

Inside/Out: A Meditation on Cross-Dressing and Prior Learning Assessment

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Introduction: Queering the Discourse

In 2003, as part of my work helping to foster prior learning assessment (PLA) in South Africa, I attended a conference in Johannesburg on the role of PLA in broadening access to higher education.¹ At that conference, Professor Kathy Munro gave a paper detailing her efforts to introduce a more flexible, adult-friendly curriculum at the University of the Witwatersrand, one of the country's two most prestigious historically white, Anglophone universities. Munro spoke of her attempt to challenge some of the disciplinary boundaries within which knowledge at the university was structured and to help academics think more broadly about how different cultures of knowledge might be brought together. Most specifically, she talked about the role that the "recognition of prior learning," as PLA is called in South Africa, might play in fostering that dialogue. She had, she said, been consistently hindered by traditional academic views concerning the presumed incommensurability of academic and experiential knowledge. She concluded by saying: "I feel stonewalled."

As a New Yorker and a lesbian, I couldn't help but hear "stonewalled" as a vivid and suggestive metaphor for defending the boundary between academic and experiential learning. The Stonewall Inn, of course, was the gay bar in Greenwich Village in which, on an evening in 1969, the contemporary movement for lesbian and gay equality began. The police, as was their habit, had raided the bar and started making arrests. This time, the patrons fought back. The first punch was thrown by a New Orleans lesbian of mixed racial parentage and aimed at a policeman who was roughing up a young drag queen. The lesbian was wearing trousers. The drag queen was wearing an evening gown (Coleman, 2000).

The metaphor is particularly suggestive, for reasons that I hope will become clear, because the excuse the police used for their raids of gay bars was a law that made cross-dressing illegal. At the end of the 1960's, a decade noteworthy for the extravagance of its sartorial counterculture, anyone not wearing at least three articles of clothing conventionally associated with his or her anatomical sex was still subject to arrest and prosecution. Thus, the "crime" that prompted the raid was not homosexuality as such, which was not illegal in New York, but the transgressing of the binary categories through which gender was publicly enacted. Men were men, and women were women, and their public presentation had to be consistent with that gender binary.

The notion of transgression is etymologically embedded in the word "queer" itself. As the late queer theorist Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick (1993) pointed out, the word shares the Indo-European root-*twerkw* with the German *quer* (to transverse), the Latin *torquere* (to twist), and the English "to thwart." Cross-dressing in particular is disconcerting because it turns categories on their heads: women wear trousers; men wear evening gowns. But beyond that, and even more frightening to some, it undermines the notion of category altogether and makes it more difficult to maintain clear, ordered distinctions (Garber, 1997). The Stonewall Inn was a liminal space, a space for in-between-ness. That made it dangerous.

As Warner (1993) among others has said, queer theory is less a theory about queers than it is a way of

queering conventional academic inquiry. Using the challenge to conventional gender binaries as a paradigmatic case in point, queer theory explores the ways in which both internalized and socially mandated regimes delimit acceptable behaviors, regulated identities, and social classifications. The “insider” category which queer theory posits is not the “heterosexual,” but the “normal,” and this, as Warner points out, includes “the normal business of the academy.” “For academics, being interested in queer theory is a way to mess up the desexualized spaces of the academy, exude some rut, reimagine the publics from and for which academic intellectuals write, dress, and perform” (p. xxvi).

In what follows, I will use queer theory in general and the notion of boundary transgression in particular to offer a queer understanding of PLA. I will suggest that PLA continues to be resisted by many because accrediting the experiential learning gained through ordinary human activity breeches the rigid boundary between categories of knowledge. I will argue, in other words, that PLA is disturbing to some because it is a form of epistemological cross-dressing.

I will also argue, however, that as conventionally practiced, PLA may appear to challenge conventional categories but in the end reaffirms them. I will briefly trace how that happens, but then I want to explore the possibility that, rather than merely accepting that academically creditable learning can be gained through experiential means, we might challenge the categories of academic and experiential themselves and come closer to what I am calling a queer understanding of PLA. I have called this piece a meditation because I will take advantage of the permission granted by queer theory to be a little bit tentative, to roll ideas out past where I can ground them securely, and begin to sketch out a more radical role for PLA practitioners as “queer” academics, whatever their sexual and gender identity. Let me say up front that I do not know the answers to many of the questions I will raise here. This mediation is better understood as an invitation to think together than as a game plan or a map.

