“Always a shadow of hope”: Heteronormative binaries in an online discussion of sexuality and sexual orientation

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Abstract

In this article, I examine an asynchronous online discussion about sexuality that lasted for several weeks and involved students at three different universities, seven of whom I interviewed. Although issues of gay rights and alliance groups were brought up, students focused primarily on the causes of homosexuality and whether homosexuality is natural or not, with one student insistently posting that homosexuality is unnatural because same-sex couples cannot experience “true love-making.” On one level the focus on the causes and naturalness of homosexuality (with few references to heterosexuality) reinforced the heteronormative binaries that often structure thinking and discussions about sexuality, a reinforcement that I initially found disheartening. However, in many ways I came to realize that this online thread still served important academic and personal purposes for students despite and because of being situated in binaries. Drawing from my reading of the posts and from discourse-based interviews with participants, I show that online discussions developed around heteronormative binaries can serve as catalysts for movement in students’ thinking about complex issues and that online spaces in particular are valuable forums for students to articulate and then complicate their understandings of issues relating to sexuality and sexual orientation.

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But, as most teachers who have introduced or entertained the issue of homosexuality in their classrooms know, the polarization and often contentious debate that results from the discussion of sexual orientation is not unproblematic. Dealing with material so close to the core of the way we think of ourselves can produce tension-filled exchanges laden with the possibility of misunderstanding and danger. (Alexander, 1997, p. 208)

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1. Background

For the past several years, students in the composition courses I teach at the University of Massachusetts–Amherst have participated in the Intercollegiate E-Democracy Project (IEDP), a national collaborative where students from schools across the country discuss via asynchronous posts various social and political issues in online forums. Using their real names, students from diverse backgrounds (in terms of race, ethnicity, socio-economic class, sexual orientation, political affiliation, and geographic location) post messages and replies on a password-protected BlackBoard site. The broad topics for the discussion forums are set by instructors involved with the project, but there are no faculty moderators in the forums and students raise the specific issues for discussion themselves.

From previous experiences with classes participating in the IEDP, I know that quite frequently students’ online exchanges become truncated, either showing a lack of uptake of others’ ideas or turning into polarized, shouting matches where rather than engage in discussions with others, students seem intent upon engaging in what one student called a “battle competition” (McKee, 2002). In fall 2002, to foster online exchanges where students would perhaps be more inclined to discuss issues for an extended period of time (thus avoiding posting once to a forum and never returning) and ones where students would not only present their own views but also consider the views of others, Brooke Hessler from Oklahoma City University (OCU), Linda Shamoon from the University of Rhode Island (URI), and I decided to have our classes participate in a special open topic forum in the IEDP. Although each of our curricula was different (first-year composition courses emphasizing revision and writing processes and a cyberliteracy course analyzing the impact of technology upon teaching and learning), we agreed to encourage students to stick with discussions for extended periods of time, to ask questions of others, and, where so inclined, to do outside research to augment the sharing of their opinions. As well, we each integrated the IEDP as fully as possible into our curricula, having students write analyses of the threads and, in the case of students in the first-year course I taught, also compose web sites based upon an issue raised in the IEDP. In this open forum, in which students participated for most of the semester, they initiated a diverse range of issues for discussion, as shown by the subject lines of a few of the threads: “student athletes... let’s get paid”; “Depression”; “Separation of Church and State”; “child labor”; “Is Hunting so Bad?”, and “Homosexuality,” the thread I focus on in this article.

For the past several years I have been researching the exchanges in the IEDP with the aim to articulate more clearly what discursive strategies promote and block productive online discussions on a variety of issues and in what ways instructors may better facilitate online exchanges. I am drawn to researching cross-institutional online exchanges because despite the well-chronicled difficulties of online communication, I still believe in the potential for online spaces, particularly asynchronous discussion forums, to foster thoughtful and deliberative dialogues about complex social and political issues, including issues of sexuality and sexual orientation that are often difficult to engage in face-to-face (f2f). A number of the students I interviewed said that they would not have participated in the homosexuality thread if the discussion had been f2f because they would have been too nervous. And, as I will show, students found the asynchronous, multi-week format of the IEDP discussions beneficial because it gave them time to review the discussion before responding, time to consider other viewpoints, time
to research, and time to reflect upon their own thinking. Cross-institutional online exchanges, such as the IEDP, also provide a greater diversity of participants than can be found on any one campus and in any one classroom, thus increasing the diversity of the contact zones (Pratt, 1991) students experience.

From the fall 2002 discussions I chose to focus my research on the homosexuality thread in part because of my interests in theories and pedagogies of sexuality, interests shaped, I’m sure, by my positioning as a lesbian teacher and researcher. I also chose to focus on the homosexuality thread because unlike several studies of online discussions of sexuality where participants seemed to become more entrenched in their views (e.g., Craig & Smith, 1998; Regan, 1993), this thread—although at times homophobic and although most certainly heteronormative—did produce movement in thinking for some students. Movement is the term Linda Shamoon, Brooke Hessler, and I use to describe our goal that participants in discussions listen to and engage with the ideas of others and that they show an openness to changing their own views. Our use of the term movement is influenced by the political theorist James Bohman’s (1996) work with public deliberation, which he defined as “a joint cooperative activity” (p. 27) where participants are willing to analyze their own previously accepted reasons in order that “they can consider alternative viewpoints and new reasons” (p. 40), thus creating a “dynamic process of reflection and revision” (p. 58). This dynamic process, this movement, does not necessarily mean changing one’s core views on an issue so as to agree completely with others, but it does mean showing a willingness to at least reconsider one’s views and to be open to the possibility of change. In discussions of sexuality, for example, although I hoped that all participants in a discussion will consider alternate viewpoints (including viewpoints of social and religious conservatives), I admit that I hope that the movement students experience is ultimately in a particular direction: toward a greater complexity of thinking and away from heteronormative binaries and homophobic understandings. However, judging from the discourse and from students’ experiences in the homosexuality thread, movement away from homophobic understandings and toward more complex understandings does indeed have to work within and through heteronormative binaries.

In the homosexuality thread, although more nuanced perspectives on issues of gay rights and alliance groups were brought up, students focused primarily on what they perceived as the causes of homosexuality and whether homosexuality is natural or not, with one student insistently posting that homosexuality is unnatural because same-sex couples cannot experience “true love-making.” When I read the homosexuality thread and noted its dominant focus on the causes and naturalness of homosexuality (with few references to heterosexuality), I was dismayed because I feared the discussion would end up merely reinforcing the heteronormative binaries that often structure thinking and discussions about sexuality (Alexander, 1997; Butler, 1993a, 1993b; Kopelson, 2002; Malinowitz, 1995). But from my work with students involved with the homosexuality thread, both during the semester and in the subsequent months as I continued researching, I realized that these online conversations, while certainly situated within heteronormative binaries, were still in many ways (although not always) beneficial for students. I gradually came to realize that I would have to rework my understandings of binaries as negative to recognize the potential benefit they can serve, at least initially, for participants, particularly in an online environment. Although a number of researchers have examined online discussions of sexuality, noting, as I will show, moments of homophobic binaries, some have
posited these binaries as detrimental to productive discussions. Others have acknowledged, as do I, that these binaries can have some benefit, but they do not then show how this benefit occurred for students. The focus, then, of the research I present here is to analyze how the discourse in the homosexuality thread did serve important academic and personal purposes for students despite and because of being situated in binaries. Drawing from my reading of the posts and from discourse-based interviews with participants, I show that discussions around heteronormative binaries can provide important catalysts for movement in students’ thinking about complex issues and that online spaces in particular are valuable forums for students to articulate and then complicate their understandings of issues relating to sexuality and sexual orientation. I conclude by offering pedagogical strategies, drawn from my research of students’ experiences, for instructors to consider when integrating online discussions of sexuality into classes.

