



(Re)constructing Gay, a Classroom, and a Journey to Rhetorical Listening

Gabriel T. Acevedo Velázquez

Abstract

This article explores Ratcliffe's (2005) theory of rhetorical listening and the means of utilizing it to interpret and facilitate conversations around gay identities, especially between teachers and students in the classroom. Conversations around sexual identities in classrooms have changed the way in which teachers and students communicate, as well as the way conversations are approached to the point of becoming nonexistent. By these conversations becoming nonexistent, gay identities become isolated in the classroom, therefore silencing what could become rhetorical opportunities for growth. I utilize rhetorical listening as a pedagogical strategy against the weaponization of the word *gay*. Using Ratcliffe's (2005) original theory of listening pedagogically as a foundation, I build on listening's potential to address controversial or highly charged rhetoric around issues of identity, in this case, utilizing the word *gay* in the classroom. I elaborate on the theory of rhetorical listening and its implications—raising awareness of identification and constructing conversations that can be applied in listening to identity rhetoric in pedagogical settings. Finally, this paper suggests using rhetorical listening pedagogy in classrooms and illustrates a series of arbitrations that show rhetorical listening as a tool for application in discussing issues of queer identity in the classroom.

Keywords: rhetorical listening, gay identities, pedagogical arbitrations, teacher identity

Introduction

Teachers' identities are produced by their beliefs: a combination of interactions within society and lived experiences (Gee, 2000; Korthagen, 2004; Sutherland et al., 2010). Others find teacher identity as an "organizing element in teachers' professional lives" (Beauchamp & Thomas, p. 175, 2009), which makes meaning on how teachers see themselves concerning those around them. Such identity creates a discursive space in which roles are negotiated in teaching. Teacher identity then becomes the analytical lens through which we examine teaching and learning and the impact on the negotiation of multiple identities to create a single professional identity (e.g., Pearce & Morrison, 2011; Sachs, 2005). We can look at factors and motivations, like rhetoric, that guide how identity is navigated by the teacher and the realization of how these aspects are created in the classroom. The idea and images of

Contact: Gabriel T. Acevedo Velázquez

Email: Gabriel.acevedo@asu.edu

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what a teacher should be are always present and correlate with what teachers find essential in their professional settings versus their contexts.

In this article, I utilize rhetorical listening as a pedagogical strategy against the weaponization of the word *gay*. Using Ratcliffe's (2005) original theory of listening pedagogically as a foundation, I build on listening's potential to address controversial or highly charged rhetoric around issues of identity, in this case, utilizing the word *gay* in the classroom. By also thinking about aspects of teacher identity, I seek to contextualize, within the classroom, experiences of utilizing the word *gay*. By using my own experience of coming out in the classroom, I allow myself to offer a pathway that emerges from the discursive power of rhetorical listening, with particular attention to analytical aspects of thinking about rhetoric as nonweapons. Toward the end of the essay, I return to my experience of coming out as *gay* in the classroom to consider how rhetorical listening offers a more productive approach to coming out, utilizing the word *gay* in the classroom as a common practice, and presenting pedagogical arbitrations that enhance an environment of listening in the classroom.

As Soon as the Word *Gay* Came Out, their Faces Transformed, and the Entire Class Changed

While teaching at a prestigious university in Puerto Rico, I taught a freshman Queer Literature course; this course was one of the most diverse, rowdy, and exciting courses I ever taught. The first half of the semester passed with no issues; all 31 of us would gather twice a week to discuss readings and assignments from the course. I remember the classroom having twelve tables with three chairs each and a desk in the front of the class. Each time we walked, the students and I arranged the tables and chairs to let us see each other more clearly and engage differently. I had taken this course and specifically designed it to read Queer Literature. Occasionally, these readings sparked collegial discussion and even some heated opinions that were all handled with respect.

