



## **Revolutionizing the Curriculum in a Youth-Focused LGBTQ+ Theatre Course**

By Andy Waldron

As a former high school English teacher, current university theatre professor, and a victim of over-critical reflection, I've been thinking through how to engage students in dramatic literature discussions, social issues, and theatre in a way that takes me out of the center. Student learning is often better achieved when they are in the driver's seat, interrogating texts they connect with, and feel like their voices are being considered. Yet in many university theatre courses the faculty decides nearly all of the content, methodology, and ways that students represent their learning. Based on this desire, I created a new course, LGBTQ+ Theatre, with several guiding questions in mind:

- How can I queer a class about queerness?
- What is the function of the "expert" in the room? Aristotelian guided discussions? A break from what Paulo Freire describes as the Banking Model of Education? How can I guide rather than lecture?
- How can I give content options and also manage the course development process?
- How can I connect significant events from LGBTQ+ history into a theatre class?

With these questions in mind, I turned to two primary theoretical groundings; the Pedagogy of the Oppressed and Universal Design for Learning. The first is a groundbreaking education and social practice established by Paulo Freire and latter is a framework for engaging students in

the education process. This paper examines the development of a LGBTQ+ Theatre course using these two lenses which puts the students at the center of the content selection, interrogation, and learning representation process.

### **Why Pedagogy of the Oppressed?**

Paolo Freire's Pedagogy of the Oppressed is the cornerstone of socially engaged education. This way of engaging teaching focuses on having youth be a part of the process and attends to their experiences, expertise, and interests. In the LGBTQ+ Theatre course, we were actively engaging in arts discourse around an oppressed population. In the United States, the LGBTQ+ community is not treated equally to heterosexual and cis-gender communities in the civic, social, or educational worlds. Therefore our process needed to be grounded in "a pedagogy...forged *with*, not for, the oppressed" (Freire 48). Based on this idea, I wanted the students in the class to be able to identify and confront the oppression in front of them. Freire also states that "as long as the oppressed remain unaware of the causes of their condition, they fatalistically 'accept' their exploitation" (64). This rings true for college theatre students that are often tasked with reading the traditional western, heteronormative, cis-gendered theatre canon and think that other voices are less significant. I wanted the students to explore new voices and perspectives, unpack the depth of work available, and question the representations and stories available. With Freire's work in mind, the course development process shifted from the content I wanted to talk about and towards collective's "what", "who", and "how".

### **Why Universal Design for Learning?**

When I taught high school English, I often thought about how I could differentiate the learning experience for my students. While we all needed to read the same piece of American

literature or a class novel, the “how” of learning could be mixed up. I may need to teach *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, but at least I could come up with a way that engages individual students in a variety of ways. While the content was fixed, the journey was flexible. The more I taught, the more I learned that I could play with the other end of the continuum, too. I could have all the students do the same paper, but allow for differentiated choices of subject matter. Differentiation could be based on product as well as process. These decisions in the classroom all stem from Universal Design for Learning of UDL. “UDL provides a coherent framework for understanding and then acting on the key elements of variability that affecting learning and teaching” (Glass, Meyer, and Rose, 2013, 104). These variables include the ways the students “read” a text or receive new information, the representations of content, and the expressions of student learning. Looking back, my planned journey aligned well with music education researchers, Karen Salvador and Mara E. Culp. They state, “part of the UDL implementation is providing engaging and relevant content with flexible low- and high-tech tools to support various pathways to learning” (2022, 106). In my theatre course, I wanted a variety of tools and approaches to connect the content into the lived experiences of my students and their interests. I wanted the students to feel like their voices and choices mattered in how they engaged with the larger discourse community.

### **Ground Building & the Content Selection Process**

In a more traditional dramatic literature course, the faculty member selects the plays the class will be reading, discussing, and analyzing. This positions the professor at the center of the knowledge wheel and the sage on the stage can talk about plays that they feel comfortable discussing. The instructor also selects the texts to order at the bookstore and substantially

frames the learning opportunities for the class. This teacher-centered model of education found in common dramatic literature courses can be clearly compared with Freire's described banking model of education. Four qualities, (with the text's numeration intact) stand out;

- (a) the teacher teaches and the students are taught;
- (b) the teacher knows everything and the students know nothing;
- (f) the teacher chooses and enforces his choice, and the students comply;
- (h) the teacher chooses the program content, and the students (who were not consulted) adapt to it; (Freire 73).