2. Homophobia and heteronormativity in online spaces

When writing about online discussions of sexuality in a literature course he taught, Hans Turley (1994) called sexuality “the most ‘dangerous’ subject” (p. 34), and reading posts from the students’ exchanges in Turley’s article and in others’ confirms that online, just as in real life, discussions of sexuality often become polarized into pro-con debates where violence and violent attitudes toward homosexuals erupt. The following three studies that I review point to how difficult it is for students and instructors to handle the binaries and the virtual violence that may arise in discussions of sexuality, particularly in online forums where students are perhaps more willing to express themselves—a willingness that both detracts from the discussion through the hurling of insults but that also benefits the discussion because, as one student I interviewed explained, when discussing issues online you “can really be perfectly honest without having the fear of embarrassment.” Although I think all of these studies are valuable because they raise awareness of an important issue, I am struck by how often homophobic binaries in online discussions are seen by teachers and researchers as either the unsatisfactory end to a discussion, or if they are acknowledged as potentially productive, more detailed data are not provided to show specifically what the potential productivity looks like and how it is perceived by those involved with the discussion.

In one of the first published articles addressing online discussions of sexuality, Alison Regan (1993) examined the homophobic comments made by composition students using the synchronous chat program INTERCHANGE to brainstorm possible topics for a research essay. When a student raised homosexuality as a possible topic, a number of students posted homophobic comments: “We’re taught that homosexuality is a sin”; “a homosexual once made a move on me. I really didn’t like it. I mean I really didn’t like it!”; and “To whoever was thinking about the topics of death and homosexuality, here’s a thought, why not join together and do a project on the death of homosexuals? Not by AIDS.” At the time of the exchange, Regan was unsure what to do when confronted with these comments, but she did try to redirect the conversation by interjecting, “Has anyone thought about writing about homophobia?” but it does not seem that her efforts were successful at redirecting what she called “socially sanctioned classroom terrorism” (n.p.). She was distressed that the online environment enabled students
to articulate “their fear and hatred of homosexuals in a way that would not have happened in
the traditional classroom,” and she concluded that online spaces are not egalitarian, as was
frequently claimed at the time (e.g., Cooper & Selfe, 1990; Faigley, 1992; Kremers, 1989).
Because Regan’s project was more centrally concerned with complicating Utopian notions of
online discourse, she focused on the negative impacts of homophobia without then turning to
examine ways to counteract and to redirect this potential negativity, except to call for instructors
working in online environments “to take an active role in framing discussions” of sexuality. As
my research shows, part of this framing involves developing pedagogical strategies for allowing
students, if need be, to begin with heteronormative binaries and to continue the discussion
from there.

The negative impact of homophobic binaries was also explored as one aspect of a study con-
ducted by Terry Craig, Leslie Harris, and Richard Smith (1998), who paired their classes from
schools in different states to work collaboratively for a semester, participating in multi-user,
object-oriented domains (MOOs), and sharing reading journals and essays. In the MOOs they
noted that at first students showed an “early politeness” (p. 126) that soon gave way to “clash[es]
of disparate students and ideas... lead[ing] to unproductive conflict, as student groups define
their identity in relation to a demonized Other” (p. 135). In the final MOO of the semester be-
tween students at George Washington University (GWU) and Susquehanna University (SU), a
discussion of homosexuality turned into an online fight with students writing such comments as
“what’s up your ass that you have to be so nasty?” “i’ll say it then, stop being a BITCH!”;
“suck away SU”; “You started it”; “Aaron gives them a boot to the skull”; “PUNCHES MARIA
IN THE FACE” (p. 138). It is after these last messages that, as the authors explained, “For the
only time in the course, one of the instructors had to intervene in order to diffuse what became a
virtually violent conflict” (p. 138). Because Craig, Harris, and Smith’s research focused mostly
on students’ interactions throughout the semester and not on just one particular exchange, they
concluded that the discussion of homosexuality degenerated into a fight because the students
used the online environment to carve localized identities for themselves in opposition to stu-
dents from other schools. Thus, they do not describe in any more detail what happened in the
MOO session after the instructor entered except to say that when the instructor asked, “Um—
what were you discussing?” the students replied, “homosexuality and religion.” But I think
the MOO session also turned violent because of the difficulty people face when discussing
issues of sexuality. As well, after I read Craig, Harris, and Smith’s study, I wondered what
happened and how—and if—those students continued to discuss religion and homosexuality.
Craig, Harris, and Smith stepped in to redirect the conversation, effectively silencing the vio-
ence and the students expressing the homophobic comments, but also silencing, it seems, any
further discussion on the issue, thus not providing further means for students to work through
homophobic and heteronormative thinking.

Although Regan (1993) and Craig et al. (1998), focused more on how homophobic binaries
shut down conversations, Turley (1994) described how, when students in a literature course
discussed issues of sexuality online (both in general terms and in relation to the class’s texts), he
did not “jump in and steer the dialogue” (p. 35) even when students posted “more disturbing”
arguments (p. 36). Turley noted how his students divide themselves into pro and con groups
when discussing the morality of sexuality and that “there were some ugly postings from both
sides: ‘Who’s been up your ass to make you like ’em?!’ and ‘Who gives a fuck whether
you approve or not?” (p. 36). But even with these posts, Turley “did not interrupt because I hoped that students would challenge each other’s opinions, and because my own authority could serve to silence any useful discussion that might arise from the noisy rhetoric of a few students” (p. 36). Turley concluded that expressions such as the above are not “destructive” if an instructor “can handle them carefully” (p. 36) and bring them up for analysis in subsequent class periods. Unfortunately, however, Turley did not describe just what that analysis looked like or what effects the online discussions and in-class analyses had on students’ thinking and approaches to issues of sexuality, particularly in relation to how students were able to use the “noisy rhetoric” of a few to move through binaries in their own thinking.

To get at a more in-depth analysis of specific students experiences in online discussions, I decided not only to conduct textual analyses of the posts, but also to conduct discourse-based interviews with participants (Odell, Goswami, & Herrington, 1983), because I believe it is essential to situate analyses of online discourse within the multiple perspectives of the participants who sent and received the messages. I hope that my research will pick up where these other studies have left off by examining a thread where homophobic binaries extended, not ended, the discussion and by demonstrating the various roles for homophobic binaries with extensive data situated within the multiple perspectives and analyses of both me as teacher-researcher and of the online participants.

3. Methodology

All 11 contributors to the homosexuality thread agreed to participate in my study, giving me consent to quote their posts and to interview them after the semester was over. I interviewed seven participants, five of whom were students enrolled in the first-year composition course I taught and two who were from other schools. I conducted six interviews face-to-face and one via email (with Jamie from Oklahoma City). In the interviews I asked open-ended questions, like the following: “What do you most remember about participating in the IEDP and then specifically in this thread?”; “Reviewing this post, what do you now see as your purpose for this post, and did it get the responses you thought it would?”; “If you had been having this conversation f2f, do you think it would have been different, and if so, how?”; “In what ways, if at all, have your views on the issues or how to talk about the issues changed from participating in this thread?”; and “How would you like me to describe you when I write about this thread?” Occasionally I would direct participants’ attention to a specific post (particularly in the email interview where I could not follow up on a student’s lead), but most often they discussed posts of their choosing.

I was aware that both the students I taught and the students at other schools might be uneasy speaking openly about their experience in the IEDP because they knew me as a faculty member involved with the project or as their first-year composition instructor, so I continually stressed that the semester was over, that there were no right or wrong answers to the questions I was asking, that I hoped they would be as honest as they would like about the IEDP, and that their sharing of their perceptions and experiences with the project would help my research and perhaps help teachers facilitate and students participate in online discussions, particularly discussions about sexuality and sexual orientation. I was out as a lesbian to all of the students
I interviewed from the thread, and while that certainly influenced their responses (in ways I will discuss below), I feel that it was important for students to know my orientation. I was also out to the students in the course I taught, having come out explicitly in conjunction with a class discussion of the homosexuality thread and having come out implicitly on numerous other occasions (e.g., by answering a question about my vacation plans with “I’m going to visit my girlfriend”); however, as I learned in the interview, one student, Kevin, did not know my orientation until the interview because he was absent the day I explicitly came out and because he must have not picked up on my implicit outings, a point I will return to later when examining the impact of the discussions upon Kevin’s thinking and writing about issues of sexuality.

In addition, I included in my research, and quote in this article, the three thread analyses the UMass students wrote during their participation in the IEDP—one after their first week of posting, one after one month of posting, and one final analysis after two months of posting. In my discussion that follows, I will not only reference these analyses, but also UMass students’ web sites, which were researched and composed about an issue related to the IEDP. (Examining students’ compositions after the online discussions are over is important, I learned, because often the impact of the discussions and potential movement in students’ thinking manifested itself more fully several days, weeks, and even months after participation was complete.) I describe students’ sexual orientation and gender as they described themselves either in interviews or in their posts. Also, in referencing others’ work, I try as best as I am able to retain the terminology used at that time by the writer (for example, homosexual, gay and lesbian, gay, queer).