March rolled around and a production of *The Rocky Horror Picture Show*, in which I participated as Dr. Frank N. Furter, opened in a theater nearby. I invited students to go to the production if they wanted to, so they could do an opinion piece of any aspects of it for extra credit in our class. To my surprise, many of the students went, as they found it to be a nice escape from the hassle of midterms. Most of them were unfamiliar with the movie and therefore did not know about the sexual and queer aspects of the main character, which I was portraying. The day after the show, as I walked into the room, no one talked, barely anyone looked at me, and I noticed some of the students were fidgeting and anxious. The class was dead silent—a thick, heavy silence. I could tell we were minutes away from some exciting conversations.

I began by asking what they thought about the previous night's show, and right away, one of the students responded, "It was fun and cool, but I had no idea we would see you in drag and kissing boys and girls on stage." A conversation began around the image students had created of me as a teacher and how such notions were challenged. A reasoned discussion began around the ideas of queerness, masculinity, and teaching. As I heard students talk, I was making up my mind on explicitly telling them about my sexual identity as a gay man. While moderating a snippet of their conversations, I outright said, "I am a gay teacher; does that change anything for you?"

The air filled with a stultifying silence for what seemed like hours. From that thick silence, we went on to a mix of opinions on queerness, teaching, masculinities, and, to my surprise, a conversation on how to use or not use the word *gay* in the classroom or when talking about a person. As the semester continued, silence spread throughout the beginning of each class, and after a while, conversations around gayness kept occurring. I offer the above reflection as an entry point into a

conversation about gayness, teaching, rhetoric, and listening. More specifically, I seek to contrast my experience with the thick silence in my class with the generative silence that attends rhetorical listening—one that, I argue, can help educators facilitate more inclusive classrooms for addressing and teaching *gay* rhetoric.

Rhetorical Listening and Strategies

In *Rhetorical Listening: Identification, Gender, Whiteness* (2005), Ratcliffe defines rhetorical listening “as a code of cross-cultural conduct” (p. 24), which can be helpful for any critical pedagogy. However, it is an essential strategy for navigating forms of embodied difference that are too often the object of debate. For gay teachers and students, the practice of rhetorical listening can structure classrooms in such a way that their experiences of gayness are drawn upon. This allows conversations around such identities to happen without fear of them being refashioned into intellectual rhetoric and that such wording will not be used against them within the classroom.

As I argue, rhetorical listening contributes to a gay rhetorical pedagogy, which acknowledges the power differentials between queer and heterosexual teachers and students, holds space for the gender difference, centers the voices and perspectives of gay people, and neutralizes thoughts on the word *gay* in the classroom. Moreover, this approach is grounded in intersectionality, situating gayness as an embodied difference complicated by others, such as race, class, disability, culture, and religion. Rhetorical listening, in this way, opens up gay rhetoric and pedagogy to more than teaching to or about queer people; it allows a transformational listening component that teaches through queerness and rhetoric. Hence, rhetorical listening foregrounds the lived experiences and perspectives of gay identities to engage in a coalitional manner which puts forward a more inclusive educational experience for all.

Rhetorical listening is so much more than the act of hearing. Ratcliffe states that it is a “stance of openness that a person may choose to assume to any person, text, or culture” (p. 17), which means that while standard listening positions listeners in the role of audience members, rhetorical listening reframes listeners as rhetors. Thus, rhetorical listening is less about competition, domination, or persuasion than about the way in which equality and values become part of self-determination for each individual. As such, it empowers rhetors to employ listening as a way to intervene and interpret certain communications in conscious ways. Through this purview, listening becomes the process of receiving information from someone else and synthesizing that information to formulate a response and sustain a conversation based on the language and rhetoric between parties.

Ratcliffe explains that this model of rhetorical engagement is beneficial for “negotiating troubled identifications” (p. 17) or those relationships that lack shared values, beliefs, or perspectives, whereas the way in which we interpret reading and rhetoric is facilitated through what we agree with or are challenged by, both of which demand a degree of sameness between the reader and the text. Rhetorical listening, then, encourages us to attend to what is outside of the normal and how that relates to the way we see ourselves and to the culture cultivated around us. In other words, listening rhetorically promotes engagement with what confuses us, what exists beyond our knowledge or imagination, and what may be perceived as chaos. The openness entailed by rhetorical listening is an intentional rhetorical consideration of difference.

