You Had Me at Foucault: Living Pedagogically in the Digital Age
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This essay examines the role of technology and social media in the performance of decentered heteronormative bodily and pedagogical power. Today's teaching spaces occupy traditional, physical outlets but also imaginary, online gathering places such as blogs, Twitter, and Facebook that have become extensions of our pedagogical bodies. I argue that feminism and queer theory—united by Foucault's upheaval of norms—provide critical sites to engage this discussion. Where feminism has become accessible inside and outside the classroom, resistance to queer theory persists. I share some of my own experiences with bodily ambiguity via teaching and living with social media that I hope can bridge the accessibility gap to move toward an emancipatory theory of pedagogical bodies in the digital age.

Keywords: Feminism; Queer Theory; Heteronormativity; Embodiment; Online Learning; Social Media

Foucault seemed to creep into every graduate school theory discussion and then into post-class bar talks venting about our coursework. Were our professors being lazy falling back on Foucault so much? I realized this was far from the truth when I started writing my dissertation on the performance and construction of femininity in a popular reality television program. There was no way around it—I had to incorporate Foucault. He described a political economy of the body, which rests in disciplinary practices and a "collective coercion of bodies" (Discipline 169). Through constant training and surveillance we normalize our behavior. He argued that sexuality and femininity are in fact disciplinary regimes, with long labor processes that force bodies into compliance with a sexual and/or feminine ideal. For my reality television study, the panopticon metaphor that Foucault borrowed from Bentham worked not only for the constant presence of the video camera but also for the daily pressures facing women who watched the program.
As my research continued, narratives of constructed, or faux, lesbianism surfaced, and I in turn incorporated theories of gender performance by Butler (*Gender; “Performative”*) into my literature review already brimming over with feminist theory. I started seeing critical—feminist, queer—theory everywhere, not just in popular culture but also in my daily life as a concurrent student and instructor. “I’m living theory,” I kept telling myself. Just as my research participants described being “always on” for their boyfriends, their parents, their teachers, and their coaches, I related better than I could explain at the time. I had only recently discovered my bisexuality and had perfected Burke’s strategic ambiguity in my performance as the happily single—straight—future professor. My body was and continues to be on display via textual and intertextual performances of sexuality, femininity, class, race, and gender. Indicated by the increased popularity of ratemyprofessors.com, including the chili pepper feature to indicate “hotness,” our appearances do matter to students (Ingalls). How can we use this expectation of our bodies, and in turn, our performances in our everyday pedagogy, productively rather than as a reinscription of bodily norms?

In this essay I offer an example of decentering heteronormative bodily power in our pedagogy via technology and social media. Our classroom spaces today occupy traditional, physical outlets but also imaginary, online gathering places such as course management systems, blogs, and social networks like Twitter and Facebook that have become extensions of our pedagogical bodies. How does teaching in the digital age complicate our performances, especially as feminist, queer bodies? The online spaces we increasingly occupy only encourage more performativity and identity play (Phillips and Cunningham). Despite the heteronormativity embedded in our social institutions (Yep), including those of higher learning (Warren and Davis), danah boyd has argued that digital structures disrupt former strict boundaries of identity and community (“None” 155). The constant renegotiation of our bodily performances, then, leads to more knowledge discovery thereby increasing our commitment to self and community, goals that are foundational to modern education and respond to a need to complicate our understandings of the body rather than continue down a path of restrictive bodily norms. Both feminist and queer theories engage this need, but where feminism has become more accessible inside and outside the classroom, resistance to (mis)understandings of queer theory persists. I argue that feminism and queer theory—united by Foucault—provide critical sites to engage this discussion and share some of my own experiences with social media that can bridge the accessibility gap to move toward an emancipatory theory of pedagogical bodies in the digital age.

**Performing Feminism**

Both feminists and Foucault have looked to the body as the site of power, where power is no longer a hierarchical system of control among the ruling and the ruled but a fluid, corporeal conception. Power dimensions operate often unseen in our everyday social institutions. While Foucault argued in *Discipline and Punish* that it
was not important who exercised power, he later stressed the importance of who is speaking about the body—what institutions have the power to prompt people to speak about the body. The deployment of sexuality is linked to the economy in many ways, but mainly through the body, “the body that produces and consumes” (History 107). In effect, power is a relationship, a process that is played out via the body: “power relations have an immediate hold upon it; they invest it, mark it, train it, torture it, force it to carry out tasks, to perform ceremonies, to emit signs” (Foucault, Discipline 25).