As one can see, teacher-centered curricular decisions assume that students do not bring their own knowledge to the classroom and that it is the responsibility of the teacher, using their own existing knowledge and decision making skills, to deposit new information into waiting receptacles.

In particular, Universal Design for Learning informed the way we began the class. Each of the three guidelines attends to different parts of the learning process. As I was working through the class journey, I reflected on the student make-up of the class and of the university and thought about UDL Guideline II, Representation. This guideline asks the educator to consider how the students encounter the information, their use of the language and symbols, and the factors which influence their comprehension, including background knowledge. I knew about half of the students signed up for the course and could tell from my earlier assessment they had mixed levels of background knowledge on LGBTQ+ content. With UDL in mind, we needed to establish a common ground from which to build our collective engagement with LGBTQ+ Theatre. We needed to develop a common understanding of terms, principles, concepts regarding sexual identity and gender identity, and intersectionality. We brainstormed what we knew about LGBTQ+ issues through word clouds, discussed vocabulary from

organizations like GLSEN, Human Rights Campaign, and the Safe Zone Project, and looked at engaging pieces like the Gender Unicorn activity. From this common ground, we could start our journey into the content.

With the LGBTQ+ Theatre class, I knew I wanted to engage the students themselves in the reading material selection process. As Freire states, “human beings in communion liberate each other” (133) and this communion is best achieved when teacher and student work together in the learning process. I needed to engage with my classroom community and not on behalf of them, without them. This selection process did raise its own challenges. I did not feel comfortable having students download copied playscripts from various sources for every play they read. I can’t encourage supporting the arts while taking money from the art-makers through scanning and sharing purchased scripts. However, selecting an anthology reinforces the canonization of particular voices and particular works. Another challenge is the limited beginning knowledge of the students. Giving free range and open choice to students means that college students with potentially limited knowledge on the subject will be picking what they have heard of, not necessarily what provides a diverse learning opportunity. Finally, the time limitations of a semester meant it would be difficult to start the course, go through the selection process, order all the scripts, and distribute them to the class in a timely fashion. My solution was to pull from an anthology and also pull texts from a few other sources.

I ended up requiring the texts *Forbidden Acts: Pioneering Gay & Lesbian Plays of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century*, edited by Ben Hodges, and *Theatre and Sexuality* by Jill Dolan. Hodges’ anthology was still in print, was reasonably priced, and contained a better variety of plays for my students to engage with. Dolan’s book was a strong piece that provided an undergrad friendly overview of

queer theatre (both onstage and in performance art) as well as some great explanations of the tenets of queer theory. The *Forbidden Acts* anthology was already arranged in chronological order by publication date and, therefore, lent itself to a chronological approach. In order to facilitate the discussion about which plays we would read, I divided the texts into three historical periods. These were Early Queer Identity / Pre-Stonewall, LGBTQ+ Rights / Stonewall, and HIV/AIDS. The Early Queer identity section included *God of Vengeance* by Sholom Asch (1923), *The Captive* by Eduoard Bourdet (1926), *The Children's Hour* by Lillian Hellman (1934), *Oscar Wilde* by Leslie and Sewell Stokes (1938). The LGBTQ+ Rights Movement (circa Stonewall) included *The Immoralist* by Ruth and Augustus Goetz (1954), *The Killing of Sister George* by Frank Markus (1966), *Boys in the Band* by Mart Crowley (1968), *Bent* by Martin Sherman (1979). Finally, the HIV/AIDS section included *As Is* by William Hoffman (1985) and *Love! Valor! Compassion!* (1994). I had the students read the anthology introduction which gave brief overviews of each play. In class later that week, we voted on which play from each section they wanted to read. The goal of the process was to give an opportunity for students to research the plays, and, as UDL Principle III encourages, to provide options for recruiting interest and to give students a sense of ownership (Hall, Meyer, and Rose 2012).

This democratic process was, however, negatively influenced by college students not doing their readings. It became clear to me after a few minutes in class on voting day, they did not make notes about what they wanted to study. We trudged through the discussion and the students selected three plays from the anthology. These were *The Children's Hour*, *Boys in the Band*, and *As Is*. My early concern with students focusing on plays they had heard of had partially come true. The students chose *Children's Hour* because the university had produced

the piece earlier in the year and few of the students saw the production. Beneficially, this opened opportunities for us to chat with the director and talk through the choices they made in the production itself. The students chose *Boys in the Band* because a Netflix version of the play had just been released, so this title was primed in the students' minds. They also expressed that they liked being able to watch the movie while reading the play. The last category, HIV/AIDS, contained plays the students had not heard of before, had almost an even split in votes.