As a pedagogical strategy, one can imagine how such consideration of difference might help teachers and students bridge rhetorical conversations; Ratcliffe emphasizes that listening pedagogically leads us “to recognize resistance, analyze it, and, when necessary, resist it” (p. 133). Rather than organizing conversations around a debate-style environment in which students engage to be right or

wrong, where students compete to be the smartest by critiquing one another's point of view, rhetorical listening sets the bar at understanding and respect. Importantly, understanding in this context does not erase difference, but centers it. To understand through listening is to engage with difference and remain aware of the moment and presence. In Ratcliffe's words,

Rhetorical listeners might best invert the term understanding and define it as consciously standing under discourses surrounding us and others while acknowledging all out particular—and very fluid—standpoints. Standing under discourses means letting discourses wash over, though, and around us and then letting them lie there to inform our politics and ethics. (p. 28)

Listening pedagogically moves beyond the notion of 'we can all learn something from one another' and insists that what we learn exists in confrontation and tension with what we already know. Inside the classroom, rhetorical listening grounds learning in cognitive dissonance, urging the uncomfortable and necessary growth that ultimately enables change.

Listening pedagogically allows process and potential to be situated alongside Fawaz's (2016) effective curation, which "centralizes the value of intentionally eliciting uncomfortable affective responses from students in the classroom in order to develop new strategies for returning, rerouting, or altogether altering students' perceptions of the world" (p. 760). Such a pedagogical stance does not shy away from making students uncomfortable with challenging language and discussion; instead, listening pedagogically embraces such discomfort as an essential part of learning. Fawaz embraces a pedagogical stance that engages with students to motivate class discussion and force students into the position of questioning individual stances in language use.

Pedagogically, rhetorical listening comes into play when such effective practices and responses grow more vital than what students and teachers are accustomed to experiencing in the traditional classroom. While our initial instincts may be to shut down uncomfortable conversations that may become emotionally charged, rhetorical listening asks us to interrogate our feelings and thoughts and find ways to articulate them in manners that help conversations emerge and flow between rhetors and listeners. It also adheres to a "logic of accountability" (Ratcliffe, 2005, p. 15), allowing rhetors to situate classroom conversations within the historical and cultural background among people. In other words, it demands that some people listen more than others, depending on each individual's conversation and stance. Instead of assuming that every person is on an equal playing field with language, "accountability means recognizing the complex interweaving of gender, race, and other cultural categories within a culture and critiquing these so as to determine the most expedient, productive praxes for the many, the few, and the one" (Ratcliffe, 2005, p. 98). Therefore, rhetorical listening is not a one-size-fits-all model but rather a one-size-fits-one model. It becomes an individual posture or a "stance of openness" (Ratcliffe, 2005, p. 98) that holds each rhetor and listener accountable for their conversations and language use.

Rhetorical listening requires an ongoing engagement of self-reflection and practice. The idea behind Ratcliffe's (2005) logic of accountability is that "all of us are, at present, culturally implicated in effects of the past" (p. 32). Hence, acknowledging privilege is not enough, but rather, we need to be aware of how our behaviors, ideas, and rhetoric are constantly evolving in ways that enhance the power we have in the classroom. Rhetorical listening empowers students and teachers to speak with authority, draw on their life experiences, and push back against dominant discourses, even those practiced by teachers. Classrooms that listen rhetorically are actively decentering themselves and showing how to participate in conversations equitably.

Queer Teaching Identity

For queer teachers and students, rhetorical listening is of the utmost importance, given how pedagogy is still grounded in heteronormative notions which deny queer people a primary seat at the table. In queer teaching identity scholarship, it is vital to explore and understand the process of how queer teachers make sense of their sexual and professional identities because such intersections may affect the way they make decisions inside of the classroom, specifically in rhetorically manipulated conversations. Similarly to how some of my students positioned the word *gay* and its meaning in reasserting normativity in the classroom, so do queer educators because of the personal and professional ramifications they might deal with. For some educators, teaching should not correlate with your sexual identity; however, authenticity is an integral component of one's identity (Gowran, 2004), and for many, sexual identity is an integral component of one's overall identity. While this mindset is well intentioned, it reduces identities and conversations to afterthoughts in queer people's lives.