4. Thread analysis

4.1. Is homosexuality a choice?: Heteronormative binaries

The thread on homosexuality was started by Susan, a straight woman who mentioned having a friend in high school whom her mother forbade her to see because her mother thought the friend was a lesbian. Susan wrote that she was “outraged” by her mother’s “prejudice” and that she felt it was important to accept others for who they are. Susan concluded her post with the following:

I also strongly believe that as long as no one is being hurt, there is no reason why two people can not engage in a loving, caring relationship, no matter whether it is heterosexual or homosexual.

Whether you agree or disagree with my own views, I am still open to discussing the issues of homosexuality further. . . . Do you believe homosexuality is wrong? Is homosexuality a choice? (9/30, 12:52 p.m.)

For anyone who has participated in discussions of sexuality, particularly for anyone who identifies as LGBT, Susan’s questions are familiar, even too familiar. As Harriet Malinowitz (1995) explained in Textual Orientations, discussions of lesbian and gay issues initiated by straight people often dwell in the “stale conventions of etiology (‘What makes people gay?’)” (p. 74), and often straight people ask “predictable questions, such as ‘How did you know you
were gay?’ or ‘Is it a choice or were you born that way?’” (p. 75). Yet even though Susan’s questions may seem “stale” and “predictable” to those of us who have discussed and thought a great deal about issues of sexuality, and even though her first question sets up a right or wrong discussion that interrogates homosexuality and homosexuals as others, I realize that these questions serve as important entries into discussions of sexuality, particularly when considered in relation to Lev Vygotsky’s (1986) and Jerome Bruner’s (1984) theories of how learners acquire new knowledge.

In his theories of language acquisition, Vygotsky (1986) argued that individuals have a scope of present knowledge that enables them to understand certain concepts and perform certain learning tasks. Each individual also has a “zone of proximal development” that encompasses what that individual can learn and come to understand with assistance from others (p. 187). Bruner (1984) extended Vygotsky’s notion of the zone of proximal development, arguing that in designing educational environments instructors should consider individual’s present knowledge and aim to elicit in students a productive frustration where they are challenged to move beyond their present knowledge. But if learners are asked to move too far beyond their zone of proximal development (too far on the scaffold to use Bruner’s terminology), then rather than experience a productive frustration that leads to learning, they will simply be frustrated and give up on whatever it is they’re being asked to learn. Although Vygotsky and Bruner primarily discuss learning in children, I think their ideas are important for all educators in all contexts, particularly their emphases that a learner can only move so far at any one time and that individuals need time to assimilate new knowledge so that it becomes present knowledge, thus expanding their learning capabilities.

Thus, in discussions of sexuality, particularly those involving participants who have never or seldom discussed issues of sexuality before, situating discussions in binaries (at least at first) can be beneficial because it begins with what are familiar—male/female, heterosexual/homosexual—binaries that shape so much of the thinking in our country—male/female, heterosexual/homosexual. Perhaps, as Donna Qualley (1994) noted, “the road to ‘both/and’ [perspectives and understandings] often runs through many intellectual, emotional, and political ‘either/ors’” (p. 26). Qualley asserted that students cannot be expected “to learn to negotiate the thickets of ‘multiplicity,’ ‘ambiguity,’ and ‘complexity’ immediately. That would be like asking [them] to arrive without having traveled” (p. 25). Qualley focused her discussion on people in marginalized, oppressed positions (specifically women) and how they need some sense of essentialized identity to form groups around which to work for social and political change. I think, however, that her argument holds too for all people addressing and working to understand complex issues of identity, particularly issues they may not have considered before. Of the seven students I interviewed, six had never explicitly discussed issues of sexuality in school before their participation in this homosexuality thread their first year in college. Although I would certainly like students to see identity as a continually renegotiated construction and performance shaped by cultural expectations (e.g., Alexander, 1997; Butler, 1993a, 1993b; Kopelson, 2002), students have to begin with where they are—and for most of the straight students in the homosexuality thread, where they were, not surprisingly, was in the midst of heteronormative thinking.

It is also important to remember that what may seem like “stale questions” to those of us who frequently participate in discussions of sexuality are often perceived quite differently by our student-participants. Sarah, another self-identified straight woman in the thread and a student
in the class I taught, explained that in the first post to the thread, “[Susan] posts an interesting question: ‘Is homosexuality a choice?’ This helps to get people’s thoughts and ideas on the subject out there.” Susan’s question interested students enough that they discussed it for almost eight weeks, and it served as a catalyst for students to examine other aspects of sexuality and homosexuals’ rights in U.S. society.

4.2. “Some of the kindest people I have ever met”: Well-intentioned othering

Binaries occurred in numerous ways in the discussion, not only in the questions asked of sexuality, but also in the subject positions participants (both gay and straight) enacted for themselves and delineated for others. The self-identified straight students in the thread (of the 11 participants in the thread, only 1 student identified as gay) posted variations of “straight, but not narrow,” leading frequently to what I think of as well-intentioned othering as shown by the following excerpts from students’ posts:

Many of my friends are homosexual and they are some of the kindest people I have ever met. They understand what it is to be ridiculed and harassed, so they tend to be kinder and more sensitive souls. (Sarah, 10/1, 11:35 p.m.)

I know many homosexual people and I have no problem with them. (Derek, 10/5, 5:06 p.m.)

I have many friends who are gay, and they are great role models, friends, and leaders. Often, it seems to me that those people who are homosexual tend to be more open minded, compassionate and sympathetic, most likely because they know what it is like to be judged. I would want someone with those character traits to be leading organizations such as the boy/girl scouts. (Susan, 10/7, 9:25 a.m.)

On the whole I see homosexuality as completely natural and I sympathize with those who are born that way. They have been given a tough road to walk and are in need of all the help and support they can get. (Sarah, 10/13, 11:03 p.m.)

On the one hand, it’s gratifying to see so many students in support of LGBT persons and in support of equal rights for all persons.13 On the other hand, self-identified straight students were in a way distancing themselves from the discussion, not examining what was for them the dominant side of the binary—their own heterosexuality. Malinowitz (1995), remarking upon a straight student’s sympathetic response to gay and lesbian issues, questioned, “alternatively to reading discourses of ‘openness’ and ‘sensitivity’ as empathetic steps toward the Other, how might we read them as signposts safely demarcating the space that exists between a speaking subject and the Other?” (p. 72). In positioning themselves as different from homosexuals and in sympathizing with homosexuals (and I think it’s telling that bisexuality was never discussed and transgender was only mentioned once in the thread), heterosexuals in the thread were often, as Malinowitz described, demarcating the space between.

Obviously this sort of demarcation can occur regardless of the medium and is not unique to online environments. But what I think online environments enable is the potential re-examination of this demarcation that may not occur in oral class discussions because unlike communication in an oral discussion, students’ online words exist for participants to read and analyze, either individually or collectively. Students are able to read and carefully study others’ posts for
meaning and expression before crafting responses. For example, Kevin, a straight man who continually posted that homosexuality was unnatural, commented on Sarah’s use of the term sympathy and the hierarchy in relations that it implied: “I think that this is a funny statement because I don’t see how you could consider homosexuals equal if you have sympathy for them [...] I’m pretty sure homosexuals don’t want your sympathy anyway” (10/14, 2:28 p.m.). Yet it’s important to note that even as he challenged Sarah to examine her own positioning more carefully, Kevin still set up an us versus them dichotomy, and the discussion did for the most part—but not entirely—reside in straight students talking about “them.”

Sometimes, however, straight students turned their gaze upon their own orientation, changing their focus from them to us. Jamie, the only out gay student in the forum, was particularly instrumental in moving the discussion so that all students would consider their own positioning and sexuality. One of Jamie’s techniques involved incorporating others’ original texts into his own posts (a process in the IEDP which involves cutting and pasting because unlike most email programs, the discussion feature in BLACKBOARD does not include the original text when someone hits Reply). Because of the online nature of the forum, Jamie was able to take homophobic comments and recontextualize them within his own discussion, as he wrote in a post to Kevin, “I’m going to pull bits from your posting and respond to them directly ...” (10/14, 12:28 p.m.).