Inside/Out

In titling this new journal *PLA Inside Out*, co-editor Nan Travers sought to further the practice of prior learning assessment by “turning the concepts inside out” through disciplinary and interdisciplinary research in human development, the science of cognition, the sociology of knowledge, neurobiology, social theory and related fields. If, as Travers maintains, “it is time for PLA to be ‘out of the closet’ and out of the basements of institutions,” we need a venue that will allow us to be “direct, open, and honest about what we understand ourselves to be doing” (personal communication, August 14, 2011).

To my mind, this is all to the good.

Inside/out, however, is an interesting turn of phrase. On the one hand, the meaning relies on a clear distinction between “inside” and “outside,” a distinction that has both spatial and social meanings. That is, the two words refer to relative positionality, not only of physical placement, but to a location in a social world that permits of two kinds of people: “insiders” who have membership in a variety of normalized categories and “outsiders” who are excluded from those norms. The terms “inside” and “outside,” in other words, align with the taxonomy of dualisms that are made up of a privileged first term and a second term of lesser worth. Used in this sense, the terms presuppose a world in which binary distinctions have social effects, in which relative worth is adjudicated through a system of categorization, and in which, as Fuss (1991) argues, things and people can be distinguished from each other through a logic of borders and boundaries.

Such binary categories are deeply significant to PLA. Western knowledge practices have long associated *knowledge* with the privileged first term of those dualisms -- mind over body, reason over emotion, objectivity over subjectivity, etc. -- while *experience* is associated with the reviled second term. Close-up as opposed to distanced, embodied as opposed to detached, personal, local, and at times even visceral, experiential learning

carries none of epistemological panache of the disembodied, universalized, idealized knowledge whose presumed purview is the academy.²

At the same time, however, the term “inside/out” challenges the very categories it names by reversing them, by turning them into each other, by bringing what was inside, out and what was outside, in. In doing so, the term begs the important question of how such categories are formed in the first place, what material, social, and cultural effects they have, and what alternative meanings might be produced by reversing the criteria through which inside and outside are defined. This points to the possibility of collapsing such boundaries or at the very least making it more difficult to take them for granted.

The term “inside/out” has special resonance among queer theorists, not only because the word “out” has particular meanings to lesbians and gay men, but because queer theory as a whole attempts to challenge the social and ideological structures through which categorizations such as “inside” and “outside” are made. It calls attention to the social constructedness of taxonomies of “in” and “out,” points to the ways in which the privileged first term is dependent on the rejection of all that is associated with the second, and notes how claims concerning the distinction take on a heightened sense of urgency when the boundaries between categories are seen to be at risk.

Terms of Engagement: Bringing the Outside In

PLA has a complex relationship to the insider status of academic knowledge. On the one hand, PLA challenges the exclusivity of the university as the site at which knowledge is produced, valued and disseminated. In legitimating the knowledge created in the workplace and community, acknowledging non-academics as the creators of that knowledge, and giving that knowledge the status of a credit award, PLA alters the relationship that students have to disciplinary knowledge and nurtures dialogue and interaction between different knowledge communities. Indeed, opponents of PLA correctly maintain that PLA moves the academy in the direction of more fluid and open epistemic boundaries and destabilizes the logic of disciplines and curricula.³ By acknowledging non-academics as the bearers of academically creditable knowledge, PLA breaches the stone wall, as it were, between the knowledge practices of the academy and those of other sites of human interaction and activity.

At the same time, however, both the process and the criteria for awarding credit reinstate the “insider” status of academic knowledge and the dualisms through which it claims legitimacy. Students are required to make their learning look as much like academic knowledge as possible by framing it in terms of the abstract over the concrete, theory over practice, the propositional over the procedural, the decontextualized over the context-dependent, and the general over the particular. In effect, they are required to erase the “outsider” quality of their knowledge by disassociating it from the devalued second terms of these dualisms and making the case that their knowledge has been sufficiently freed of the contamination of the everyday practices of work life, home life and community (Michelson, 2006).