A political economy of the body rests in humans’ adhering to rigid disciplinary practices—constant training and surveillance—that normalize our behavior. The bodily disciplinary regimes Foucault spoke of, including dieting and fashion, can be both empowering and constricting. Bodies come to be governed by various codes of dress, movement, location, and physiological appearance. The proliferation of reality TV and the rise of public video cameras on busy street corners and in private institutions and places of commerce has only intensified our surveillance-based culture (see Gumpert and Drucker for a detailed discussion of privacy in the digital world), let alone the influx of status updates from Facebook and Twitter into our daily lives. Sara Mills, via Foucault, has argued that forms of self-regulation are characteristic of modern societies. In fact, as I type this paragraph I just read a tweet referencing boyd’s discussion of how what we choose to share online simultaneously constructs a very public self as well as a lesser-known private self (“Public”). This constant negotiation of the public and the private complicates our pedagogical performances, sustaining increasing pressures to perform to the expectations of our students, colleagues, administrators—and ourselves (Goffman). The disciplinary regimes (Aleman) of higher education—which demand a normalized body (McWilliam)—are indeed at play in my otherwise friendly feminist classroom.

Feminist theory and performance are inseparable. While I identify as a feminist, I actually live feminism. It’s the difference between a thing and a process. Feminist theory, like the wave metaphor of feminism or the multiple feminisms identified by many academics and activists today, must be practiced if it is even to be feminist. One cannot proclaim, “I am a feminist” unless he or she manifests the principles of feminism, such as equality, inclusion (value of all people), and autonomy (Foss and Griffin). Feminism is no longer a movement to eliminate only gender inequality. Feminism today, if it is grounded in the third-wave understanding of embracing difference, must recognize overlapping identities and power inequalities—especially the intersection of gender, race, class, and sexuality.

The notion of living theory in such a fragmented environment is often easier said than done, and it is different for each practitioner. For some, feminist principles lead to organizing at the grassroots level. Other feminists study gender inequality at the structural or social level. Still others strive to create warm, open teaching environments that encourage conversations about identity politics—and embody feminism in their everyday lives. According to Nancy Chick and Holly Hassel, “[f]eminist pedagogy produces a classroom environment of mutual respect where both teacher and all students take active, responsible, and shared roles in the learning
process” (197–98). This definition is distinguished from an understanding of critical pedagogy as a democratizing force enabled by teachers as a service to their students, which only reinforces Paulo Freire’s banking metaphor of education, where we stockpile reserves of knowledge (71–86). As a teacher, I have a responsibility to my students, my craft, and myself to help facilitate an inclusive classroom. But to live pedagogically, to live theory, this process cannot be interrupted by an off switch. Because my pedagogical body does not cease to exist outside the physical classroom walls, my feminist body is always on. How did I agree to this exhausting process?

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I realize now I was always a feminist, what most would call a third-waver given my generational place and inclusion of diversity in my feminist praxis and performance. My mother spent many years struggling emotionally and financially as a single parent. We lived in a lower income area near St. Louis, still infamous for its racial tensions and disparate race and class geography. My grandmother marched and lobbied Congress for women’s equality in the workplace, yet she was also active in our Catholic parish. These experiences would never have been able to lead me to a praxis and embodiment of feminism rooted only in gender. I spent my adolescence feeling different because of my lower socioeconomic status and knowing my white skin distinguished me from the dark-skinned boys and girls down the street. The prejudiced white community kept reminding my family how “they” were encroaching on “our neighborhood.” My grandmother received death threats for selling a home to a Black family. I also struggled with confessing my secrets and fears—aka. “sins”—to an old, costumed man behind a screen, especially since I knew I was attracted to boys and girls. How frightening for a young woman. The only Catholic teachings that resonated with me were the Gospel stories where Jesus talked about love and forgiveness. It took me years to realize I didn’t need to be Catholic to live a rewarding life. I just needed to be a feminist.

