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# Negotiating the gendered representations of sexualities through critical literacy

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# Contents


**ABSTRACT** vii

**ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS** viii

**DECLARATION** ix

***Chapter 1*: Introduction** **01**

1.1 Background 01
1.2 Research Aims 11
1.3 Research Questions 15

***Chapter 2*: Literature Review** **17**

2.1 Hegemony 17
2.2 Gender Hegemonies 29
2.3 Sex, Gender and Sexuality 41
2.4 Representation and Pedagogy 66

***Chapter 3*: Methodology** **84**

3.1 Mapping the Project 84
3.2 Research Site, Time and Participants 90
3.2.1 The Workbook 91
3.2.2 The Critical Literacy Course 93
3.2.3 Assessment and (Re) Design 98
3.3 Ethics 100
3.4 Limitations 101

***Chapter 4:* Designing the Workbook** **103**

4.1 A Rationale for the Workbook 104
4.1.1 Language 104
4.1.2 Policing and Subversion 107
4.1.3 (Re)Design 116
4.1.4 Social Impact 123
4.2 Course Materials 129
4.2.1 The Course Pack 129
4.2.2 PowerPoint 132
4.3Processes of Production 140
4.3.1 Identifying 'Real' Themes 142

4.3.2 Identifying Theoretical Concepts 149
4.3.3 Applying a Critical Pedagogical Structure 176

***Chapter 5:*** **Implementing the Workbook** **182**

5.1 The Biology versus Society Dilemma 184
5.2 The Meanings of Words: Connotation, Denotation and Multilingualism 199
5.3 A History of Policing: Students' Autobiographical Writing 209
5.4 Redesigning or Reiterating Normativity? 217
5.5 A Question of African-ness: Intersections with Racial Identity, Tradition/Culture and Religion 221
5.6 The Pedagogy of 'Coming-Out' 226

***Chapter 6*****: Assessment and Redesign** **234**

6.1 The Task 235
6.2 Design Trends in Students' Educational Materials 242
6.2.1 The Usefulness of Gender 244
6.2.2 Hyperinclusivity: Negotiating the Discourses of Sameness and Difference 265
6.2.3 The Signification Conundrum: Confusing and Conflating Identities 273
6.2.4 Focussing on the Other 278
6.2.5 The Hypothetical and the Opinionated 282
6.2.6 The Persistence of Heteronormativity 291
6.3 Positions and Dispositions: Measuring Students' Materials against their Course Evaluations 303

***Chapter 7*****: Conclusion and Recommendations: Endings and Beginnings** **316**

## FIGURES AND TABLES

Figure 1.1: *Caster Semenya in 2009 and again in 2012 (Greenfield, 2012)* 03
Figure 1.2: *Caster Semenya Annotated (Greenfield, 2012)* 04

Figure 2.1: *The Interactions between Foucault's (1984a/1992) Social Relations and Sexual Relations being Enacted through Butler's (2006) Gender Performance* 57

*Figure 2.2: The Identity Gem – Mapping Sex, Gender and Sexual Identities* 61

Figure 3.1: *Mapping the two-fold benefits of Fairclough's (1989) model for CDA* 89
Table 3.1: *Data Coding* 86
Table 3.2: *Critical Literacy Basic Course Outline* 95

Figure 4.1: *Lessons in Heterosexuality series by Arcadia_Missa Screen Shadows Group* 113
Figure 4.2: *Processes of Producing the Workbook* 141
Figure 4.3: *Phase 1 extract: Family* 144
Figure 4.4: *Phase 2 extract: Heteronormativity* 158
Figure 4.5: *The Universal Man* 164
Figure 4.6: *Sex/Gender Model* 166
Figure 4.7: *The interactions between Foucault's (1984a/1992) Social Relations and Sexual Relations being enacted through Butler's (2006) Gender Performance (Reproduced)* 167
Figure 4.8: *The Identity Gem (Draft 1)* 169
Figure 4.9: *The Identity Gem – Mapping Sex, Gender and Sexual Identities (Reproduced from Figure 2.2)* 172
Figure 4.10: *Workbook Cover* 178
Figure 4.11: *Phase 3 extract: Language* 178

Table 4.1: *Lessons in Heterosexuality* 113
Table 4.2: *Basic Tools for Visual Design* 121
Table 4.3: *Representations of Family and Intimacy* 147
Table 4.4: *Phase 2 extract: Heteronormativity (written text only)* 158
Table 4.5: *Policing and Subversion – Activity 2* 160