In this section, I want to explore the relationship of PLA to the insider knowledge of the academy, specifically the terms under which PLA brings “out”sider knowledge “in.” I will focus on three aspects of that relationship: the claim that experiential learning transcends the context in which it was gained; the ways in which the PLA applicant is positioned as the subject or object of knowledge; and the presumptive right of academics to judge the knowledge of others. In each case, my point will be that, as currently practiced, the challenge posed by PLA to the insider knowledge of the academy is more apparent than real. That is, while the potential exists to challenge the categories of knowledge and the power relationships through which academic knowledge maintains its insider position, PLA ends up reinforcing them.

Experiential learning as contextualized knowledge

Under the terms of the taxonomies discussed above, academics draw on such dualisms as theory/practice, abstract/concrete, propositional/procedural, and explicit/tacit to distinguish their more rarified knowledge from the kinds of knowledge available through ordinary experience. While rooted in dualisms that are at least as old as Plato, these categories continue to be reproduced; according to various 20th century theorists of education, academic and everyday knowledges can be categorized in such binary terms as vertical and horizontal (Bernstein, 2000), context-independent and context-dependent (Vygotsky, 1978), Mode 1 and Mode 2 (Gibbons et al., 1994), and, perhaps most tellingly, sacred and profane (Durkheim, 2008).⁴ These continuing habits of categorization both bear out Bourdieu's (1988) characterization of *homo academicus* as a "supreme classifier among classifiers" (p. xi) and connect the relationship between experiential and academic knowledge to broader epistemological debates.

Academic knowledge, described by Bernstein as "uncommon knowledge . . . freed from the particular, the local" (as cited in Breier, 2003, p. 50), defines itself by what it excludes, namely, the context-dependent everyday knowledge that remains closely connected to specific sites of practice and to the activities of specific, embodied human beings. This detachment from context is of at least two kinds.

The first is that of the human being who may have generated, certainly has used, and, in the process of assessment, has articulated and provided evidence of knowledge. Forms of privileged knowledge in Western cultures, including academic knowledge, rests on claims to universality, and, as I have argued elsewhere (Michelson, 2006), PLA replicates that move. As the student is guided to move from exploring something called "experience" to identifying and articulating a separate entity called "learning," the experiential context falls away, so that the knowledge can be treated as if independent of any historically or socially specific human life. Thus, while the experience that led to the learning is required to be that of an individual, the learning itself is creditable only to the degree that it looks like that of anyone else or, rather, like that of the faceless, disembodied and sexless agent of knowledge in the academy.

The second erasure of context is contained in the often-repeated justification for PLA on the grounds that "it doesn't matter where you learned it; it matters what you know." Insider knowledge such as that of the academy rests on claims to transcend specific social locations; the speed of light and the temperature at which water boils at sea level are the same under any economic system or any cultural milieu. The slogan thus reproduces the presumptions of those sites of material practice, such as universities, that wishes to hold its own knowledge as detached from any particular geographical or cultural perspective, as if a university were not also a workplace, a site of material practice, and a place of contestation and judgment. Compelling as it is as a way to challenge the insularity of academic practice, the slogan again seems to free the learner from the specificity of context and thus belies an equally important point, namely, that it *does* matter where one has learned something because knowledge is part and parcel of the material and social contexts within which it is created, used and judged.

Subjects and objects of knowledge

The literature on adult and experiential learning is replete with evocations of students' knowledge, both of the self and of the world. PLA processes that depend on "self-reflection" are especially celebrated for the ways in which students become more aware of themselves as learners, with the credit award being only one of the mechanisms whereby they achieve a greater sense of themselves, greater confidence in what they know and can do, and a sense of epistemological and social agency.⁵

There is much evidence, both anecdotal and otherwise, to suggest that this is true. It is, however, only a partial truth. The process of assessment, which begins with the student as the subject of her own knowledge, ends

with the student as the *object* of the knowledge of the assessor. For all of our insistence that we are not judging the worthiness of the student's life but rather making the much smaller assessment of some of the student's knowledge according to one particular cluster of criteria, there is still the moment in which, to be assessed, the student must allow her knowledge to become an object of display, visible and vulnerable to the judgment of the insider.