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Foucault has been both scorned and venerated by feminist theorists. According to Nancy Fraser, Jana Sawicki, and Margaret A. McLaren, Foucault’s lack of a normative framework—how power should be exercised—is problematic for not focusing enough on the power of macrostructures. Because Foucault reframed the top-down approach of state power to a pliable, multidimensional biopower (History 133–59), structuralists have had a hard time reconciling his ideas with the feminist goals of improving opportunities for women and other marginalized groups. For example, Caroline Ramazanoglu has argued that Foucault’s idea that power is everywhere encourages scholars to overlook systems of patriarchy and classism. Ramazanoglu and Janet Holland argued that a persistent point of contention between feminists and Foucault involves the intersection of material life and social life—how docile bodies become materially embodied—and how this contradicts feminism’s goal:

[y]oung women’s accounts of their sexuality can be interpreted as supporting the view that men have appropriated desire, and that sexuality is, in variable ways, both
socially and materially embodied. There is a complex interaction between grounded embodiment, the discourses of sexuality and institutionalised (sic) power . . . . Women’s sexuality is contradictory in both contesting men’s power, and contributing to its continued success, through women constituting themselves as acceptably feminine. (259–60)

Their discussion adds fuel to the argument that Foucault lacks a normative stance—he accepts societal restrictions but insists that individuals can alter these power restrictions. According to Ramazanoglu and Holland, this is problematic in that a “whole range of sexual practices is socially produced in the interests of men” (260).

Despite the challenges posed here, feminists have also been quick to incorporate Foucault in their work. McLaren has encouraged feminists to embrace Foucault for his account of social norms. She recognized the damage norms could do “through the process of marginalization and exclusion of those who do not conform to them” (228). Butler appears to agree:

[i]f we understand the norms by which we are obliged to recognize ourselves and others as those that work upon us, to which we must submit, then submission is one part of a social process by which recognizability is achieved. (Bodies 193)

Butler reminds us that Foucault’s attention to sex and power allows discussion of sex and desire at borders not often crossed: “[t]he question that Foucault opens, though, is how desire might become produced beyond the norms of recognition, even as it makes a new demand for recognition” (193). It is likely meaning will shift according to who is speaking about the body and desire but also according to the social, political, and economic struggles surrounding the speakers and speech situation. Higher education is ripe with sexual energy and discussion and provides a perfect example to study issues of bodies and power. And, as Donna Haraway has driven home, communication technologies continue to recraft bodies (164). The hybrid technology involved in the production and consumption of bodies in the modern university is no exception.

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When I began studying gender as an undergrad, I knew I had found my calling. I finally had the lexicon to explain my values and concerns. Our readings helped explain the differences in gender communication more than the power structures that led to the privileging of certain gendered communication styles in society, but that didn’t matter. At the time I was also enrolled in a communication and conflict class. It did not take long to link the gender and conflict concepts into what I know now as feminism. By the next year, I was writing my first feminist criticism of a popular television program for a critical media studies course.

I will never forget the mentor who politely discouraged me early in my graduate career from becoming “the feminist professor.” Here I stood before this man I had admired—and still do—who brought gender issues into his media studies classroom in a way I have never seen a male professor do before or since, feeling simultaneously crushed and emboldened. I wanted to be the feminist professor, the woman who helped her students
at least become comfortable with feminism—if not into practicing feminists themselves—and who also learned more from my students than I could actually teach them. I knew my mentor meant well, in that he was concerned about my hiring prospects. I politely thanked him for the advice but continued in the direction I knew my heart always desired. Since then I continue to reflect on my student life to inspire my performance of faculty life. Just as much of what I study—mostly popular culture and media—stems from a desire to connect to my students’ interests, I also try not to lose sight of what it is like for students today to find examples in their everyday lives from their classroom experiences as they enact their own performances of theory.

