

Teaching Geographies of Sexualities: 20 Years On

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Abstract

This editorial provides an introduction to the *Journal of Geography in Higher Education* Symposium on "Teaching geographies of sexualities: 20 years on". This edited collection revisits the Symposium "Teaching sexualities in geography" (*Journal of Geography in Higher Education*, Volume 23 [1999], Issue 1) and the earlier Arena Symposium essay series "Teaching sexual geographies" (*Journal of Geography in Higher Education*, Volume 21 [1997], Issue 3). The contributions to this updated anthology trace the evolvment and provide original critiques of the current state of sexualities (and, in extension, gender and intersectionality) education in geography curricula in transnational context. These interconnecting papers allow for a more in-depth understanding of the diverse possibilities and challenges facing the teaching of sexualities within geography in a contemporary international climate and identify opportunities for expanded provision. This editorial concludes with critical pointers to champion teaching-inflected sexualities scholarship that traverse disciplinary and geographical borders of pedagogical inquiry.

Keywords

Sexualities, queer pedagogy, black sexualities, children, gender-based violence, public art

Introduction

This special issue follows a long overdue forum, “Teaching geographies of gender and sexualities” (Zebracki & Hall, 2017), which we, the editors of this Symposium, convened at the Annual International Conference of the Royal Geographical Society with the Institute of British Geographers (RGS-IBG), 29 August–1 September 2017.¹ The fruitful debate provided by this panel, sponsored by the Space Sexualities and Queer Research Group (SSQRG) of the RGS-IBG, segued into a commissioned collection for this journal. More than 20 years on, this edited compilation draws from two related collections published in this journal: the Symposium “Teaching sexualities in geography”, Volume 23 (1999), Issue 1 and the earlier Arena Symposium essay series “Teaching sexual geographies” (nb no editorial), Volume 21 (1997), Issue 3.

Lawrence Knopp, the editor of the 1999 Symposium heralded the queer pedagogical commitment to “challenging academic geography” and, after Gibson-Graham (1996), “radical social transformation” (Knopp, 1999, p. 77). We pursue this commitment through an updated outlook, notably driven by ever-evolving queer and feminist epistemologies and changing disciplinary, research, and teaching interests and institutional frameworks and demands. The collection provides a platform for the critical articulation and discussion of teaching geographies of sexualities (and, in extension, gender and intersectionality) in spaces of higher education and learning in a contemporary international context.

This anthology presents original contributions from scholars straddling different stages of careers and institutional and geographical settings. The contributions have common ground in that they all draw from first-hand pedagogical research and personal experience to focus on diverse and distinct topics, concerns, and pedagogical and geographical dimensions. In so doing, the accounts navigate, and negotiate, different, and contrasting, social, spatial and political contexts of research-led teaching on geographies of sexualities, specifically and respectively:

- Shifting academic and political (or: politicized) contexts of teaching sexual (in)equality and (in)justice (Skelton, 2020);
- Lesbian and queer pedagogies of tackling the centring of heterosexual and masculine geographies within the “here” and “now” (Browne, 2020);
- Engaging the possibilities of using Black sexualities to enable pedagogical transgressions against the increasing disciplinary presence of Black geographies (Eaves, 2020);
- Pursuing inquiry-based learning on cultural relativism regarding gender-based, heteronormative violence and child abuse (i.e. female genital mutilation/cutting) (Evans, 2020);

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- Confronting and questioning norms around acceptability and permissibility in teaching children’s geographies of sexualities (Hall, 2020a); and
- Negotiating the critical pedagogical role that the visual (i.e. public art) may play in addressing geographies of sexualities and gender and destabilizing concomitant normativities and hegemonies (Zebracki, 2020a).

This Symposium, by no means, should be rendered an exhaustive representation – or complete mapping exercise – of all of the sexuality-informed, or “sexuality-modulated”, practices of geography teaching in higher education. Nonetheless, it portrays a timely and versatile palette of concerns that many peer educators in this area are dealing with. We clarify those concerns hereinafter with three sections that deal with the contributions in tandem, before concluding with some “queering” ways forward.