In exploring the experiences of gay educators, there is heavy emphasis on the navigation of identities inside of pedagogical settings, teachers' experiences with rhetoric, and the relationship between teachers and students once they are *out* in the classroom. Kissen (1993) described gay teachers as living in a "glass closet." She identified three themes regarding teachers:

The first involve[s] the teachers' self-definition as gay men, their self-concept as teachers, and the intersection of those two identities. The second primary [sic] focus[es on] the damaging effect of homophobia on their daily lives in and out of the classroom. [The] final theme [is] the need to develop strategies to avoid being fired and to nurture themselves in the face of tremendous pressure and stress. (p. 5)

Kissen (1993) noted that teachers who partially or wholly disclosed their sexual orientation "described self-revelation as dangerous and scary, the few who had taken these risks said that the rewards of self-actualization far outweighed the stresses" (p. 7). After examining gay teachers' experiences, Kissen found significant relief in terms of experiences within the classrooms and curricula due to being partially or entirely 'out' in their respective classrooms and pedagogical settings.

Gay teachers continually modify the way they act and their classroom rhetoric to allow them to enact identities considered heterosexual or normative. Such measures are of utmost importance in classroom language, because certain practices that go against heteronormative views of teaching (e.g., teachers discussing their sexual orientation and notions that teachers are inherently thought of as heterosexual, which is very common among male teachers because of the expectations of masculinity in the classroom) may be detrimental to the perception of teachers and students (Jackson, 2007; King, 2004). These heteronormative rhetorical standards become a representation of what teacher identity should be, how a teacher should act, and what language is acceptable to use in the classroom. Teachers have to pay attention to the way they utilize language inside of the classroom. This linguistic monitoring is even harder for gay teachers as they have to simultaneously balance the (heteronormative) social expectations with their professional identities in teaching, as well as the language they use and teach within the classroom (Jackson, 2007). For gay teachers, there is an extra layer of scrutiny about their interactions and contact with students.

Pedagogical Arbitrations

I began this essay with a summary of how coming out and using the word *gay* was received by my students in a Queer Literature course I was teaching. From this experience, I would like to offer a reflection on this event to incorporate what I see as positive arbitrations that could engage the

classroom into utilizing language, in this case, the word *gay*, and simmering down notions of how to use specific rhetoric in the classroom. I offer three arbitrations that could have made a difference based on how the course was planned, set, offered to students, and how conversations around the professor's coming out and usage of the word *gay* in the classroom occurred. My intention with these arbitrations is to model practical applications for rhetorical listening in the classroom. The following demonstrates that rhetorical listening is accessible, practical, and valuable to all educators, regardless of grade level, teaching, subject, and personal identities.

Arbitration 1: Pedagogical Preparation

As the teacher, a rhetorical listening strategy would have been helpful, not only walking into the possibilities of conversations for that day in class, but at the moment I began to craft my course around queer literature. Rhetorical listening could have helped students and me with preconceived notions and biases of what gay identities are and how they would affect conversations in the classroom. Having an active listening strategy assumes that privilege is blinding and that in occupying positions of power, there is often an oversight to leveraging the connection between power and our ethical stances. As the professor, I did not need to be aware of the implications of coming out to the classroom, but rather, I needed to acknowledge that holding such a position of power in the classroom and coming out would rattle students' ideas of how a teacher should be perceived. Had that acknowledgment been made, rhetorical listening would have guided pedagogical preparation in the class.

Listening rhetorically during pedagogical preparation involves less audible conversations than the intentional openness towards written materials. By listening reparatively,¹ rhetors can position themselves in a "realistic and necessary surprised experience" (Sedgwick, 1993, p. 146). This allows educators to acknowledge that one does not know everything and that rhetorical listening actively seeks new knowledge. As the teacher, my class and students would have benefited from a more in-depth early offset of readings that tied in possible personal identities in the class (e.g., "How to Bring Your Kids Up Gay" by Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, or "'Quare' Studies, or (Almost) Everything I Know About Queer Studies I Learned from My Grandmother" by E. Patrick Johnson). By focusing more on the queerness of people, history, culture, theory, etc., some missteps that occurred in that event could have been handled better or avoided altogether.