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It is this feminist principle of inclusion—or connection—that motivates and challenges me to incorporate innovative learning technologies, including online and hybrid classroom spaces, as a major component of my pedagogical performance. And while my classroom blogs, Twitter, assignments, and the like are not technically enfleshed parts of my being, they are extensions of my pedagogical mind and body (McLuhan). The types of projects I assign are in part determined by the technological means by which my students become agents of their own education. For example, via Twitter, students suggest topics for critical theory dissection that at times have replaced my planned discussion items for the day. On other occasions I have generated discussion topics from students’ blog posts. Some of my experiences with using blogs to complement, and sometimes replace, face-to-face learning, have helped me appreciate these spaces where students who might not have otherwise spoken up take the opportunity to do so. According to Chick and Hassel, online learning encourages minority voices, another tenet of feminism. Some education scholars have argued that online learning spaces have already become commodified, conduits of cultural imperialism (Ess; McCormick), but my experiences with hybrid learning approaches to date have been received mostly positively, which I expand on in the next section.

Feminism on the Blogs

When I first taught the gender class, in a summer session, only one male was on the roster. However, he never showed up. I imagine he may have approached the classroom door and saw fifteen women and quietly headed for the registrar to withdraw. I have only had a few men enrolled in my fall and spring sessions of thirty students. For someone who studies and appreciates diverse identities, I sometimes find it difficult to lead an honest, open discussion of gender when my male students always already feel silenced. On the flipside, even with just a few men present, many of the women students deal with their own pressures to conform to a certain expectation of gender roles and desires. Although I regretted not having a male perspective in that summer class, I was amazed at the level of discussion the women attained without that gendered normative pressure.
To further contextualize this dilemma—I call it such because I struggle regularly to find ways to diversify the conversation—I will elaborate on an activity I rely on to gauge my students’ understanding of feminism but also to spark debate early in the semester. Prior to our discussion of multiple feminisms and the media’s limited representation of feminism, I ask for a show of hands of how many students identify as feminists. I usually only get a few female hands, but in my summer class, nearly all of the women raised their hands. At the end of the term I ask the question again and usually have a few more recruits—although that is never my goal.

So when I knew I would be teaching gender online for the first time (I used a blog for a handful of discussion activities in a previous semester just to try the technology out), I kept this unspoken gendered pressure in mind when designing blog prompts. On one hand, I was tasked with the challenge of teaching communication concepts without the benefit of face-to-face interaction to gauge understanding or interest. On the other hand, this prep allowed me to try something fresh for comparison. The way the blog technology I use is designed gives students the option of uploading a picture or using a modified version of their names. Many used their real names and uploaded profile pictures, but some used a first initial and last name and provided no picture. Others even created unique screen names not connected to their student identity. Of course, I knew each of their blog names so that I could grade their posts but did not use their real names, nor reference their gender in my public blog responses.

As such, unless these “genderless” students explicitly referenced their gender in their blog replies—with references such as, “as a woman,” or “as a son,” others were left to play a gender guessing game. I found that this “not knowing” frustrated a number of students but not at the risk of restraining their own responses. In fact, the online course design ultimately proved to be a rewarding experience for most students in that at the end of the term many told me they felt more comfortable sharing their opinions in a way they had not before in physical classrooms. To clarify, five men and twenty women participated in the summer online class. However, for the first time I had two men and most of the women self-identify as feminists on the first go around.

The experience did, of course, have its drawbacks, the most telling of which a male student expressed to me at the end of the term. In the education unit of the course we discussed preferred gendered learning styles. This student pointed out to me that the blog discussion format was very conducive to the textbook description of women’s preferred mode of collaborative classroom interaction. I sympathize with the student and will try to incorporate some activities to accommodate other learning styles next time around, but for now I cannot deny that all students—male and female—shared more and built more conversation from others’ ideas than I have witnessed before in a physical classroom.

Although I do not advocate social media and virtual space for every classroom, I would encourage other educators to try some of the technologies. Students often hesitate to be open about their experiences and opinions of polarizing topics such as gender and feminism (Maher and Hoon). In that regard, I suggest trying a blog or at least a discussion forum for courses that cover controversial social and political
topics. I want to be clear that I am not trying to relegate the feminist, nor the queer, classroom to an unseen space. However, many scholars have argued how online spaces, for a number of reasons, including a flexible learning environment (Rhode), agentic-centered learning (Turpin), and community-centered instruction (Leslie and Murpy), enhance more traditional pedagogies. Moreover, Gary L. Anderson has discussed the benefits of classroom blogging specifically, in that increased student control over the learning process leads to increased social capital and a greater feeling of inclusiveness.

