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WRT Mini-Seminar on “Interrupting Hetero-normativity”: October 19, 2005

Exercise on "Gender Blending/ Bending/ Breaking"

Goal: To use common experiences of social pressures to gender-conformity to extend students’ understanding of what “hetero-normativity” is, how it functions in relation to the T (transgender) in LGBTQ, and how gender-conformity relates to social pressure to conform around sexuality.

Reading Preparation: “We Are All Works in Progress” from  
Leslie Feinberg, Trans Liberation: Beyond Pink or Blue (Boston: Beacon Press, 1997)

Assignment Background:

“Hetero-normativity” can seem like a huge and abstract phrase. But we’ve all experienced being pressured to conform in very basic ways within a social system of sex and gender.

Let’s think about something as obvious as “being a boy” or “being a girl.” For instance—what about your first memory of someone urging you to act like a boy or a girl. What were you doing at that moment, and what did you feel about how you were being told, or shown, to behave? What were the words, what were the gestures, what were you doing, who was trying to teach you the behaviors? What were your feelings at the moment? Now—take your time and recall one similar moment each from elementary school, middle school, high school, college—moments when your gendered behavior was being monitored by others. Was there ever a moment when people stated explicit assumptions they were making about your sexuality as being tied to a certain kind of gendered behavior on your part? Was your gendered-ness associated with heterosexual? lesbian? gay? bisexual? because of words, gestures, kinds of clothing, sports preferences, hobbies, books you read, anything at all that you preferred? Have you ever been harassed on the street because of your gender expression (that is, the gender you are perceived to be) or because you were ambiguously gendered? What happened and how did that make you feel, what did that make you think, about your gender and your sexuality? And, of course, all of your experiences and your memories have taken place at a specific place and time, with you in your specific body, you being of a certain nation or ethnicity or culture or religion or class, being in a body speaking a specific language or living with your particular set of physical abilities. All of this would be woven into your memory of gender-ness and sexuality connections as well.

Writing Assignment:

After these reflections, choose one moment where you experienced assumptions from “the world” about your gendered-ness and your sexuality. Think about what you are learning from this moment because of reflecting now. Then write a story to illustrate what you have just learned. Show us the original experience with a beginning, middle, and end, in which you set us as the readers down right in what happened to you. Then, at the end reflect on the meaning of this story to you, about the intersection of gender-ness and sexuality. The only guidelines are that this writing be storytelling about you and therefore be given with specific and concrete details from your life, and that you reflect on what you’ve learned from recalling and mulling over your memories.

