantly and it is the repetitions that I have come to interpret, reinterpret. I have not yet come to understand. I am understanding. I am coming to
.....
.....Queer.

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NOTE ON CONTRIBUTOR

MARK VICARS is a recipient of an ESRC scholarship and is a doctoral candidate in the Department of Educational Studies, University of Sheffield. His PhD research is using a life history approach to investigate the formative reading practices and literacy behaviour of gay men.