A few weeks later, we used a similar approach to have the students select a piece of theatre that represented the BIPOC experience. The students quickly noticed that the anthology highlighted white, gay male voices, and did little to include voices outside of that demographic. As a result, we had a great discussion about theatre history's connection to representation and voices. In order to facilitate including BIPOC voices in the curriculum, I looked in a variety of other anthology texts and had students choose between: *Dark Fruit* by Pomo Afro Homos, *Porcelain* by Chay Yew, and *Men on the Verge of a Hispanic Breakdown* by Guillermo Reyes. This time, I pulled summaries of the plays, reviews from recent productions, and put them all into a PDF reading. The voting process was more vigorous and informed this time, partly due to increased student interest and recognition that not doing their reading may lead to reading plays they may not like.

Finally, I wanted to give students a "do-anything-you-want moment" and had them partner up to select any piece of LGBTQ+ theatre they would like. With a class mix of theatre majors from a variety of sub-disciplines, I wanted to provide space for even more exploration and individual selection. The students could select musical theatre, an anthology piece we

didn't read, a play they had heard about in the Jill Dolan text, or one they may have heard about from peers. I wanted them to partner up so that they could easily bounce ideas off each other and have a discussion partner for the analysis. The students chose: *Men on the Verge of a Hispanic Breakdown* by Guillermo Reyes; *Orange Julius* by Basil Kreimendahl; *Six Years Old* by Daphne Silbiger; *Falsettos* by William Finns and James Lapine; *Collective Rage: A Play in 5 Betties* by Jen Silverman; *The Next Fall* by Geoffrey Nauffts; *The Killing of Sister George* by Frank Marcus; *Southern Comfort* by Dan Collins. This not only attended to student interests and placed the presenters in the position of the expert, but also exposed the class (and the professor) to a wide variety of new works. The students were becoming the teachers.

While student choice was a key component in the play reading process, there were a couple of other titles that I decided we would read. With my background and expertise in Theatre for Youth, I wanted to make sure we read at least one LGBTQ+ TYA play, so I selected *Food for the Dead* by Josefina Lopez. The other was *The T-Party* by Natsu Onoda Power. This piece is an excellent example of devised theatre, is primarily non-linear, and has a variety of delightful scenes that push the viewer to reconsider theatre expectations. Also, the play itself was devised by the director, participants, and by transgender community members.

### **Projects & Presentations**

De-centering the teacher in the class was not limited to the plays we read but also involved the projects the students worked on. Built upon UDL and differentiation the main class projects focused on independent research and individual representations of student learning. Four particular projects highlight this shift; Children's Book Read-Alouds, Collaborative LGBTQ+ History Board, Devised Scenes, Student-Guided Final Projects.



## Children's Book Read Aloud

As an educator and LGBTQ+ Theatre for Youth scholar, I wanted to attend to performance outside of a traditional play script. I am especially interested in how LGBTQ themes and content are presented to young people. We took a trip to the younger end of the literary spectrum and examined picture books. These texts often distill queer themes to family, acceptance, and gender. These concepts are often made legible through creative use of imagery and text. The arts, in this case children's books ; "provides opportunities for nonlinguistically and cross-linguistically representing information, symbolism, and metaphor, using a wide range of forms...This represents a shift from concentrating on the arts as a subject area to emphasizing the arts as a learning strategy" (Hall, Meyer, and Rose, 2012 107-108). Children's books became the means to learn more about the LGBTQ+ community and to establish another common base from which to build our discussions.

We began the class, not by reading plays, but rather by reading stories to each other. Due to the pandemic, the school had several green screens set-up to allow for digital performance. Before they took them down, I invited my students to select an LGBTQ+ picture book from my collection, adapt it to a live reading, select fun backgrounds, and present & record it for young people. The students selected the books including: *10,000 Dresses* by Marcus Ewert, *Not Quite Narwhal* by Jessie Sima, *And Tango Makes Three* by Justin Richardson and Peter Parnell, *Morris Micklewhite and the Tangerine Dress* by Christine Baldacchino and Isabelle Malenfant, *A Day in the Life of Marlon Bundo* by Jill Twiss, *The Different Dragon* by Jennifer Bryan, and *Daddy's Roommate* by Michael Willhoite. This project also allowed the class to engage with discussions around sexuality and gender in a low-risk context. Instead of

jumping into heavy content that could make students worried about saying the wrong things or not being sure how to engage, we started with simple texts and simple themes.