Jamie was not bothered by the fact that he was the only out gay student in the thread because, as he explained in his interview, “living in Oklahoma, I am quite used to being the solo homo in a group so this [the IEDP] wasn’t much different.” He participated in the homosexuality thread because he saw it as a way to “work for acceptance—not just tolerance [...] I only want people to know that gays are like everyone else [...] using my self as personal example.” He further explained that “overall I was actually glad to speak out and represent a community that is so often overlooked.” Jamie’s desire to use himself as a personal, representative example is evident in his first post written in response to Susan’s initial questions. Jamie changed the subject line from “Hello, Homosexuality” to “Gay is Okay,” which I see as his first challenge to heteronormative categorizations:

... hi susan... as someone who is gay, i have, what i think is a very unique outlook on homosexuality... the answer to your question: “is homosexuality a choice?”... no, but also yes... here’s my explanation... no, you don’t choose to be gay (or straight for that matter)... sexuality is something that i believe we are born with... an unchanging entity within us all [...] when i’m explaining homosexuality to people (mostly straight people) i usually begin with the question, “did you make a choice to be straight?”... more than not the answer is always “no”. so then i say “it’s exactly the same for people that are gay”... see what i’m sayin’?... but also, yes homosexuality is a choice... so you’re born gay... you now have a choice of whether or not you are going to act upon your desires or stifle them [...] does anyone else think that sexuality is a predestined unchanging entity? for you heterosexuals out there... did you make a choice to be straight? or did you have to contemplate the decision of whether you are attracted to the opposite sex? i’m interested to know what the straight opinion is on this topic... (9/30, 2:41 p.m.)

When I asked Jamie about his purpose for writing the above post, he answered, “this explanation of the ‘choice’ of sexuality is one that I use when I am ‘educating’ people about homosexuality” and that “I know that the choice issue is one of the most debated of all issues
regarding homosexuality so why not go ahead and get that out of the way?” For Jamie, judging from his “get that out of the way” comment, the issue of choice was certainly stale, but rather than avoid the issue he tried, as he did in all of his posts, to change the focus of the binary, to move the discussion to an examination of heterosexuality as well as homosexuality. Jamie’s post led Susan to post to reflect upon the constructed nature of normal when she replied:

I would think that for the majority of strait people there is no consideration given to whether or not they should stifle their desires, simply because it is ‘normal’ to have them [. . .] as someone who is strait I would say that there was no contemplation, or decision made, as to whether I am attracted to the opposite sex. I simply am. I cannot imagine feeling as if I needed to stifle my desires of attraction, simply because an attraction to the same sex is not considered ‘normal’ by the majority of society. (10/7, 9:25 a.m.)

A number of students noted Jamie’s efforts to invert (but not eliminate) the binary. Jen, a UMass student who joined the discussion after Jamie (and his classmates) had finished participating (because “it just seemed so lively”), wrote in a thread analysis that Jamie’s posts were beneficial to the discussion because “Instead of only stating his opinion, he turns the argument back to the discussion group asking whether the heterosexual made the choice to be so.” So even after Jamie was no longer present in the discussion, his posts were still being read and considered by other participants, including newcomers to the discussion, a development I think unique to online environments. In a f2f discussion, newcomers either do not hear what was said by those who have already left or they hear what was said mediated through others, which often results in a condensation and, of course, a rephrasing—“Jen, before you arrived, Jamie said he wondered what the straight opinion on sexuality was”—which is potentially much less powerful than a person’s original words.

In fact, Jamie’s “turning back” influenced Jen a great deal. On the opening page of her web site (her site focused on the rights granted heterosexuals and denied homosexuals in United States) she made a game, “Guess the homosexual individual,” where viewers were to click on one of the four photos of people. No matter the image clicked, a pop up window appeared stating “You are incorrect. [. . .] Please enter the site to learn more,” which effectively challenged viewers to reconsider their own assumptions. Jen also put an option to skip the activity; viewers who chose to skip the activity were greeted by a pop-up window congratulating the person for recognizing that stereotypes based on appearance are wrong. Although not going so far as to make her opening page “Guess the heterosexual individual,” Jen’s site does somewhat balance out who is being interrogated as other, a move she first considered making after reading Jamie’s posts.

4.3. “I don’t see homosexuality as natural”: The role(s) of homophobic opposition

Although Jamie’s posts influenced a number of students, students said their participation in the discussion was influenced the most by Kevin’s posts. Of all the people in the forum, Jamie felt, as he explained, that Kevin “needed the most work,” and in the rest of his posts to the forum, he “specifically was targeting Kevin’s interests.” Jamie probably felt the need to focus on Kevin because (a) Kevin was one of only two students to post in opposition to homosexuality and gay rights (the other student from a western school posted only once in
the last weeks of the discussion and did so inadvertently not realizing that the forum was for URI, OCU, and UMass students) and (b) because Kevin was the most frequent poster to the thread—his nine posts comprised 23% of those made. Kevin joined the discussions after it had been underway for two weeks. He explained he was motivated to post “because everyone was agreeing with each other and I wanted to stir up a little trouble. I kept with the conversation because it became so interesting.” Kevin’s desire to stir up a little trouble is evident in the first line of his first post. The importance of beginning discussions of sexuality with students’ present understandings is evident in the rest of his post:

Prepare yourselves people you’re about to be pissed off.

Everyone who has contributed to this thread has agreed that homosexuals should have the same rights as heterosexuals. Does every person in our society agree with this? Absolutely not. So far no one has voiced the opposition, so I’ve taken it upon myself to put in some input on the matter. First I’ll start with the sexual part of homosexuality because I find it unnatural. My reasoning for saying that it is unnatural is because I have learned about evolution and primal instincts. Our primal instincts tell us to mate so that we can produce offspring in order to pass our genes on to the next generation and stay part of the continual evolution of mankind. Homosexuals on the other hand, don’t have these primal instincts to mate with the opposite sex, but would rather have “mate” with another of the same sex. This just doesn’t work.

In a previous posting someone brought up the discussion of same sex partnership and having kids. Personally I think that it would be a weird situation for the kids being brought up by the “parents” because they wouldn’t have a father or a mother or both, they would have two fathers or two mothers [...]

My stance on same sex marriages is also negative. I’m not going to get into the religious reasoning against same sex marriages because I am not a very religious person, but I know most religions frown upon same sex marriages. This is a complicated issue because it depends on your viewpoint if you see same sex couples the equivalent of heterosexual couples, and I can’t say that I do. I don’t see them as equivalent mainly because I don’t see homosexuality as natural, but also because I don’t think they can experience the same type of love a man and a woman can have together. Homosexuals could never experience true “love making” because they don’t have the required anatomy, so to speak. That’s just the way I see it.

Anyways, I know most of you aren’t going to like my point of view on homosexuality, but at least you have heard a variety of opinions now. Please give me some feedback, criticism, or anything you just have to say about it. (10/12, 12:58 a.m.)

Kevin’s belief that homosexuality is unnatural underlies his stance against gay adoption and gay marriage, and it is this question of whether homosexuality is natural or not that dominated most of the rest of the thread, which remarkably, did not turn into a shouting match, even though Kevin’s posts did, as I will show, anger and frustrate a number of students. On the one hand this discussion focusing on the binary of natural/unnatural is certainly othering—at one point in his interview, Jamie wrote that he wished the thread had looked more at how “Homosexuality is a culture [...]. We are a culture, more so than a gender or a sexuality or a genetic defect.” But, on the other hand, I do not think Kevin would have been willing or able to consider more complex cultural issues—issues of multiplicity and ambiguity (Qualley,
—until he had worked out what for him was the crucial point of stasis: determining the naturalness of homosexuality.

Kevin’s insistent focus on the naturalness of homosexuality mirrors what often happens in public discussions of such issues as gay marriage, the curricula of sex education courses, funding for AIDS research, and hate crimes legislation. Conversations may begin by focusing on the equitable development of public policy, but they often turn into debates on the morality and naturalness of homosexuality. Kevin’s understandings of homosexuality, at least when he first joined the thread, were reflective of this limiting public debate, which caused him to articulate his views from an unexamined subject position.