Political, personal, positionality

Tracey Skelton bridges this Symposium by reflecting on her 1997 article, titled “Issues of sexuality in the teaching space” (Skelton, 1997). Skelton’s retrospective account critically evaluates how first-hand teaching of geographies of sexualities at different higher education institutions in the UK vis-à-vis Singapore has been informed by conflicting geo-political and institutional (i.e. academic) contexts. The author disentangles teaching style, content, and student engagement in contrasting eras of teaching and legislature. Skelton worked at two UK-based universities when the 2004 Civil Partnership Act was in place but moved to the National University of Singapore (NUS) before the 2010 Equality Act, and subsequent Same-Sex Marriage Act of 2013, were enacted in the UK. Singapore, in contrast, preserves the British colonial Penal Code 377A, which criminalizes sex between men.

Skelton (2020, this issue, pp. 188–202) discusses the “significant risk”, in terms of implications for career progression, job security, and censoring content which teaching (anti-)normative sexualities in “an environment of deep intolerance towards non-heterosexuality” (ibid., p. 196) may have; and that risk needs to be negotiated. Notably, the social media era and the climate of youth engagement may have facilitated an “opening up” of sexuality in the classroom over recent years, as Skelton (2020, p. 198) submits: “the change is palpable within geography in NUS and I’m proud to have played a part (alongside a few other colleagues) to have developed that from almost zero-level to its present everydayness”. With reference to Catungal (2019), she then concludes that classrooms “remind us of the power of the actual spatiality as well as the metaphor of the classroom as a complex site of power, inclusion/exclusion, learning, knowledge production (or its denial) and of authority on our part” (Skelton, 2020, p. 198).

Indeed, classrooms are spaces for the co-creation of knowledge, which may challenge norms as well as the sites of knowledge production, as Kath Browne (2020, this issue, pp. 203–216)

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argues in her account on teaching sexualities. She critically examines the pedagogy of students examining their own lives in the “here” and “now”. Browne draws from 15 years of teaching an optional, third-year undergraduate Geographies of Gender, Sex, and Sexualities module at the University of Brighton, UK and 12 months of teaching experience at Maynooth University, Ireland. Browne’s focus on the world we have supposedly “won” (Weeks, 2007; see Browne & Bakshi, 2013) encourages students to question linear notions of sexual “progress” and the presumption of Western legislative equality as panacea.

As this collection illustrates, there are co-emerging pedagogical opportunities and constraints for embedding geographies of (“other”) sexualities in the curriculum, whilst grappling with issues around (*not*) involving the personal. The places of teaching, which Browne puts central in her argument, is both informing the teaching practice itself and the expectations and experiences that students have about that very teaching practice: “I was marked as ‘the lesbian’ both at the start of my career, and also the start of most student’s [sic] studies. This has created my teaching in specific ways both in terms of privilege and recuperation of the boundaries of geographical knowledge by colleagues and students” (Browne, 2020, p. 213). Her argument attends to practical learnings and (self-)critiques of everyday normative spaces. It teases out the possibilities and failings of teaching gay, lesbian and queer geographies (where gay and lesbian can be queer but can also exceed this). Browne advocates a relativizing approach by deconstructing heterosexual and masculine normativities and hegemonies as seen beyond the sexual “other”. She conveys a particular pedagogical interest in post-colonial, destabilizing critiques of geographical, “neo-colonist” imaginaries, notably Global North vs. Global South divides. Such problematic binaries are critically at play in challenging the “here”, i.e. UK and Ireland, and “us”, or the hegemonic sexualities and genders, which govern the everyday teaching space, too.

Marginalization, vulnerability, empowerment

We observe that the teaching and learning work around geographies of sexualities, pronounced institutional variations notwithstanding, largely runs in the background of geography curriculums. In the context of neo-liberal academia, this may potentially indicate sexuality’s perceived subordinate importance as a “squeamish” topic and an associated practice of scholarship that might be deemed “risky” for one’s career (see Bell, 1997, as cited in Zebracki, 2020a, p. 270). In other words, sexuality may well epitomize a “null curriculum” (MacPherson, 2011, as cited in Hall, 2020a, p. 249), which might apply even more so regarding teaching about marginalized populations within already marginalized disciplinary spaces.