Again, the history of sexuality provides a parallel. Historically, homosexuals have been treated as the objects of other people's knowledge: categorized in absolute terms, classified as abnormal, and subjected to investigation, in both the "scientific" and judicial senses of the word. The criteria of judgment and the right to judge were both retained by the insider corps of psychoanalysts, physicians, sexologists, police officers, judges and legislators whose right to make those judgments was predicated on being positioned in the "normal" category from which those being judged were excluded. The language used to investigate and judge was the language of the insider group, that of an enforced heteronormativity that had been articulated in the first place around the exclusion of homosexuals. The truth of their lives was to be spoken of by others who had been given the status of knower, with homosexuals as the known (Honeychurch, 1996).

It is no accident that Foucault used both students and homosexuals as examples of how, with the rise of the social sciences, categories of people became the objects of other people's knowledge. The modern educational system evolved as one of the regulatory social institutions charged with managing categories of people by collecting information about them. The word examination, for example, refers both to the inspection of the physical body on the part of physicians and the procedure whereby the minds of students are ostensibly made visible to educators. In the process of the examination, the student goes from the learner to the one who will be learned about, from knowing (the stated purpose of education) to being known (Foucault, 1995).

PLA, of course, is an examination in that sense whether or not a literal exam is part of the process. In the act of presenting learning to be assessed, the student goes from being the subject of her own experience and learning to being the object of the assessor's knowledge; and the language of the student's learning, originally that of the site in which it was gained, is translated into that of the academy in a double move in which students are first asked to indicate that their knowledge can indeed be reproduced as academic discourse and then by the assessor who must name the knowledge in more-or-less conventional disciplinary or interdisciplinary terms.

The presumptive right to judgment

Among the justifications for PLA is the claim that is consistent with the normal structures of assessment and judgment that characterize formal education. According to this argument, the difference – that we are assessing knowledge we ourselves have not imparted – is less important than the similarity; academics, after all, are in the business of assessing the knowledge of others, and PLA maintains that authority.

This is particularly apparent in two widely practiced forms of PLA: assessment by standardized or "challenge" exam and what is usually referred to as course-match assessment. The use of examinations as an assessment method conforms to academic conventions most closely; challenge exams typically test students on the same information, and in the same way, that students are tested in a final exam, while standardized exams draw on a broad, often national consensus concerning academic knowledge in a field. Course match assessments, in turn, take as a given the conventional but often arbitrary organizations of knowledge known as curricula and syllabi. To be assessable, students' knowledge must conform to disciplinary boundaries, particular configurations of fields and subfields, and often the happenstance of expertise that exists in a departmental faculty.

Even with more fluid PLA practices that allow for alternative organizations of knowledge -- those that follow the logic of the workplace, for example -- judgments concerning the credit-worthiness of knowledge typically rest on conventional understandings of cognitive level, academic and professional discourse, breadth and

depth. Nor does the PLA process often allow either students or faculty to problematize those understandings. In retaining the power of unilateral judgment based on criteria that are not themselves open to interrogation, PLA reinforces the conservatism of the academy and its insularity.

There are, of course, substantial reasons for maintaining that power of judgment. What I have here called the insider knowledge of the academy has qualities of sustained inquiry and depth that have allowed for the growth and dissemination of vital knowledge in many fields -- standards of evidence, the logic of argumentation, the ethics of research, and peer review support principles of validity and trustworthiness that are not easily abandoned, nor should they be. I will have more to say about that below. At the same time, that very list makes it clear that academic criteria are both a moving target and a highly contentious one. To the degree that PLA treats such descriptors as “college-level” and “college-equivalent” as timeless and unproblematized norms, it fails to engage with outsider knowledges as correctives to knowledge practices that become reified because they are shared by a homogeneous community of insiders. Today’s standard practice is tomorrow’s unconscionable ethical failing or blinkered vision, as the history of both the sciences and the social sciences makes clear.

These three steps – the decontextualizing of experiential learning, the repositioning of the student as the object of knowledge, and the rendering of judgment – are, in effect, a rite of passage through which the student’s experiential learning is welcomed into insider status. The workaday garb is stripped away to reveal the outlines of an academic robe, the collar – white, blue or pink as may be– replaced by an academic hood. The conservative opposition to PLA makes sense in this context: workaday garb is perfectly respectable -- at the workplace. It should just know its place, not try to be something it isn’t, and stay where it belongs.