### **Collaborative LGBTQ+ History Board**

In keeping with a more student-centered approach to the course, I wanted to shift away from the banking model approach that has the professor espousing what they think is relevant history, significant figures, and important events. I also recognized that students today have large amounts of information at their fingertips through internet searches. That said, I have seen in my own classes that students may be able to access information quickly, they sometimes lack the view of the flow of history, the patterns and movements, and need help seeing how history can affect art and art effect history. Finally, I thought it was important for the class to develop a common, base-level understanding of LGBTQ+ history from which to build the discussions. From these tensions, I turned to a student-generated timeline project.

Hanging a 25-foot piece of butcher block paper on the classroom wall, I created a blank space to visualize US LGBTQ+ historical events, political movements, and figures. I asked my students to go home and research 7-10 queer historical figures (avoiding out celebrities) and 7-10 events (excluding Stonewall and the Supreme Court Marriage Equality rulings). I wanted them to dig deeper. The next class, I added a timeline to the paper and impulsively added 2020 to the right and 1900 on the left. Whoops. With that less-thoughtful act, I inadvertently end-zoned relevant queer history without even asking students the earliest examples they had uncovered. I distributed post-its to each student and asked them to select 3-4 significant items, and to put each one on each post-it. They then brought them to the timeline, added them in roughly the correct chronological location. I then discovered the error of my ways when the

students started to create a pile of post-its to the left of the 1900 end point. I scribbled out the 1900, moved it over a few feet, adjusted the existing post-it note locations and left dates off the early edge. This allowed the students to expand their visualization much further back to the early Greeks, for example. After this initial pass, I invited students to take a poster-walk, scan over the post-its, think about what they researched and then add what they thought was missing. This reduced redundancy and also allowed for allowed for all of my students to share all of the historical items they found. The students took another pass and then we discussed what we saw, did not see, and the connective tissue between events. Finally, I had each student select one event or person that they knew nothing about and had them write a short 1-page report on that subject. They came back, presented orally, and then affixed the one-page document to the timeline. [\[Link to Photos\]](#) We were moving from a breadth of history to a depth of information, and perhaps understanding.

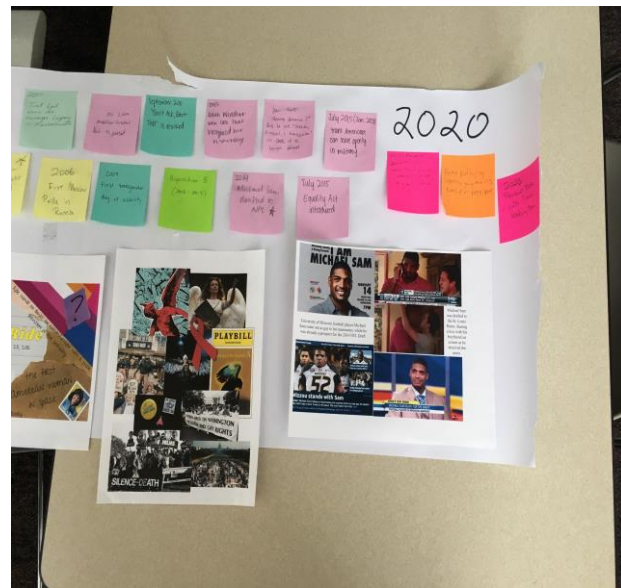


Photo Credit: Andy Waldron.

## **Devised Scenes**

Building off the play read in class, *The T-Party*, I wanted the class to not only engage with the texts of others but to create their own pieces. I soon discovered that my students did not quite know how to devise, so we began with a series of activities. We explored Newspaper Theatre through Drag Queen Story Hour articles, queered Fairy tales & fables, engaged with a fun Dice rolling activity as a means of combining disparate elements in a play together, and finished with Ethnography. From these devising practice sessions, the students decided to write pieces that included: a personal narrative monologue, a queering of Rapunzel, a newspaper theatre piece based off the wedding cake lawsuits, a non-linear, sound tunnel piece exploring the overused phrases that hetero-cis individuals say about / towards the LGBTQ+ community mixed with queer voices, and a combination piece made of three ethnographic monologues. Theatre and the devising / playwrighting process became the means for exploring and examining LGBTQ+ issues in a dynamic way. As Hall, Meyer, and Rose state, “The arts can provide engaging multimodal alternatives for the representation of content and for meaningful expression and action” (2012, 107). Here the form of the learning representation took place live onstage and in the collaborative writing process.