Jamie called Kevin on his position when he responded, “Kevin as someone who is gay I find it my DUTY to enlighten you [. . . ] first I’m going to ask you to define ‘true love-making’” (10/14, 12:28 p.m.). This post to Kevin, more so than Jamie’s other posts, attempted to disrupt the dominance of heterosexuality and to even go so far as to claim a superiority “for someone who is gay.” Jamie’s inversion of heteronormativity and his assertion that it was his “DUTY to enlighten” angered Kevin, and he said it was the line that he most remembered from the forum. In his reply to Jamie, Kevin addressed Jamie’s request that he define “true love-making”:

When I said, “Homosexuals could never experience true “love making” because they don’t have the required anatomy, so to speak.” I based “love making” as sexual intercourse. Granted there are different kinds of this, but there is only one way to truly have sex and it takes a male and a female for that. I can’t see how male on male sex could be considered “love making” (I’m not going to get into the details I hope you can understand why). Females are a little different, there is a lack of a required component (you all know what) and they could never really do anything beyond oral sex to each other, and I don’t consider oral sex “love making” at all. I really don’t want the details on how homosexuals “make love” but I can’t see any possible way for “love making” to take place.

Please enlighten me I’m anxious to see what your response is. Thanks. (10/14, 3:05 p.m.)

“Love-making” is, for Kevin, male–female intercourse and although it is tempting to look at his views as just those of an 18-year-old male with (perhaps) limited sexual experience, I think Kevin’s views in this post are telling, shaped as they are by a culture dominated by the primacy of the phallus. As well, I see in this post a formation of identity by negation—a setting up of homosexuals as an unnatural other in order to reify one’s own subject position. Jonathan Alexander (1997) noted that young adults (and I would add adults) “often use difference, especially sexual difference, to gain a clearer, more definitive, and sometimes harsher and more exclusionary sense of their own identities” (p. 209). By asserting that homosexuality is unnatural—and in asserting that “females are a little different, there’s a lack of a required component”—not only did Kevin assert the superiority of heterosexuals and heterosexual intercourse, but also the superiority of the “required component” that he as a male possesses.

Jamie was not the only person to question and challenge Kevin on his heteronormative (and sexist) views. Sarah, who was the second most frequent poster to the forum, commented in her interview that Kevin’s post upset her and that “I still get mad when I read that.” In her reply to him in the thread she wrote:

I completely disagree with your view point on homosexuality. Homosexuality is a completely natural occurrence. It occurs in nature at the same rate it occurs in humans. In addition, the
brain of a homosexual is formed differently from a heterosexual, so either way, homosexuality is completely natural. (10/13, 11:03 p.m.)

Sarah explained that in her responses to Kevin, which focused a great deal on scientific studies, she “was trying to say, ‘Okay, that’s your view now. If I can give you these examples, if I can prove to you that homosexuality isn’t unnatural and that a homosexual isn’t subordinate to a heterosexual, can I get you to change your mind? Can I get you to have an open mind and think about it?’” That Sarah explained her goal to prove to Kevin that “homosexuality isn’t unnatural” and to show that “the brain of a homosexual is formed differently from a heterosexual” shows how she too is working within heteronormative binaries. Kevin asked Sarah to share where she got her information about the brains of homosexuals and heterosexuals and when she shared the web addresses, Kevin read the studies and wrote back, “Thanks Sarah these sites are really informative and I suggest reading them” (10/22, 1:45 p.m.). At first when I read these posts and I read Kevin’s responses to Sarah and Jamie, I thought it was because of these binaries that Kevin was more receptive to considering Sarah’s viewpoints: She was working in discourse with which he was most familiar and her challenges to his thinking were not as challenging as Jamie’s because of this familiarity.

But there are other factors shaping Kevin’s differing responses to Sarah and Jamie. First, Kevin was willing to consider Sarah’s assertions that homosexuality was natural because she brought in science, something that Kevin as a science major valued. As he explained, “I tried to get into scientific subjects and only one other person was doing that […] once it [the discussion] got to the scientific I was into it.” Second, Kevin felt that Jamie’s posts showed a lack of openness (which is not surprising since Kevin’s showed a lack of openness to Jamie). In his interview, when he reviewed the thread, Jamie acknowledged that some of his posts to Kevin were “a kind of raw debating” and that in places “I resort to asking rhetorical questions. I think that is probably the worst kind of argument—it doesn’t advance communication.” And third, and perhaps most troubling for people interested in facilitating discussions of sexuality, Kevin discounted Jamie’s claims because he knew Jamie’s sexual orientation. Kevin may have been more willing to listen to Sarah because as a fellow heterosexual, he did not feel that her views were biased whereas Kevin did feel that Jamie’s were. In a mid-semester analysis of the IEDP, Kevin chose to analyze Jamie’s “DUTY to enlighten you” post. In his analysis, Kevin wrote (and at the time he thought Jamie was a woman):

I think a strength to this post is the fact that she states that she is actually gay because it shows the true gay side to the issue. However, […] another weakness I see is that she is very implanted with her thinking (which I can understand because she is actually gay), this makes arguing fun, but not very good for discussion. She is closing down the discussion by saying it’s her “DUTY to enlighten me” because she feels that she is right and isn’t even willing to consider how I see homosexuality (mostly due to her being gay).

Because of Jamie’s orientation, which Kevin mentioned repeatedly—three times in three sentences—Kevin felt Jamie was “very implanted in her thinking” without considering, at least not at this mid-point in the discussion, how he was very implanted in his thinking too.

Kevin’s analysis also points to the potential catch-22 LGBT persons face when coming out and the underlying difficulties of binary thinking that instructors must address. According to Judith Butler (1993b), “one comes out of the closet… so we are out of the closet, but into
what?... being ‘out’ always depends to some extent on being ‘in’” (p. 309). Although Butler’s point was to argue for the destabilization of categories—she “would like to have it permanently unclear what precisely that sign [lesbian] signifies” (p. 308)—when dealing with others who carry views of what those categories signify, there’s a sense that coming out means coming into other people’s stereotypes and all that that involves. On one hand, Jamie tried to use his gay identity to educate others, as he wrote to Kevin, “I want to not only educate you to bring you to ‘tolerance’ but bring you to acceptance of gays and our lifestyles” (10/14, 12:28 p.m.). But on the other hand, his coming out meant that his arguments for the naturalness of homosexuality carried less weight for Kevin. As Karen Kopelson (2002) explained, “Because to come out is always to come out as, it cannot disturb processes of regulatory categorization. Because it is to come out as heterosexuality’s oppositional other, it cannot disturb the binary logic that surrounds sexuality nor the attendant process of privileging and devaluing that surrounds this particular and every other pervasive binary system” (p. 22, italics original). Thus, the binaries shaping Kevin’s thinking were detrimental in that they led Kevin to devalue Jamie’s perspective. However, other students in the online exchange were able to read and join in on Kevin’s and Jamie’s exchanges, so that Kevin’s thinking did not go unchallenged. When I asked Kevin to explain what posts most influenced his changing perspective on issues of sexuality, he identified Sarah’s posts, but Sarah was motivated to post in part because of Kevin’s homophobic responses to Jamie.

When I asked Jamie what he most remembered about the thread, he replied “Frustration, frustration, frustration.” He found his exchanges with Kevin “exhausting, frustrating” because “he always seemed to block what anyone said and never really tried to understand points of view different from his own.” In yet another post to Kevin, Jamie wrote:

Also, you say that, “I just don’t think people of the same sex should be allowed to marry because of my opinion of homosexuality as being “unnatural.” Are you saying that since YOU think that homosexuality is unnatural then gay marriages should remain unrecognized? [...] Finally, your final statement, “I really don’t want the details on how homosexuals “make love” but I can’t see any possible way for “love making” to take place.” I think that this clearly exemplifies your lack of an open mind toward this topic. Your arguments seem to stem from your refusal to see the other side of this situation, to realize that in many cases the love between two men/two women can be deeper and more true than that of a heterosexual couple. (10/16, 12:55 p.m.)

In his interview, Jamie commented that “going back and reading this posting, I almost cringe. My frustration is just oozing out of every word on the screen.” Whereas Jamie was frustrated by Kevin’s posts, the straight students in the thread whom I interviewed found Kevin’s participation beneficial because they were spurred on to do research and because they found the discussion much more interesting once someone expressed opposition to their views.