PLA as Epistemological Cross-Dressing

Which brings us back, of course, to the metaphor of cross-dressing, albeit on a somewhat superficial level that keeps the dualisms intact and just messes them up a bit. On this level, men may dress as women, and vice versa, but it is still clear what it means to “be” one or the other and to dress appropriately or inappropriately. Indeed, it might be argued that transvestites confirm the most extreme stereotypes of gender: How many “real” women actually dress as the ‘50s vamps that many drag queens imitate? And how many would want to? There is even a suggestion of pitiable aspiration in this approach to cross-dressing; Trapped in the binary of the two conventional genders, the cross-dresser becomes a *manqué*, i.e., wannabe, man or woman, mixing up the categories, to be sure, but still maintaining the dualism, however “queered” (Garber, 1997). Applied to PLA, this suggests that our claims about students’ experiential learning are a bit demeaning all around. We make students play dress-up, as it were. We require them to costume practice, apply and problem-solve, all of which are valid and effective in their own context, in the academic regalia of theory, reflection and transferability. No wonder some people think the practice second rate.

On another level, however, cross-dressing poses a more serious challenge to comfortably dualistic categories by calling attention to the permeability of the margin between them. On this level, the transvestite is the avatar of a category crisis, what Garber (1997) calls “the disruptive element” (p. xx) that intervenes, not only in gender categories, but in the possibility of categorization itself. Cross-dressing is powerful, in part, because it challenges the idea that we know exactly what we are looking at and thus opens up the possibility of seeing something else. Butler (1999) describes the confrontation with the cross-dresser as “the moment in which one’s staid and usual cultural perceptions fail, when one cannot with surety read the body that one sees, is precisely the moment when one is no longer sure whether the body encountered is that of a man or a woman. The vacillation between the categories itself constitutes the experience of the body in question” (pp. xxii-xxiii). Butler goes on to argue that, when gender is denaturalized, it can be seen as “a changeable and revisable reality” that might be understood differently (p. xxiii).

This second understanding of cross-dressing speaks to the power of PLA to make the contentiousness of knowledge-practices visible in the same way that cross-dressing makes gender visible, by jolting the viewer out of taken-for-granted and naturalized categories. PLA has deep potential as a liminal space within which to take another look at such binaries as theory and practice, public and private, rational and emotional, transferable and context-dependent, etc. and to ask if and in what way those categories actually hold.

I would argue that such a focus for PLA is several decades past due. In the 40 years since PLA was introduced as a permanent feature of U.S. higher education, two generations of critical theory -- not only queer theory, but feminist theory, critical race theory, critical anthropology, science studies, psychoanalytical theory, theories of cognition, and related fields -- have undermined the clear distinctions between theory and practice, questioned the separation of learning from the meld of other human activities and interactions, and traced the anything-but-value-free relationships between claims to privileged knowledge and power moves of other kinds. Knowledge itself, in other words, has been queered. On the one hand, women's "intuition," workers' "tacit" knowledge, the "ethnoscience" of indigenous people, and other outsider knowledges have been explored for the different but efficacious ways in which they combine explicit and implicit theory, propositional and procedural knowledge, and inductive and deductive reasoning. On the other hand, knowledge practices that claim to rest on the privileged first terms of those dualisms -- "pure" science, "abstract" reasoning and "disinterested" social science -- have been resituated within the muddy waters of human relationships, social values and cultural norms.

This means that, rather than justifying PLA by attempting to demonstrate how students' knowledge fits the conventional categories, we might use PLA as a way to revisit them. Garber (1997) has argued that the cross-dresser is neither male nor female but is rather something else, not a third gender or third term so much as "a mode of articulation, a way of describing a space of possibility" (p. 11) that does not rely on binary thinking at all. Thus, rather than trying to place students' knowledge within the available dualisms (theory and practice being a representative case in point), we might dispense with those categories altogether. It follows that students would not have to make their knowledge resemble academic knowledge; they would instead have to establish the efficacy of particular insightful, effective ways of doing things in particular sites of engagement. We, as academics, moreover, would have to do the same. Our claims to knowledge would no longer rest on privileged claims to objectivity, universality or abstract conceptualization but rather on the efficacy of particular forms of knowledge when applied to particular kinds of inquiry, activity or circumstance. Our interaction with students would no longer come down to a unidirectional judgment, however user friendly and supportive, but rather a shared engagement with questions concerning the role of knowledge in sustaining the human world and aspiring toward a better human future. That doesn't mean relativism. It does mean accountability. To whom, is an important question. To what, is another.