In the light of the Black Lives Matter movement, starting to gain momentum around 2013, and the attendant intensifying efforts to decolonize the curriculum (see Radcliffe, 2017), we especially missed a dialogue with the geographies of Black sexualities at our aforementioned RGS-IBG panel in 2017. We, therefore, seized the opportunity provided by this resulting

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collection to commission and introduce LaToya E. Eaves as interlocutor to fill this knowledge gap at this timely juncture when Black geographies is gaining more and more currency (see Bailey & Shabazz, 2014, as cited in Eaves, 2020).

Eaves (2020, this issue, pp. 217–229) uses first-hand pedagogical examples, stemming from her own positionality as Black geographer, to show how the teaching and studying around Blackness, sexuality, and place can take place in the classroom. Drawing from Black, African American and Black feminist scholarship, Eaves discusses Black sexuality praxis as both an epistemology and pedagogy. Her teaching work and scholarship question how racial inequalities feed through space and time and construct social norms along with both real and imagined racialized notions. At the same time, she states the caveat that Black sexualities should not be rendered as a “monolithic engagement” in the same way as “Black”, in the sense of an “absented presence” (Wilderson, 2008), has been functioning as a categorical social marker of difference.

Eaves emphasizes the pedagogical importance of putting the plurality of subjects and spaces central. As such, she aims to demonstrate the complex operations of – and thereby facilitate (more) nuanced understandings of – Black sexualities in critical reference to the historically and spatially interlocking (local, national, global) oppressions of Black people. Eaves highlights aspects around vulnerability that appear from the disclosure of “knowledge holes” and, thus, from teaching the unfamiliar (in a greater effort to empower the marginalized). She discusses first-hand encounters with how teachers learn alongside learners in revealing, strikingly, the “injustices on/against [Black] bodies” – where some students were surprised “why teachers had never taken up these subjects in previous classes” (Eaves, 2020, p. 217).

Vulnerability also plays a role in the account of Evans (2020, this issue, pp. 230–247), who broaches research-led teaching about the emerging issue of female genital mutilation/cutting (FGM/C) across diverse contexts of African communities – a topic which has gained political priority through global advocacy campaigns. This form of gender-based (and heteronormative) violence, or essentially child abuse, remains a case in point in terms of an under-discussed, sensitive topic (or former taboo as the author conveys) for engaging with sexuality in the geography classroom. Her account not only shows how teaching sexuality has relevance for considering issues around “development” in the Majority World (a term that destabilizes the Global North vs. Global South divide). It also brings to light the pedagogical value of the topic of FGM/C for analysing conflicting discourses and power dynamics in approaching geographies of sexualities whilst simultaneously interrogating how sexuality intersects with gender, childhood, and ethnicity. Also here, positionality, and (self-)reflexivity, exhibit important areas of concern: “As a white British feminist geographer, I find myself confronted with dilemmas in how I represent FGM/C in African contexts [...] I am conscious of critiques by postcolonial feminists levelled at ‘Western’ feminist discourses on ‘Third-world women’ that construct them as ‘archetypal victims’ of male violence and denies their agency” (Evans, 2020, p. 234).

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Evans evaluates an inquiry-based learning approach, resonating with the research-led teaching scholarship of the other Symposium contributors. This approach entails a deep learning method that revolves around using real-world examples, co-learning (see Le Heron et al., 2006), and putting research and teaching in dialogue to facilitate social transformation (see Wellens et al., 2006). Departing from FGM/C as a child-safeguarding issue within the context of the UK and extending it to the context of African communities, Evans critically underscores how ambiguous discourses around cultural relativism, universal human rights and social justice pose pedagogical and learning challenges around framing FGM/C (along with the different uses of this term) whilst making this topic relatable to students. Evans' argument integrates some student feedback to demonstrate, amongst other avenues, how the inquiry-based pedagogy has empowered students to critically reflect on the ethics of "development work" and reduce the perceived "distance", i.e. cultural difference, between the self and "other".