I mean the whole discussion didn’t get interesting though until—I can’t remember his name—but some guy came in and had a complete opposite view, which made it more interesting. (Susan)

It was fairly boring at the beginning. Every time you logged on you’re like, “Oh, stupid class makes me do this” [...] When we started everybody had the same opinions and it got kind of boring. And Kevin came in and he had a different opinion and the thread took off. I mean, it
really—we started having people having actual discussions [...] Everybody said “oh, wow, this is interesting.” You actually go and log on in your own free time just because you wanted to look and see what he had posted and you wanted to see what he had said as a response to your last post. You wanted to actually get a discussion going. (Sarah)

It was like he was being perfectly, completely honest. Like he didn’t like this, he didn’t understand homosexuality. He kind of gave us a reason to talk more and to expand on our ideas. Instead of just saying “I agree with this.” Especially him and Sarah really went at it and they had a long conversation. Just reading that really helped me get new information and see those different ideas and I really like that too. (Erin)

What they felt made the thread successful were Kevin’s homophobic expressions of opposition, which became a focal point for the discussion, inspiring students to write more and later to do research to show Kevin that homosexuality is natural. Perhaps because Kevin expressed his opposition online, students (at least the straight students) found it more beneficial because they had time to think about what they were going to say. Susan felt that online “I think it’s kind of better because I think you think more about what you’re writing, whereas if you’re in face-to-face you just kind of might like blow up and just start not really listening”; and Derek, a straight male who mostly lurked in the discussion, felt nervous posting online but as he explained “it’s a little better than talking to someone face-to-face because I had a lot of time” and “because when you’re speaking you don’t have time to think about your word choice”; and Sarah explained that “doing it online give you a little time to think, a little time to do some research, a little time to back up your claims.” Students, especially Sarah and Susan, posted research they had found, and it was their research along with the time spent discussing and considering the issue, that led Kevin to change his mind.

But the differing perceptions of Kevin’s role in the discussion (Jamie’s frustration and straight students’ interest) highlights the crucial difference that exists between having someone attack your views (homosexuality is unnatural) and having someone attack your very being (you are unnatural). Whereas the self-identified straight students did get upset at some of Kevin’s points—Sarah who has “a set of gay uncles” was particularly upset at Kevin’s stance against gay marriage—they were still examining an issue one step removed from themselves. But for Jamie, who consciously tried in the discussion “to use[ ] my self as personal example,” Kevin’s opposition to homosexuality and his homophobic assertions that homosexuality is unnatural were attacks on his person.

Jamie was, however, more frustrated than angered or demeaned by Kevin’s posts. In fact, Jamie mentioned that he was glad Kevin expressed his opinion so freely because that enabled an honest discussion to occur. As he explained when I asked in the email interview in what ways, if at all, he thought the discussion would have been different f2f, he wrote back:

I think that this discussion would have taken a completely different turn if conducted f2f. By sheer appearance, I am sure I would have intimidated almost everyone in the thread. I resemble a linebacker. I’m 6’5” and am about 250 lbs of solid, immovable mass. But more specifically, I think that many individuals—especially Kevin—would not have been as outspoken [...] I think that perhaps online discussions are a little more effective, because people can really say what they want.
Even though Kevin was expressing homophobic opinions—rather strongly at times—Jamie, who it is important to note had constructed a secure, without identity, was glad to have Kevin express his opinions rather than stay silent and just think them in a f2f discussion. Despite the frustration he felt, Jamie also felt that “There was always a shadow of hope with [Kevin]. Somehow, I got the idea that throughout that hard-headedness, there was someone deep down that really wanted to learn.”

4.4. “I changed my view”: Binary thinking as precursor to movement

Sarah also saw signs in Kevin that he was willing to move toward more accepting views. In her interview when I asked her, “Just looking through the thread now [two months after she participated in the IEDP], what stands out for you?” she replied that “Kevin’s first post really stands out,” and she traced Kevin’s changing perceptions of homosexuality, noting two posts in particular where he showed movement:

Oh, here it is. His post Gay Brain Study [10/22] [reads] “Thanks for these sites they are really informative and I suggest reading them.” He’s saying that he understands what my point is [...] which is kind of interesting that he doesn’t keep going with the same thought of everything being unnatural, homosexuality’s unnatural, homosexuality’s unnatural, it’s unnatural, unnatural. Instead he comes through and says “okay, well, maybe you have a point here.” Later he says [paraphrases post from 10/26] I may not understand it but due to the site that you’ve been posting maybe I’ll hold off judgment until I understand a little bit more what’s going on.

In that later post that Sarah paraphrases, Kevin wrote to Susan (yet another example of how posts addressed to one person are still read and analyzed by others), “Before I said the reason I don’t think gays should marry is because homosexuality is unnatural, but I’m looking into the science behind homosexuality and I’ll let you know my opinions when I become a little more educated on the matter” (10/26, 12:35 p.m.). These small signs of changes in thinking manifested themselves most fully in the web site Kevin composed after participating in the IEDP. On the index page, Kevin wrote,

The purpose of this site is to educate people about the causes of homosexuality. I think that if people were to understand homosexuality better, they would be more apt to accept people with different sexual preferences and they would hold less prejudices against them. I know before I did any research on homosexuality I felt that homosexuality was unnatural and a crime against nature because it wasn’t the accepted standard. Now I have realized that homosexuality is not a crime against nature, and it is a naturally occurring phenomenon. I hope that others will find my research of the causes of homosexuality useful, and maybe the information may help to shape others’ opinions on the matter, as it has shaped mine.

When I asked Kevin about his changing perspective, he explained that initially,

I was sticking to the primal instincts theories [...] So I figured that homosexuality was just not natural. Why would you do that? But then Sarah showed me the web site that got into the scientific part of the brain and it contradicted what I’d originally thought.

What Kevin concluded from his readings of the various possible biological, genetic, and cultural causes for homosexuality was that homosexuality is natural and that his objections to
it and his objections to issues of gay rights on the basis of the unnaturalness of homosexuality were unfounded. In his interview, Kevin explained his changing perspective by commenting that from his participation in the forum and from his research, “My knowledge increased. As I came to the knowledge I changed my view,” a change that “surprised” him.

It is a change that surprises me as well. According to Annie Cotton-Huston and Bradley Waite (2000) in their research report “Anti-homosexual Attitudes in College Students,” students with strong religious convictions or strong traditional gender-role expectations are more likely to express anti-homosexual attitudes. Although Kevin is, as he explained in the thread, “not religious” (10/26, 12:35 p.m.), his discussions of “true love-making” and “required anatomy” may indicate traditional gender-role expectations. As well, Kevin grew up in a home where “My dad’s always been one against homosexuality [...] it’s just always been not a positive in my house.” Before his participation in the homosexuality thread, Kevin had never discussed homosexuality in school, at home or among friends, except for hearing or exchanging brief derogatory comments about gay people. And, yet, despite these factors that may have influenced his views against homosexuality, Kevin did experience movement in his views.

It is important to note that Kevin was a student in a class I taught and that perhaps he changed his views to accommodate his lesbian teacher. However, because he was absent the day I explicitly outed myself to the class and because Kevin must not have picked up on all of the ways I implicitly outed myself, he did not know my orientation until I interviewed him after the semester was over. (“I didn’t know that. I had no idea. No idea.”)

Kevin’s views changed while still examining issues of sexuality—or more accurately, issues of homosexuality—within a binary. Although the binary did not disappear in Kevin’s thinking (or in most of the other students’ for that matter), what did change was his positioning of heterosexuality as natural and homosexuality as unnatural. Before Kevin was able to consider issues of sexuality in terms of multiplicity and performance, he first needed to work through and within the binary of whether homosexuality is natural or not.

5. Implications for teaching and for research

Although I have examined only one thread involving 11 individual participants, I think the students’ discourses and experiences do point to some ways instructors can better facilitate online exchanges where students are able to work within and through heteronormative binaries that dominate so much of the thinking and discussion of sexuality and sexual orientation.

Central to Kevin’s movement in thinking and to all of the students’ experiences in the thread was having the time for reflection and re-evaluation of perspectives. I doubt Kevin would have been able to move from “I don’t see them as equivalent mainly because I don’t see homosexuality as natural” (from his post on 10/14) to “homosexuality is not a crime against nature, and it is a naturally occurring phenomenon” (from his web site, 11/30) in just a one-hour discussion. He, like all of the students in the thread, needed time to find and articulate his perspectives and time to try to understand both his own and others’ views. Although the structure of the IEDP affords that time—the online, asynchronous environment; the several-week duration of the discussions—it is a structure that can be worked into other online environments, including synchronous discussions where a topic is continued from one
session to the next. Students need to have the time to articulate their views before they can consider any movement in their own thinking.