A Sartorial Dilemma

There is more than a bit of the utopian in the above alternative image of PLA: students and academics collectively flattening the epistemological and institutional hierarchies to engage in mutual critique of the usefulness of different kinds of knowledge for different kinds of purposes. But there is something utterly concrete about it as well. PLA is one of the few spaces in the academic world in which students in relatively non-prestigious institutions are challenged to ask themselves what it means to know something and what the relationships are among work, learning, social agency and personal identity. That they explore such questions explicitly, in class activities, discussions and homework assignments, is one of the many virtues of PLA.

There is also much that is dangerous about the flattening of epistemological hierarchies, given the historical moment, at least in the U.S. At a time in which a serious candidate for U.S. president can proclaim that hurricanes are God's punishment for government spending and in which people are encouraged to believe that the government should keep its hands off their Medicare, perhaps we need to stand behind knowledge practices

that, for all their failings, have good old, flat-footed Anglo-Saxon empiricism to recommend them. As Stephen Colbert famously said to George W. Bush,⁶ reality has a well known liberal bias, so perhaps this is a moment to cross-dress into a properly positivist lab coat and stop, at least for now, trying to promote any constructs of knowledge that don't insist on evidence-based research, the scientific method and the disciplines – in both senses of the word – of the Enlightenment academy.

I am not sure there is any way out of that dilemma, but framing the irresolvable is one of the things that queer theory does best. As one of multiple contemporary theoretical approaches that refuse the modernist pretense of a mind at one with itself, queer theory undermines the conventional academic practice of erasing our ambivalence, side-stepping our worries and cramming the babble of multiple inner voices into a coherent, if largely fictitious whole. What do you get when you cross a postmodernist with a Tea Party activist? I doubt that anyone knows the answer, but at a moment in which epistemology is politics by other means with a vengeance, there is much at stake both for PLA practitioners and for part-time studying, working (if they're lucky) adults. What it is that people know, how they know it, and why they think it is true has taken on a new centrality in the current period. While that raises the stakes on practices such as PLA that adjudicate the legitimacy of knowledge claims, it also heightens the importance of doing so, precisely because the social and ideological effects are so serious these days.

All judgments concerning knowledge have social consequences, relationships to power and worldly goods, and they are inevitably expressed within discursive forms that make some things commonplace and others both literally and figurative unutterable. There is a certain irony in the ways in which most PLA practitioners grapple with this; for all the critical self-reflection that we ask of students, we are not encouraged to think of ourselves as actors in a drama awash in judgment, power or the adjudicating of what is or isn't going to be visible within the academy. In spite of – or perhaps because of – our relatively marginal position within academic social and intellectual ranks, PLA practitioners – advisors, assessors, portfolio-development workshop leaders, scholars – have a choice between being the foot soldiers of forms of learning that are not themselves seen as open to question or coming out of the closet as the epistemological cross-dressers we are.

What that might mean in practice requires a long and difficult conversation, and I make no claims to know the answer. If anything, this meditation is that all-too-weather-weary artifact: an invitation to a dialogue. It might mean allowing our students to help us revisit our received truths in much the same way we wish to help them revisit theirs. It might mean beginning the hard work of learning another language, one that does not rest on binary categories or privilege the names that academics give to things. It might mean becoming champions of outsider knowledges borne of experience on the margins and at the same time holding both ourselves and our students accountable for the necessarily biased, necessarily partial conceptual frameworks within which we and they decide what is true.

Certainly, it means opening ourselves and our practices to critique and being honest with ourselves, our students, and each other about the stakes we have in those practices. It means exploring and encouraging our students to explore how – and why -- the ideological frames of the academy permit of some explanatory frameworks and not others. It means addressing the implications of believing or not believing that corporations are people, or that the Earth is billions of years old, or that love is just a four-letter word.

All this would require different readings, assignments and discussion questions that bring knowledge-practices back down to earth. What does a given form of knowledge enable in the way of human activity? In what contexts is that knowledge effective, and why? What values and whose power does it uphold? What forms of equality or inequality does it further? If some of the current unsupported claims to truth are disturbing – that God hates fags or that there is no global warming – then abandoning our own Archimedean point might allow us to further an understanding among our students that all of us are answerable for what we think is true.