## **Student-Guided Final Projects**

Finally, in order to de-center the learning process and to allow for more student agency, I asked students to design their own finals. As Salvador and Culp state, “learning environments should include universal approaches that create multiple means of engagement, multiple means of representation of content...and provide students with opportunities to engage in culture and meaning making” (2022, 107). The final project aligns with this important UDL

principle in the multiplicity of texts, representations, and options for learning expression. The students partnered up with a classmate and selected a youth play from my extensive collection. I've been researching LGBTQ+ Theatre for Young Audiences and have an extensive collection of over 100 plays from which the students could pick. Having students select works that interest them or that examine their own identity structures aligns both with UDL and Freire's work. They ended up selecting: *Dungeness* by Chris Thompson; *Zanna, Don't* by Tim Acito; *Wrestling Season* by Laurie Brooks; *The Fantastical Dangerous Journey of Q* by Ric Averill; *fml: How Carson McCullers Saved my Life* by Sarah Gubbins; *Run* by Stephen Laughton; *The Laramie Project* by Moises Kauffman and the Tectonic Theatre Project; *All of Us* by Laurie Brooks. These plays opened up the class examinations of youth gatekeeping, adapting challenging content for K-12 students, and the distillation of complex sexual and gender concepts.

Next the students read and analyzed the piece, and then created a representation of learning. This could range from a traditional essay to a visual art piece and from collages to slide presentations. These pieces became a way to guide a verbal presentation to the rest of the class during the final exam periods. Similar to a book report, I asked that the students in their final project representation to cover the plot, characters, author information, conventions, themes, and how the piece fit (or pushed against) LGBTQ+ history. By providing open, creative spaces for representations of learning, teachers can support students of different skill levels, learning challenges, etc. to succeed in the classroom. Students that have a hard time writing get to find another way to express their ideas.

In daily practice, we unintentionally build barriers by the way we design our instruction, and this can occur in any part of the curriculum (goals, methods, materials, and assessments). For example, requiring students to express their knowledge by writing a five-paragraph essay will automatically limit how students can express their

knowledge...In such situations, students who have motor difficulties, students who are English language learners (ELLs), or students who have weaknesses in organization, for example, may not be able to accurately express what they know despite the fact that they understand the content (Hall, Meyer, and Rose 2012, 11).

I had a few students that get anxiety about a completely open-ended assignment like this, so I gave them the option to type a traditional essay, I encouraged arts-based representations, and also showed them examples of story cubes. These paper constructs have the creator write different elements on each facing of a cube. The end result was a final exam session filled with colorful and creative visual aids to guide the spoken presentation. Some students created sculptures from clay while others made mobiles and graphic-designed posters. Only a few chose the essay route and many took me up on the paper cube option. [\[Link to Photos\]](#) Assessment of their learning became more interactive and engaging than a traditional essay and perhaps a PowerPoint presentation.

## **Conclusion**

Approaching the course development and teaching process from a student focused lens provided many opportunities for engaged pedagogy. This is further enhanced by the principles in Paolo Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* and Universal Design for Learning. In this particular course, LGBTQ+ Theatre, the play content and community examined was served best by a Freirean attention to oppressed and less heard voices in dramatic literature courses. The principles of Universal Design for Learning guided the decision-making process and opened up the course for more student-centered opportunities. Reflecting on the questions I posed earlier in the piece, queering the dramatic literature course involved breaking the top-down power structure, increasing opportunities for student agency, diversifying the curriculum, and focusing

on representations of learning rather than continued essay writing. These changes shift the traditional dramatic literature classroom away from the banking model and towards centering the voice of the learners (the classroom students) and the oppressed (the LGBTQ+ community and issues).

The revolutionary approaches to pedagogy continue and I find confidence in this initial foray into turning control of the classroom and content over to students. Yes, I have not TOTALLY given up control (partially due to my anxiety and partly due to the limitations at play in an academic setting). By opening up the selection process, expanding the frames of theatre to include work from youth, children's books, pop culture, and devising, we begin to better understand performance and the ways identity are created onstage and in the minds of the participants themselves.

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