Sensitivity, visibility, critical pedagogy

The contribution of this Symposium's co-editor, Hall (2020a, this issue, pp. 248–264), similarly to Evans (Evans, 2020), engages pedagogical issues around research-led teaching on "sensitive" topics and content, in this case around children, sexualities, and schooling (see Hall, 2020c). Inferred by first-hand teaching practice, Hall attends to "what" children's geographies of sexualities is, and "how" it can be taught (drawing from queer and feminist pedagogies which often sit on the curricular margin). At the same time, he also asks how his teaching practice may contribute to increasing institutional demands for making teaching in higher education (more) "useful" and "relevant" to "students-as-customers" (see Nixon et al., 2018). Hall explores (maintaining) criticality in teaching children's geographies of sexualities whilst allowing the confrontation with challenges, such as the presumption that "unfairly cast[s] the university's [...] students as unwilling or unable to engage with critical or too theoretical material" (Hall, 2020a, p. 252). This has, as Hall submits, "redoubled my efforts to present research-led teaching grounded in a teacher training type approach where practical tools and learnings are emphasized" (ibid.).

Rather than empowerment alone to make a difference in the world, as addressed above, Hall (2020a) underlines "speakability", after Monk (2011) in response to homophobic bullying, as pedagogical potential to make the discussion of "sensitive" topics (more) permissible (see also Hall, 2020b). This yet demands a sensitive approach to showing specific, and possibly controversial, visual content to students in class. Hall (2020a) discusses the implications thereof, including the upfront review of the appropriateness of such content, and consideration of the possible need for content previews/forecasts, which are favoured over trigger/content warnings. Nonetheless, he calls pedagogical attention to the possible consequences of discussing, or showing, uncomfortable, or "controversial", content and how potential viewer discretion alerts may translate into student (non-)participation. Radical and critical teaching in this subject area, as Hall (2020a, p. 260) concludes, "[m]uch depends on

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institutional context/location and positionalities of the educator. What constitutes challenging is geographically and temporally contingent”.

The visual also holds the main concern in the closing contribution by Zebracki (2020a, this issue, pp. 265–284). His “first-person” investigation into research-led teaching analyses the possibilities and challenges of using sexuality-inflected public art as a “conversational piece” (see Kester, 2004) in queering the nexus of sexuality, gender, and space (see Zebracki, 2020b). He attends to the content/message as well as context of public art and its social (re)production through the negotiation of self/“other” subjectivities. As such, public art as teaching method may allow the critical exploration of the power of the visual – along critical processes of (in)visibilization – for enabling meaningful, multi-transgressive pedagogics for destabilizing norms, hegemonic discourses, privilege, and processes of exclusion. Zebracki discusses examples of first-hand pedagogical practices related to public art and sexuality which he has applied in class contexts (i.e. creative educative content including an infographic, i.e. Sam Killerman’s genderbread person, and educational film, i.e. *Pride* [2014] directed by Matthew Warchus) and in field contexts (in the form of a guided walking tour with a focus on gay-led preservation of art deco architectural heritage on Miami Beach, Florida, USA). He does so to argue how a critical pedagogy, as engaged throughout this Symposium, is underpinned by tenets of reflexivity and (self-)consciousness of positionality (whilst juggling with potential issues around topic sensitivity).

A critical pedagogy, as Zebracki (2020a) draws from Freire (2000 [1970]), holds the profound potential for multi-sited *praxes*, that is: “critical *reflections* and critical *actions* that may stretch beyond the teaching space into ‘real-world’ contexts” (Zebracki, 2020a, p. 265). He argues for the need to teach, and “do”, intersectionality (see Crenshaw, 1991) within the teaching space, which takes “lived, place-based ([oft-]exclusionary) experience at the heart of its pedagogy” (Zebracki, 2020a, p. 268). This would enable the production of nuanced insights into complex social geographies – which manifest themselves beyond sexuality aspects alone, such as across class, ethnicity, and geographical origin. Building on Rancière (2013), Zebracki differentiates between intertwined *aesthetic* and *political* strategies of using public art to teach about sexuality: creative content (including ideas, artefacts and other content including elements of digital culture) may visually support critical debate about social difference (see Zebracki & Luger, 2019). Thereby, it may stimulate both the imagination and action space for radical rethinking, resistance, and transformation, which may all unearth and shake up normative sexualized world views.