The PLA Practitioner as Queer Academic

One of the things that cross-dressing does is to disturb the taken-for-granted nature of those who hold insider versus outsider status. In a wonderful send-up of the staid academic conference, Long suggests that his audience think of a paper he is presenting as being delivered “by a small, mustachioed man wearing a gold lame cocktail dress, black pumps with three-inch stiletto heels, a raven wig, and a beaded cloche with peacock feathers” (as cited in Honeychurch, 1996, p. 348). The image not only challenges the conventions both of gender representation and academic conferences, but insists that the audience recognize that, underneath the conventionally bland and serious academic presenter, *there is someone there*. That is, by destabilizing cultural norms, Long highlights the presence of real human actors whose enactments – of gender, of professional bearing, of social and epistemological legitimation – have, like their knowledge, to be accounted for and explained.

What might it mean, then, to posit PLA practitioners as queer academics or, rather, to queer the identity of the PLA practitioner in a way that might allow us to understand our roles as non-neutral, potentially “outlaw” presences within the power structures of the academy? Warner (1993) argues:

Every person who comes to a queer self-understanding knows in one way or another that her stigmatization is connected with gender, the family, notions of individual freedom, the state, public speech, consumption and desire, nature and culture, maturation, reproductive politics, racial and national fantasy, class identity, truth and trust, censorship, intimate life and social display, terror and violence, health care, and deep cultural norms about the bearing of the body. Being queer means fighting about these issues all the time, locally and piecemeal, but always with consequences. It means being able, more or less articulately, to challenge the common understanding of what (not only) gender difference means, or what the state is for, or what ‘health’ entails, or what would define fairness, or what a good relation to the planet’s environment would be. (p. xiii)

Seeing PLA practitioners as queer academics, then, is not only a case of professional identity, much less one of sexual orientation. Rather, it is a perspective on the ways in which our function as epistemological referees spins inward into our own phenomenological lives and outward into the world. This requires us to acknowledge the unstable distinction between many kinds of ins and outs and of inner and outer worlds. It requires us to take seriously our relationship to the ways in which knowledge is deployed in social institutions, the ways in which we negotiate the terms of the social and the political, and the lived effects of how evidence is interpreted and knowledge claims are framed.

As mediators of students’ engagement with the knowledge-practices of the academy, PLA practitioners as queer academics are in a position to help them explore what their own outsider and even outlaw experiences have required them to struggle with “all the time, locally and piecemeal, but always with consequences,” as Warner suggests above. If we are willing to do more than apply the criteria of insider knowledge to our students’ prior learning, we might begin with raising questions about whether the conventional dualisms still suffice and what experience, identity, evidence and knowledge might look like in a liminal space between smug rationality on the one hand and Obama-is-the-anti-Christ irrationality on the other. A gold lame cocktail dress and raven wig are not everyone’s idea of academic office wear. At the same time, it is worth reminding ourselves that academic convocations are nothing if not medieval costume parties and that the original mentor of *The Odyssey* was a cross-dressing goddess in disguise.

Notes

- ¹ 2nd JET Conference on the Recognition of Prior Learning. CSIR Conference Centre, Pretoria, SA: July 2003.
- ² I have argued elsewhere that the categories of epistemic privilege align with categories of social privilege that associate legitimate knowledge with the male, the white, the professional and the

heterosexual. Like women, people of color, indigenous peoples and workers, “experience” is the marginalized Other of each of those categories. See Michelson, 1996.

3 See, for example, Muller, 2000.

4 See Bernstein (2000); Vygotsky (1978), Gibbons et al. (1994), and Durkheim (2008). The use of epistemological dualisms to argue against PLA is most widely evident in the South African debate on the subject. Breier (2003) identifies the following addition binaries that are currently being tapped to argue for the incommensurability of academic and experiential learning: generalizing/localizing, etic/emic, context-independent/context-dependent, formal/informal, elaborated/restricted, universalistic/particularistic, competence/performance, knowing that/knowing how, formal logic/logic of practice, explicit workings of thought/implicit workings of thought, and formal mastery/practical mastery.

5 For an overview of those claims, see Michelson, 2011.

6 White House Press Corp. dinner, August 26, 2007.

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