Figure 5.1: *Categories of Male-Female Representations* 186
Figure 5.2: *'Conventional Representation' – Example 1 – Extract from A09.1* 189
Figure 5.3: *'Conventional Representation' – Example 2 – Extract from B02.1* 190
Figure 5.4: *'Conventional Representation' – Example 3 – Extract from A10.3* 191
Figure 5.5: *Transgender Symbol* 193
Figure 5.6: *'Ambiguous Representation' – Example – Extract from A03.1* 194
Figure 5.7: *'Neutral Representation' – Example – Extract from A02.4* 195
Figure 5.8: *Argumentative 'Formula' for Conflating Racial Identity, Culture/Tradition and Religion-based Morality* 223
Table 5.1: *Criteria for Representing Sex and Gender in the Continuum of Male-Female Representations* 187
Table 5.2: *Autobiographies: Intersections with Gender* 211

Figure 6.1: Course Assignment 236
Figure 6.2: *Design Trends – A Qualitative Summary of Students' Materials* 244
Figure 6.3: *Using Gender as an Introduction to Learning 1 (extract 1.14W1A1)* 249
Figure 6.4: *Using Gender as an Introduction to Learning 2 (extract 1.22W1A1)* 250
Figure 6.5: *Moving into Deconstruction (extract 2.23W1A1-4)* 251
Figure 6.6: *Avoiding Queer Discourses – Example 1 (extract 1.23W1A1)* 255
Figure 6.7: *Avoiding Queer Discourses – Example 2 (extract 1.23W2A2)* 256
Figure 6.8: *Using Subversive Texts – Example 1 (extract 1.22W3A7)* 260
Figure 6.9: *Using Subversive Texts – Example 2.1 (extract 2.20W3A3)* 261
Figure 6.10: *Using Subversive Texts – Example 2.2 (extract 2.20W3A3)* 262

Figure 6.11: *Using Subversive Texts – Example 3.1 (extract 2.1W1A1)* 263
Figure 6.12: *Using Subversive Texts - Example 3.2 (extract 2.1W1A1)* 264
Figure 6.13: *Using Subversive Texts – Example 4 (extract 1.20W2A2)* 264
Figure 6.14: *Model for Discourses of Hyperinclusivity* 267
Figure 6.15: *Conflations of Gender and Sexuality example (extract 1.40W4A6)* 276
Figure 6.16: *The Persistence of (Hetero)normativity – example (extract 1.10W2A2)* 301
Figure 6.17: *Course Evaluation Continuum* 306

Figure 7.1: *Screenshots of my Results for the Ultimate Sexual Orientation Test* 317
Table 7.1: *A Four Step Framework for Critical Literacy* 327

## APPENDICES

Appendix 1:
Negotiating the Gendered Representations of Sexualities through Critical Literacy: THE WORKBOOK

Appendix 2:
The Workbook adapted to Microsoft PowerPoint
- A2.1: Lecture one – Language
- A2.2: Lecture two – Gender Violations
- A2.3: Lecture three – Policing
- A2.4: Lecture four – (Re)Design
- A2.5: Lecture five – Social Impact

Appendix 3:
Focussing on the Other: Data set 2.17

Appendix 4:
Three examples of students' materials
- A4.1: data set 1.18
- A4.2: data set 1.22
- A4.3: data set 1.21

# Abstract

The conflations of sex and gender, and then gender and sexual identity in representation becomes problematic in a context where homophobic discourses and violence still persist, despite South Africa's progressive constitution. Therefore, this study focuses on the implications of the conflations between sex, gender and sexuality for education.

Using literature on theories of power, sex, gender and sexuality, as well as critical literacy, I have designed a critically aware educational workbook that confronts issues of sex, gender and sexuality. Because no text is neutral, this workbook and the process of its production are critically reflected upon and scrutinised in order to understand how critically aware educational materials can be produced. The workbook is then implemented in a critical literacy course for pre-service student teachers at a university in Johannesburg. In these lectures, the workbook is used to deconstruct patriarchal and heteronormative order in the attempt to understand how effective the workbook is, and the responses that participating students give in relation to texts and activities in class. These responses are recorded through field notes and notebooks, wherein students complete in-class activities, and have revealed the complexities involved in reimagining sex, gender and sexuality as socially loaded concepts and its impact on language use in the classroom. Finally, because critical literacy advocates (re)design practice, students are given a task to design their own educational materials. These are then critically analysed in order to consider how students' design trends and 'evaluations' of the course show their changing understandings of sex, gender, sexuality and the conflations between them, or how they remain the same.

Throughout this thesis, I argue the need for critical literacy in education, across learning areas and grades. Specifically, I argue for a critical literacy that is unafraid to deal with controversial issues and difficult conversations, as well as a practice that uses subversive texts and diversity as resources for teaching and learning.

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# Declaration

I declare that this thesis is my own unaided work. It is submitted for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in Applied Language and Literacy Education, at the University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg. It has not been submitted before for any other degree or examination in any other university.

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