Online environments allow students to articulate and challenge perspectives because they communicate in a semi-public forum, one shaped by pedagogy, where they write to and receive feedback from others. How students are prepared to provide this feedback is important, particularly if discussions are to be perceived as productive by all or most participants involved. The posts made to and students’ reflections about the homosexuality thread point to some strategies that Brooke Hessler, Linda Shamoon, and I emphasized with students that seem to be beneficial for fostering online discussions, particularly discussions about controversial subjects.

One of these strategies was to encourage students to ask questions of others. Students in the homosexuality thread posted questions to the thread in general (e.g., Susan’s initial questions; Jamie’s asking straight students to consider their own orientation), and they asked specific questions of others. Many of these questions formed crucial turning points in the discussion. For example, Jamie responded to Kevin’s initial “Prepare yourselves people you’re about to be pissed off” post not by getting pissed off, but by asking questions, including asking Kevin to define “true love-making,” a question that led Kevin to articulate more clearly his perspective, thus enabling others to understand his views and what approaches they might use to work to convince him otherwise. In another instance, Kevin asked Sarah where she got the information about differences in homosexual and heterosexual brains, which then led him (and others) to read a great deal of studies about the biological and cultural factors shaping sexual orientation and identity. Kevin moved in his thinking because of his reading of these research studies, studies he acknowledged that he would not have been motivated to read if he had not been engaged in the online discussion with peers and if he had not felt that he needed to find more evidence (nonexistent evidence as he discovered) to support his claim that homosexuality defies primal instincts and is unnatural.

Kevin’s movement in thinking began while he was participating in the thread but continued as he wrote papers analyzing the discourse in the IEDP and a web site based upon an issue raised in the IEDP. The integration of online discussions into other writing assignments, particularly into assignments that have students writing to others outside the classroom, is another component crucial to facilitating successful online discussions. Students in the course I taught did not just participate in the forums and be done with them—they continued their thinking on the issues as they analyzed the threads in class discussions and written assignments and as they composed a web site that would potentially be read by their IEDP peers.

This continuation of the discussions into other composing environments is important too because it enables students to follow issues raised in the thread, but perhaps not discussed most fully. For example, before Kevin joined the thread, the students, all of whom posted in support of equal rights for LGBT persons, were beginning to discuss the many injustices LGBT persons face in our society, and what could be done socially and politically about it. After Kevin joined, the thread turned to whether homosexuality is natural or not, focusing a great deal on scientific studies and discussions of things such as hypothalamus size. But toward the end of the thread students began to return to examining issues of rights and prejudice shaped by their discussion of the naturalness of homosexuality, but they were not able to do so fully before their participation in the IEDP was over. However, students in the class I taught were able to continue working with ideas raised in the thread in their other course compositions. Kevin and
Sarah, not surprisingly given the focus of most of their posts, wrote their web sites exploring the possible causes of homosexuality and heterosexuality. Derek, who mostly lurked in the thread, reflected upon the Boy Scouts’ stance on homosexuality (concluding that although he’s not pleased about it, he will, as an Eagle Scout, support it); Erin, who was initially bothered by how studies of sexuality so often exclude women, made a site addressing the biased and stereotypical portrayals of lesbians in U.S. films and television shows, and Jen argued in her site for the equal treatment of homosexuals in the military and in state-sanctioned domestic relations. I mention the topics of their sites because I think they show that although much of the discussion in the homosexuality thread centered on heteronormative binaries, students were able to engage with issues of sexuality in diverse ways.

Another important strategy, and one that was crucial for the homosexuality thread, is to encourage students to stick with the discussions for extended periods of time and not just to give up on the discussion, even when the points of stasis around which a conversation are stuck seem irresolvable. Although movement as dramatic as Kevin’s may be rare (at least in my experience of online discussions of sexuality), people’s views can be changed and expanded in smaller ways. In this article I have focused on Kevin and the movement toward greater understanding and at least tolerance of homosexuality in his thinking, but other students experienced movement in their thinking as well, understanding more fully others’ objections to homosexuality and learning more too about heterosexuality.

But asking students to engage in and stick with discussions of controversial subjects can, I realize, feel risky. Recently I presented this research into the homosexuality thread to a group of college writing instructors. After the presentation a number of people asked me if I weren’t nervous about having my students engage in online discussions about such controversial issues as sexuality. I wasn’t surprised by these questions, especially given the incidents of name-calling and the virtual fights reported by Regan (1993), Turley (1994), and Craig et al. (1998). And perhaps given a different group of participants this online thread could have turned into name calling and such after Kevin posted his homophobic comments. But it didn’t. It didn’t in part because of the participants, particularly Sarah’s and Jamie’s maturity in responding to Kevin and in part because of classroom practices and pedagogy that emphasized listening to and asking questions of others, using research to augment opinions, and sticking with a discussion. As instructors we should not avoid discussions of sexuality out of fear of homophobic outbursts. Nor should we worry if the discussions begin with the reduction of complex issues to simple binaries. Discussions of sexuality need to begin somewhere—without them we have a silence that is dangerous and detrimental to people’s growth as individuals and to society as a whole. We need to encourage discussions of sexuality and we need to make room for and learn how to work within and through homophobic binaries. What my research and analysis of the participants and posts in this homosexuality thread show is that even within discussions centered on binaries, greater understanding of and tolerance for (and even acceptance of) differences can occur. As Kevin wrote in his last post to the homosexuality thread, “I’d like to thank everyone for an interesting discussion. It actually has taught me a lot about homosexuality and heterosexuality for that matter” (11/23, 10:27 a.m.).

However, there is also much that my research into this homosexuality thread does not show—or, more accurately, there is much further study needed. In my research, I focused a great deal on communication within heteronormative binaries and the movement that occurred for students
arguing across differences of perspective. But research is needed too into how like-minded individuals might use online spaces for productive discussions. For example, the thread began with a group of students making posts in support of equal rights and against homophobia. Within these seemingly similar posts were actually a great deal of subtle variations and points that could have been developed in a number of directions. But many students said that until Kevin joined, they found the discussion “boring,” because “we were all sitting around agreeing.” That students could not envision a way to have a rich discussion of (seemingly) like-minded individuals disturbs me, and I think it’s important as teachers and researchers we strive to provide and to study venues where students engage in discussions about issues that move more fully beyond the pro or con thinking that dominates so much of what passes for public discussion in our society (see Tannen, 1998).

But that is not the only avenue for further research. We need to study discussions where communication breaks down, as in Craig, Harris, and Smith’s (1998) MOO, in order to see how we might encourage communication between participants with such polarized views on issues of sexuality and sexual orientation. We also need to examine more fully the relationship between f2f pedagogies and online pedagogies. In addition, we need to engage in research about online discussions of sexuality that are not teacher-research studies, as are mine, Alexander’s (1997), Craig, Harris, and Smith’s (1998), Regan’s (1993), Turley’s (1994), and Warshauer’s (1995). Although teacher-researcher studies are important and valid, it would be helpful to be able to conduct discourse-based interviews with students while they are engaged in online discussions and in a context outside of teacher–student relationships. And, what I think is most important, we need to continue to research the experiences of a diverse range of students—gay, lesbian, straight, bisexual, and transgender—and we need to do so in ways that complicate their identities, recognizing the multiple, overlapping discourses shaping understandings of self and of others.

To put it plainly, there just have not been that many studies of online discussions of sexuality, particularly studies that draw not only from the researcher’s textual analyses of the posts but also from participants’ analyses of the discourse. We need this multi-perspective research to develop our knowledge of how people discuss issues of sexuality online and to develop pedagogical strategies for facilitating and theoretical frames for analyzing the online discourses and the sociocultural factors influencing those discourses. The more research-based knowledge we have upon which to draw, the more successfully we will be able to incorporate online discussions into our curricula and the more opportunities students will have to express, explore, and perhaps change their understandings of sexuality and sexual orientation.