As part of pedagogically preparing, rhetorical listening allows reflection on one's own power and privilege, especially as the educator. It also allows us to examine how we position ourselves in the conversations to be had in the classroom. It allows me to think about how I am affected by and perhaps benefiting from established power norms. Who is affected by these? And how do I bridge those differences in the classroom?

Arbitration 2: First Day Introductions

During the first day of class, it is customary to go around and introduce yourself and encourage students to do the same to create a comfortable classroom environment (i.e., icebreakers). In my many years of teaching, these introductions have customarily happened quickly without much substance behind them. Students, specifically, are not trying to remember everyone's name, and even when I am teaching, I can only remember a couple of names before they start to blur out of my mind, especially the first few days of class. These introductions are usually sprinkled with fun facts like favorite movies

¹ In this piece, *listening reparatively* refers to the notions behind listening attentively to rhetoric in ways that allow rhetors to engage in conversations of reparative natures. This allows the production of ideas, knowledge, and power for a deeper understanding of what rhetoric might suggest.

or students' fields of study, but everyone quickly forgets these tidbits. Pedagogical introductions are thought of as legitimate stated purposes but do not often achieve them. Reflecting on the first day of this specific course, it was no different. Like always, I went around the room asking students to introduce themselves, saving myself for last. Within fifteen minutes, we had finished, and it was time to move to the course introduction.

A rhetorical listening approach would have allowed me to handle such introductions very differently. Ratcliffe notes that rhetorical listening begins with "listening for (un)conscious presences, absences, and unknowns" (p. 29). Given that such introductions are to make the unknown known, it would befit educators to take them more seriously as an opportunity to engage in meaningful listening practices with their students. This is specifically important for queer students, who are frequently afraid to present themselves as 'out' in any given context. By asking more engaging questions or setting an example of a more meaningful introduction by the teacher, you can set an established commitment to self-definition rather than creating a power-knowledge division established by your role as the educator.

Rhetorical listening additionally encourages educators to be mindful of names, pronouns, and identities. For instance, by creating an environment of pronoun usage in the classroom, you can allow students to feel more comfortable about their identities and express them to the people around them. While pronoun usage has become more prominent in the last few years, mistakes can occur; taking simple precautions and accountability for such mistakes is a way that honors the notion of accountability set forth by rhetorical listening. Furthermore, as the educator, you should know that students do not assume any given identities from you or the teacher. When I decided to focus my course on Queer Literature, I should have been prepared, right from the beginning, to establish an environment of secureness by coming out that first day. I am not in the closet as an educator, but I assumed that my identity would not come into play or not be a point of conversation for my freshman students, especially in the conservative environment of Puerto Rico. As established before, rhetorical listening is not a one-off, but an act of sincerity that creates a classroom of engagement.

Arbitration 3: 'Gay' Strife in the Classroom

During our in-class discussion about seeing me (their teacher) in a drag performance and knowing that their teacher is gay, many opinions came to light from students. Especially the notion of 'should teachers be out?' and what 'gay' entails in a classroom. A few students in the class echoed these wonderings. I responded with the following: "Let's talk about that. How are gay teachers supposed to act? Moreover, does knowing that your teacher is gay affect your perceptions of them or the class?" After asking those questions, I started looking around the room and saw some confused faces, some 'what is going on?' reactions, and straight-up silence from most of the class. There was almost a minute of no one saying anything, so I decided to move the conversation around what I had just asked. I began engaging with the students and pushing to have a conversation on the fact that their teacher had just come out to them.