These findings are important for performance theory in that we as educators should work to be mindful of student engagement in our embodied pedagogy, in that the virtual classroom is an extension of our teacherly bodies. And although a 2010 Pew study actually showed a decrease in blogging by the millennial generation, ninety-three percent of teens and young adults spend time online, with a marked increase in social network participation (Lenhart et al.). Because our students thrive in online environments, why not incorporate these elements into our pedagogical performances? To extend the conversation, I move now from blogs and feminist performance to social networking and queer performance.

Performing Queerness

Just as second-wave feminism reminds my third-wave feminist self that I would not likely be able to perform feminism in the classroom if not for my foremothers, my Web 2.0 queer self sometimes needs reminding that it wasn’t always so easy. It wasn’t always so easy to maintain an ambiguous sexual identity. The suffocating space of the closet made ambiguity a prison. It wasn’t always so easy to publicly display a queer political identity. How political are rainbow triangle stickers in our offices really when students, but especially colleagues, are too nervous or afraid to begin that conversation? It wasn’t always so easy to unite gay, bi, trans, and straight into a common cause of queer equality.

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A transformational online landscape—preceded by overwhelming changes in the televisual and mainstream popular culture landscapes and more slow-going transformations in the legal and social realms—has helped reshape queer life in the twenty-first century. We began displaying our relationship statuses on MySpace and Facebook. Not all of us choose to share our specific relational attachments—more so out of preventing future “it’s complicated” social network embarrassments—but those in the queer community who led the way for proudly displaying same-sex bliss on the Web may be just as important as the first same-sex couples to risk holding hands or kissing in public. However, it is more than the literal announcement of a relationship that demonstrates the continuing decay of bodily prejudice on the Web. We can share pictures, comment on others’ pictures, and what is most helpful for my personal and professional life—link to stories and commentaries on queer issues. Facebook and Twitter are rapidly replacing older, less participatory forms of news. Not only can we post links on our profiles and on friends’ walls, we can also have
conversations about those issues. What’s more, we can do so without fear of physical harm. The privacy settings on social network sites allow us to limit access to our links, photos, and other profile information. As such, we can preclude the emotional pain of homophobic slurs on our walls.

But here rests a problem. If I am advocating social network sites as a means to eliminating prejudice through inclusion and communication, then how can I also encourage queer people to limit these interactions to specific friends and networks? The Web affords us the flexibility of coming out quietly or living loudly and everything in between. We have different histories and personalities, so it makes sense that some of us are more comfortable toeing the fully out line, whereas others are happily public advocates. Larry Gross contended that any increased queer use of online space helps equalize participation in specific communities.

As we continue to shift more of our lives online, the queer fight to eliminate bodily prejudice will have to transform as well. Over the years, we have gained ground and rounded out many one-note representations of queer life in film and television. We have also fought hard for equality in laws and government policies. In the space and place of social media and new technologies, the queer community has more resources than ever to advocate for change. One example is the Amazon Fail from April 2009, when millions of queer-themed books—as well as some nonqueer titles devoted to unconventional sexual subjects—disappeared from Amazon’s online search results. Despite it being a holiday weekend—Easter no less—the social network community quickly let Amazon know how incredibly obtuse, insensitive, and, frankly, bigoted, this move was. Links on Facebook, Twitter, Digg, and many blogs spread calling for an Amazon boycott. Amazon representatives apologized for what they called an innocent “algorithm glitch” and relisted the titles (“Amazon Under Fire”).

Now, as much as I would like to credit the queer community for this rapid response, it took a joint effort of individuals that went beyond sexual identity markers. The point is that the Web, social media especially, makes it easier than ever to respond to bodily prejudice. Further, online media are not consumed in isolation (Karl). Our social media use constitutes “part of a broader set of everyday technopractices and information and communication technologies” (Karl 46). We can organize nationwide protests against civil rights infringements. We can pass along the Human Rights Campaign’s list of queer-friendly corporations. We can sign online petitions to remind President Obama of some of his campaign promises to the queer community. Or, we can display our MySpace sexual orientation as lesbian. However we choose to perform our sexual and political bodies, it is important to recognize that these performances cross traditional classroom boundaries. According to Lisa Jean Moore, we cannot always choose when we want to “deploy or erase our body for educational purposes” (105). Especially as we become ever more connected via social media, our embodied performances cross spatial and technological boundaries.