Notes

1. In fall 2002 the general topic forums were: 9/11 and its Aftermath; Advertising and Popular Culture; Crime and Violence; Diversity and Multiculturalism; Education and Literacy; The Environment; Gender in Society and Politics; Health and Health Care; International Issues and Globalization; Moral Values in Public Life; Politics, Democracy, and the Media; Science and Technology; Sports Culture; Other Topics, Other Issues; Thoughts on How the IEDP Works; Open Forum for Students from Oklahoma City University, University of Mass, and URI.
2. Most instructors involved with the IEDP integrate the online forums into their course curricula, either through paper-based or web-based writing assignments or through class discussions and activities. For sample syllabi and assignments that instructors from a variety of courses have used, please see the IEDP faculty handbook located at <http://www.trincoll.edu/prog/iedp>. This site also contains information about how to join the faculty listserv and how to get classes enrolled in the blackboard discussion forums.

3. Initially when synchronous and asynchronous online communication forums such as Daedalus INTERCHANGE, LISTSERVs, and email were introduced in educational environments, they were heralded as egalitarian spaces where the inequities present in f2f discussions would be eliminated (or at least drastically limited) and all people—liberated from their material bodies—would be free to express themselves (Cooper & Selfe, 1990; Faigley, 1992; Kremers, 1989). However, as many online participants, researchers, and instructors were to discover, online communication is just as rife with inequities as offline communication because who we are offline much influences who we are online. A number of teachers and researchers have critically examined the early enthusiastic claims for online environments, showing that although online discussions may have some liberatory effects, the power imbalances—perpetuated discursively and felt materially—are not so easily disrupted. Just as in f2f environments, in online spaces stereotyping, othering, miscommunication, and silencing still occur because of differing subject positions influenced by gender (Hawisher & Sullivan, 1998; Selfe & Meyer, 1991; Webb, 1997), race and ethnicity (Blair, 1998; McKee, 2002; Redd & Massey, 1997; Romano, 1993), geographic location (Ma, 1996; Meagher & Castaños, 1996; Shamoon, 1998), and professional status (Johnson-Eilola & Selber, 1996).

4. One study of students’ online discussions of sexuality where violence and homophobic comments did not erupt was in Jonathan Alexander’s (1997) “Out of the closet and into the network: Sexual orientation and the computerized classroom.” Enacting a performative pedagogy influenced by social constructionism, Alexander set up INTERCHANGE sessions as role-playing activities where students (and teachers) “write [pseudonymously] from different subject positions and take on identities that are not their own and experiment with different subject positions’ discourses” (p. 212). Specifically, he described one-hour long exchange among his students where they were asked to imagine they woke up in a world where “homosexuality is the norm and heterosexuality is demonized” (p. 213). Based on his students’ comments in the exchange, Alexander concluded that through the role-playing and, importantly, through subsequent in-class analyses of the transcripts students were able to experience and to come to understand the social construction of identity and to realize “the ways in which social pressures toward normalization affect individual lives” (p. 214). Perhaps because of the structure of the role-playing activity and perhaps because Alexander was out as a gay man to his students, it does not seem that homophobic outbursts occurred. Although I am intrigued by Alexander’s use of role-playing and have utilized it at times in my classes, I also think it is important that students have extended experiences engaging in discussions like those on the IEDP where participants use their real names and where they write explicitly from within subject positions they claim and construct and are interpellated into in their daily lives.
5. After obtaining institutional review board approval from all institutions involved with this study, I mailed consent forms to IEDP colleagues to distribute to their students at the end of the semester after students’ participation in the IEDP was over—that way students knew what they had written in the forums and whether they felt comfortable giving me permission to research their posts and to conduct interviews. For the students in my class, I distributed the consent forms at the end of the semester, students turned the forms in to the writing program office, and I did not see them until after the semester was over.

6. Some research participants specifically requested that I use their real names; others requested I use pseudonyms.

7. I wanted research participants in the homosexuality thread to know my orientation because I did not want them to assume I was heterosexual. Perhaps this is yet another instance of how heteronormative thinking shapes our interactions. Because the default assumption is so often that a person is heterosexual, I wonder if I were straight if I would have felt it as necessary to identify my orientation.

8. In their IEDP thread analyses written during the semester of their participation, students addressed such questions as: “In what threads have you posted? Why?”; “Have you received any responses yet? If so, were they what you expected?”; “What are your goals for the discussion you are in? (If you are involved in many, choose one to focus on.)”; “Select four key posts in the thread on which to focus. In terms of the ongoing threaded discussion what do you see as the strengths and weaknesses of each post?”; and, “Whom do you think was the most productive and beneficial contributor to the discussion? Why?”

9. When quoting students’ work, I did not change grammar, punctuation, or spelling. I have inserted ellipses in brackets to show where I have omitted words or sentences. If any ellipses appear without brackets they were part of the students’ writing. I also add explanatory brackets when I think there may be an unclear antecedent for a pronoun. In transcribing the interviews, I used italics for words that students especially emphasized.

10. In identifying students’ sexual orientation and gender, I recognize that identities are often in flux. For example, if I had been asked my sexual orientation as a first-year college student I would have said straight but I now identify as lesbian. Another student I have taught—a student who in another year’s IEDP also gave me permission to research his online experiences—identified as a lesbian woman as a first-year student and now as a senior identifies as a straight man.

11. I was first pointed to Qualley’s (1994) chapter from reading Karen Kopelson’s (2002) essay “Dis/Integrating the Gay/Queer Binary.”

12. Even though students weren’t aware of it, they actually have discussed sexuality in almost every class they’ve taken, because of the way heterosexual relations and heteronormative thinking structure so much of how we live, think, work, and learn.

13. Six of the straight students in the thread identified themselves as friends or family members of people who were gay, and personal acquaintance with a LGBT person is one of the leading factors influencing positive attitudes toward homosexuals (Cotton-Huston & Waite, 2000, p. 117). Scott DeWitt (1997), in an article discussing gay, lesbian, and bisexual persons’ experiences on the Web, stated that “we should not forget that coming out always involves more than g/l/b [gay, lesbian, bisexual] people” and that “straight students come out as family members, friends, and coworkers of gay men, lesbians, and
bisexuals, using their reading and writing assignments in much the same way [as g/l/b students]” (p. 232).

14. Oklahoma City University students participated in the online discussion for three weeks. University of Rhode Island and University of Massachusetts–Amherst students participated for eight weeks.

15. The expression of opposing views serves an important role in discussions and other collaborative and deliberative endeavors, as a number of compositionists and rhetoricians have examined. John Trimbur (1989) argued that in order to understand and to develop ideas of consensus that are not limiting it’s necessary to “rehabilitate the notion of consensus by redefining it in relation to a rhetoric of dissensus” (p. 610). Dennis Lynch, Diana George, and Marilyn Cooper (1997) proposed a pedagogy centered around what they call “agonistic inquiry and confrontational cooperation” where students are encouraged to explore complexities that move beyond simple either/ors, enabling them to “make new connections across a range of possible disagreements” (p. 61). And, one final example, Patricia Bizzell (1992), when examining the role of contradiction in discourse communities, asserted that “we must acknowledge conflict as a frequent and perhaps inevitable concomitant of discourse community interactions” (p. 232) and that “we should accustom ourselves to dealing with contradictions, instead of seeking a theory of pedagogy that appears to abrogate them” (p. 235).

16. As a former high school teacher who taught for four years in a mid-sized Wyoming town (pop. 12,000), I’ve encountered plenty of students who wrote or said (and meant) such things as “All gays should be lined up and shot” or, who echo the homophobic Kansas pastor Fred Phelps’ absurd claim, “God hates fags.” So I am not surprised by the outbursts reported by Regan (1993), Turley (1994), and Craig et al. (1998). Nor, for that matter, was I surprised by the murder of Matthew Shepard in 1998, a murder that in some ways I think we in the educational system, both straight and LGBT, are responsible for because we often contribute (knowingly and unknowingly) to homophobia in society by not addressing and confronting issues of sexuality in our courses.

17. If the discussion had turned into name-calling and violence as described, say, by Craig et al. (1998), I would have joined in the online discussion and I would have engaged in even more of what Susan Warshauer (1995) called outside response, challenging students to support their claims with well-founded research and to re-examine their own posts for othering statements. I also would have joined in the conversation more if the majority of students were expressing homophobic opinions.

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References


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