Zebracki’s argument, in the fashion of Bishop (2006) and hooks (1994), buttresses and promotes an “activated” citizenship amongst educators and (co-)learners, which chimes in with the overall remit of this Symposium. Such activation, he argues, necessitates a “slow”, i.e. culturally responsive and “first-person pedagogy”, which pauses and reflects. Zebracki concludes that public art as a pedagogical tool, in so doing, may operate as project of “awakening” (after Rancière, 2013) to unsettle socially (re)constructed norms, selves, and “others”.

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Queering pedagogical pathways

Taken together, this Symposium provides a forum for retrospection, introspection, and projection to take stock of – whilst critically considering – a cross-section of themes, geographies, and pedagogies which revolve around teaching geographies of sexualities. Again, we would like to stress that this Symposium merely embraces a collection of critical inquiries into this matter. Withal, we recognize how the past, current, as well as best (or desired) practices as presented throughout this collection may potentially offer useful reference points to peers. They may pinpoint cross-disciplinary – as well as transnational, transcultural and transinstitutional – concerns with (research-led) teaching on sexuality, straddling key issues around (but not limited to): positionality, embodiment, agency and the politics of identity and disclosure, the under- or misrepresentation of marginalized communities, institutional freedoms and limitations, methods for facilitating engaging teaching (including transgressive learning and social transformation), and educational responsibility.

We encourage future published scholarship on teaching and learning in and across the above areas of concern. Against the background of this Symposium, we flag up the current digital turn as one particular area in which we feel further debate is needed in geography education – especially in light of online teaching, inclusive practice, and alternative provision, reinforced as an immediate corollary to the coronavirus pandemic (coinciding with the publication of this issue). We, hence, welcome conceptual and practical engagements with what it means to engage teaching geographies of sexualities (and, in extension, intersectionalities) at the University that is journeying through the digital age – in interplay with how digital realities inform sexuality and bodily politics (see Nash & Gorman-Murray, 2019; Zebracki, 2020b), participatory teaching methods, as well as digital literacies and proficiencies (see the Symposium on GIS-focused geography education; edited by Rickles & Ellul, 2017). Accordingly, how can emerging digital teaching practices be pursued to inclusively engage (research-led) teaching on geographies of digital sexuality? And what are the pedagogical and ethical implications for the relationship between educators and (co-)learners and a further expansion of the frontiers of geography teaching and learning?

Note

1. Whilst we have adopted the shortened, punchier title “Teaching geographies of sexuality” for this collection, we have pursued a wider, intersecting argument on sexuality, queer, and feminist geographies throughout this issue, as also transpired by the title and aims of the originating 2017 RGS-IBG panel “Teaching geographies of gender and sexualities”:

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“The session aims to provide a forum in which to raise and discuss issues relating to undergraduate and postgraduate teaching of geographies of gender and sexualities in international Higher Education institutions. An international panel will make initial statements before discussion is opened up. We hope that this session will showcase existing teaching, establish the current state of gender and sexualities in the geography curriculum, identify opportunities for expanded provision, and allow a better understanding of some of the constraints or challenges facing the teaching of gender and sexualities in geography” (Zebracki & Hall, 2017, N.P.)

Participants in this wider discussion on teaching geographies of gender and sexualities included us, Martin Zebracki and Joseph J. Hall, as the session conveners, and Marianne Blidon (Pantheon-Sorbonne University, France), Tracey Skelton (National University of Singapore, Singapore), and Kath Browne (University of Brighton, UK, now affiliated with the University College Dublin, Ireland). We owe a debt of gratitude to the panellists for the fruitful debate and the contributors to this ensuing Symposium for their thought-provoking work.

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