The ever-increasing connections unite our teaching and living spaces into vast technomediated networks that can help us better theorize our everyday bodies. Elizabeth Grosz looked to the city as the body’s home. She called the city the “site for the body’s cultural saturation” (Space 108). A city is a complex, interactive network
that brings together social activities that might otherwise be unrelated through architecture, geography, and civic relations. The city brings together economic flows, political organization, interpersonal, familial and extrafamilial social relations, as well as the aesthetic and economic organization of space and place. By situating our educational institutions, hybrid classrooms, and online social networks as cities, we can explain how pedagogical bodies operate as disciplined sites of power and pleasure, interconnected to larger cultural, political, and economic motivations. Indeed, Ellen Cronan Rose argued that “knowledge is a commodity that can be packaged and delivered” (144). I hope that digital pedagogy of the sort I have described so far complicates our understanding of pedagogical bodies as packaged knowledge vessels since a patriarchal, commodity approach does not advance critical pedagogy.

Instead, we need to channel lived experience and encourage active knowledge production, theorized by Henry Giroux as the everyday classroom. Diana L. Gustafson, drawing from Patricia Lather, has explained how embodied learning, via self-reflexivity, challenges hegemonic knowledge structures. This leads to recognition of the political power of education. The body becomes the site for learning and political enlightenment. Sherry B. Shapiro went even further to argue that the body should be the curriculum. However, in the digital age and in a political climate that does not recognize all bodies as legitimate (Butler, Gender Trouble; Morris), how can pedagogical bodies remain relevant sites of learning and engagement? As Nancy Sorkin Rabinowitz has asked, “who gets to teach?” (187). Where does feminist, queer pedagogy, but moreover, a queer feminist, nontenured assistant professor fit into this bodily knowledge community?

It seems so average now, but my investigation of gender, race, and class in a single seminar paper as an undergraduate student set the foundation for how I continue to embody feminism and queer studies today. Sharing my feminist agenda in the classroom invites resistance from some students at first, until they recognize that the media has severely limited our popular understandings of feminism, as well as queer life. Even then I realize not all of my students will embrace an understanding of feminism as acceptance and inclusion of different perspectives, including queer identities. Moreover, I know this is the case with other academic feminists who still privilege gender as a foundation. Scholars have argued for a continued move toward intersectionality in feminist research. Leslie McCall defined the complex approach as “the relationships among multiple dimensions and modalities of social relations and subject formations” (1771). Intersectionality sees identity markers as mutually constitutive (Shields) and interdependent, in that our identities (man/woman, straight/queer, Black/White, middle-class/working-class) must be understood as dependent on the relationship of marginalities and privilege (Crenshaw). Postcolonial feminists have been instrumental in establishing voice and subjectivity in studies of identity and power (Anzaldúa), which as educators we need to continue to explore. For example, as a bisexual White woman in academia I experience the world through both the privileged space of Whiteness and a middle-class existence but through the
more complicated, marginalized spaces of sexuality and gender, as well as my childhood experiences of a lower income household.

This simultaneous embodied privilege and marginalization calls for a similarly hybrid performance of my feminist, queer self. For example, if I want feminism to appear approachable, I must make distinct choices about what and how to disclose, for as Kyoko Kishimoto and Mumbi Mwangi have argued, disclosure makes us vulnerable. The constant scrutiny of our various audiences—students, co-workers, administration, parents—leads to unrest. However, this discomfort can actually be productive. By discussing politically and emotionally charged material, such as the experiences of people on the margins, our performances become more authentic, leading to a “transformative” classroom (Kishimoto and Mwangi 98). I have found that technology is helpful in this transformation.

Making Critical Choices about Queer Pedagogy

I recognized my bisexual identity later in my twenties, after I moved away from home where my high school and college friends knew me as incredibly straight. So I appreciate Facebook’s opportunity to let me come out quietly, though still proudly. This is also where I have to appreciate the hardships that my queer brothers and sisters fought before me. Where they had to painstakingly come out over and over—if they came out at all—I am able to not have to have the same conversation each time I encounter an old—or new—acquaintance. Via my political, pedagogical performance in the hybrid space of online social media, my body speaks ambiguously for me.