The question remains on how teachers can aid conversations about queer rhetoric and the attitude towards those conversations. Many of the conversations that happened in the classroom came from my students' perceptions about me (the teacher) being challenged. Thus, it is vital to explore and understand how gay teachers make sense of their sexual and professional identities, because such intersections may affect how they make decisions inside the classroom. In talking about the identities of gay teachers, there is a strong emphasis on the navigation of identities inside of pedagogical settings, teachers' experiences with curricula, and the relationship between teachers and students once they are 'out' in the classroom. The latter was the most crucial topic of conversation in the class. Although

students were not asking me to forego my identity or stop bringing it in the future, they were mentioning that they did not know how to associate *gay* with me as the figure in front of them. The conversations could only be surmised, as most students, albeit not all, wanted to be sure what it meant for them to have a gay teacher and how that would affect the class, if at all.

Had rhetorical listening been part of the class, I would have been able to source the frustrations and challenges early on. It would have allowed for in-depth discussions at the start of the term around ideas of identity and the meaning behind the rhetoric we use to present them—in this case, *gay*—which would have helped the intellectual and emotional struggles students were having about their teacher's sexual identity. While the intellectual and the emotional struggles often intrude on each other, I separate them to assert that what students needed at that moment was not reasoned debate, but rather, effective engagement. My students were expressing their views and wanted to be listened to and debate their ideas. It is important for students to know that their teachers see them as real people with real and honest identities. They need to be assured that no matter what is being discussed, their opinions are valid. This is all the more important for queer students, whose identities, and by extension, their value are vulnerable.

As a tool to address gay strife in the classroom, rhetorical listening insists that no argument or tension can be resolved without a mutual respect between teachers and students. If teachers want to cultivate a mindset that students are willing to trust, they must be unwavering in their commitment to students' worth and agency. Rhetorical listening allows for the redistribution of authority and empowers students to express and challenge ideologies. Teachers must be willing to listen as it garners students' respect and confidence. Rhetorical listening addresses strife by acknowledging that not every tension is a call for debate, so when it comes to gay identities, rhetorical listening is a nonissue.

Final Thoughts

I began this essay by reflecting on the silence and conflict that using the word *gay* as my pedagogical identity meant for my class—the defining moment for a course on Queer Literature and teacher–student relations. I have engaged with an alternative way of identity discussion and acceptance throughout this piece, brought on by rhetorical listening, one that can be productive, engaging, and empowering. As a pedagogical technique, rhetorical listening allows teachers and students to hold themselves accountable for the power dynamics presented in the classroom. A lot of the time, such accountability includes willing silence and reflection on others' perspectives.

Rhetorical listening allows me, as an educator, to ethically and intentionally teach students, queer and heterosexual, and prepare materials related to queer rhetoric in the classroom. As a gay teacher, I see myself occupying a space of pedagogical neutrality—while still acknowledging my position of power in the classroom—that allows students to posit their ideas and thoughts about gayness in the class. To listen rhetorically is to allow a sense of transformation in the classroom for both students and teachers. More specifically, utilizing rhetorical listening in the classroom allows me to recognize how such a space is used for decentering established notions and ideas about gayness. As part of that decentering process, rhetorical listening allows my classroom and research to emphasize rhetoric, and queer rhetoric at that, in a way that shows how notions of class, gender, and sexuality become contentious in the classroom, hence allowing such a space to be used for decentering purposes.

Rhetorical listening utilizes an intersectional approach to teaching or approaching gay rhetoric that recognizes a spectrum of notions and opinions from teachers and students. In this regard, rhetorical listening allows us to navigate, identify, and build coalitions around shared experiences. In

that sense, rhetorical listening is a tool that allows the exploration of differences, shared experiences, and community building that occurs in the classroom. By listening rhetorically, I embark on a process, not only for myself but for those around me, in a way that nonconforming identities, experiences, and rhetoric/language become transformational.

I would like to end this article by acknowledging a subtle, repetitive theme that warrants further exploration—rhetorical silence—specifically in the context of queer and gay pedagogies. Silence has always been a resource for people to communicate without rhetoric, and, increasingly, it has become an instrument for registering protest and making a point. Given the prevalence of silence throughout my experience with utilizing the word *gay* in the classroom, I posit a fundamental question for future research: *What is the significance of identifying and engaging with rhetorical silence as a means to combat the weaponization of ‘gay’ in the classroom?* There is value in identifying rhetorical silence as a means of interaction and significance in a context, combativeness, and weaponization of language in pedagogical settings.

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