My online social network friends can assume what they want from my public profile. Am I a lesbian? Straight? Bi? It doesn’t really matter. In the Web 2.0 landscape, for me at least, it’s not so much about performing a personal identity as it is about performing public queer advocacy as a politically embodied pedagogy, for we do not cease teaching when we step outside the classroom, especially those of us who also teach digitally. Queers and allies can unite online in a common cause of embodied social justice. Maybe that conservative Christian I was friends with in high school who “friended” me last year on Facebook will scroll through my profile and link to one of the news stories about positive images of gays and lesbians in the media and reconsider some of his understandings about queer life. Who knows?

Although I do not actively solicit my students as members of my socially mediated circle, I do accept their friend requests and do not block them from following me on Twitter. Sometimes I choose to restrict them—as well as my work colleagues—on Facebook from certain private life info and images for the reasons mentioned previously, but I do not hesitate to perform my progressive, feminist, queer self when posting links and notes online. The process is similar to my classroom demeanor discussing current events as they relate to critical, feminist, and/or queer theories. The difference on the Web is the space—and time—it allows for thoughtful, invited, conversation. I so desperately want to cling to my ivory tower of academic freedom,
but I recognize the current understanding of the corporate model of higher education (Giroux and Myrsiades) that pressures faculty to perform normatively and efficiently. If the Web allows us the space for our students—some of them closeted and seeking role models or at least just someone to talk to (Wright)—away from university hallways and Web servers to send us a Facebook message or tweet that might invite a much-needed conversation, then I’m not sure why more academics have not embraced the technology for this means.

To be clear, Foucault’s disciplinary practices do creep up on me. I teach in the south after all. My state does not protect sexual identity. My institution may have passed a sexual identity nondiscrimination policy a few years ago, but does my nontenured junior professor self really want to be the first to test it? In a word, no. I do not discuss my sexual identity in the classroom, nor to my colleagues. For me this choice stems out of professionalism and the desire to be more than a bisexual thirty-something in a committed opposite-sex relationship. It is much more interesting to discuss President Obama or the Fox network’s science-fiction drama Fringe than what plants my boyfriend and I picked out at the garden store or what woman we thought was cute at the Nordstrom counter. But I would be lying if I did not admit that my public identity in the physical space of the university excludes important parts of my self out of fear of alienating conservative students and administrators.

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Why then do I continue to study what I study, with words like bi and queer in my conference presentations and publications? Perhaps I will struggle with CV choices come tenure time. Why do I tweet links to contact our congressional leaders to abolish “Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell” and post links on Facebook to march for queer equality? My understanding of the right to academic freedom—on the printed page and online at least—may be delusional. However, I am not quite ready to announce my queerness in class or at the Provost’s next ice-cream social. Is this an act of queer self-loathing? Am I enjoying the privilege of heterosexual performance? I hope not.

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Just as other bisexuals and even straight couples have decided not to marry as long as gays are not accepted into the marriage institution, I do not see it necessary to flaunt my straight-seeming relationship when so many of my queer counterparts are still silenced. Moreover, as I mentioned just a moment ago, we are more than the sum of our intimate relationships. So how does this relate back to Facebook and other social networks? By choosing to embody Burke’s strategic ambiguity both in the classroom and online—through the absence of direct sexual identity disclosure and the presence of a myriad of links supporting queer political advocacy—I hope my performance invites a dialogue of queer acceptance and appreciation. If and when my students were to ask me outright about my relationship status or sexual identity, my hybrid body might already have outed me. This textual production (O’Brien) is an active process toward community building via a “masquerade” of gender online (Danet
129). As educators we should embrace these ambiguous spaces as embodied sites of learning and perhaps even modeling (Wright). For, according to Kate Bornstein, we are oblivious to gender until confronted by ambiguity, what Foucault and others have discussed as fluidity.

Foucault’s discussion of fluid identities and biopower has been furthered by feminist philosopher Grosz. Grosz challenged established notions of power by calling for a reconfiguration of the body (Volatile vii). An unstable, continuous model of sexuality that looks at various levels and forms of sexuality, “embodied subjectivity” (22), helps avoid a rhetoric that assumes a mind/body split. Bodies and likewise identities are volatile sites of power and struggle whereby only one or a few dominating perspectives prevail. The body and identity are certainly not one and the same, but understanding the volatile nature of the body helps us to understand the fluid nature of identity, and in turn our performances of identities and bodies via technology and social media forms. Our bodily performances are already socially coded through clothing, jewelry, makeup, cars, living spaces, and other markings. Grosz explained a social inscription of bodies that produce particular objects, where bodies speak without talking as they become encoded with and as signs: “[t]hey [bodies] speak social codes. They become intextuated, narrativized; simultaneously, social codes, laws, norms and ideals become incarnated” (Space 35). Digital technologies help us move away from particular norms of gender, sexuality, class, race, and other identity markers in ways that traditional pedagogy has failed us. Grosz identified a “civilized” (Space 139) body as grounded in utility and fragmented, purchasable commodities. This is useful in that we can investigate the body as an entity in itself, wrapped around and intertwined in the political and social struggles of the day, with the hybrid classroom the present site of cultural resistance.

**Pedagogical Performativity in the Digital Age**

In the digital age, then, we are always ON. Teachers’ bodies, like other service and knowledge professions, cannot simply leave our work at the office. This acknowledgment can either increase the disciplinary pressures on which Foucault theorized, or we can embody the productive forces of this decentered power source. By enfleshing a theoretically, politically motivated body inside a network of socially mediated forms, we can respond to the immense pressures of normalized bodies in institutions of higher education. As evidenced by my students’ sometimes ambiguous bodily performances on the gender blogs, although not all students were comfortable with the unknown, bodily ambiguity can be a helpful pedagogical praxis. The feminist classroom, the queered classroom, becomes united by this principle of ambiguity. Foucault’s disciplinary regimes become more open and malleable and facilitate thoughtful, necessary conversations about bodies in the digital age.

My own contradictory approach to performing my feminist, queer body inside and outside the classroom is but one example. More explorations of feminist and queer performance in higher education are necessary to advance our understanding of pedagogical performativity as well as living pedagogically. bell hooks has already
argued for academics to find ways to make feminism more accessible to our students. We need to extend this accessibility to queer theory and heteronormativity. One approach might be by queering the classroom via embodied pedagogy. In a twist of the typical critical pedagogical approach to reflexivity, Mimi Orner has called on educators to move beyond encouraging students to share their experiences by speaking up ourselves. For a truly empowered, embodied pedagogy, teachers need to be accountable for our own bodies and voices. However, we also need to recognize that talking, being reflexive, is not enough. I argue that we need to infuse our pedagogy with an impassioned approach to our own bodies. Through what Bryant K. Alexander has called “geographies of learning” (58), we might continue to disrupt normative pressures on our bodies and those of our students via social media. This approach responds to what Henry Jenkins has argued is important to twenty-first-century learners—that educators seek to engage students beyond the physical limits of the classroom walls. Even nonassigned use of Facebook, Twitter, and blogs by students or nonpromotion and tenure-based use of these social media forms by faculty constitute a larger network of performative pedagogy that my own students appear to appreciate.

Given the transformation in education and communication in response to digital technologies that break down barriers between knowledge creation and consumption, pedagogical performativity is increasingly transparent and malleable. Just as identity is not stable but rather a flexible performance (Morris), queer and feminist pedagogy exist in constantly shifting terrain. How do our pedagogical performances complicate how we understand and relate to our students and our classroom material? As more of us continue to increase our online performances via Twitter, Facebook, and blogs, where identities of gender, race, sexuality, and, to a lesser extent, class, appear to be more diverse than in any other media form, what role can living pedagogically play? My experiences shared here are just part of a larger fabric of embodied pedagogy. Queer, feminist, straight, ethnic minority, or otherwise, as educators we should embrace our bodies as “infectious,” a concept Patrick Palmer strategically intended to disrupt the historically specific connotations of the queer body.

I recognize that while universities promote diversity in their mission statements and recruitment materials, many of us, for now at least, teach among mostly homogeneous populations (Brown, Hinton, and Howard-Hamilton). However, although the student body may appear visually to be similar in ethnic and economic background, when we take the time to hear our students’ voices, provoked by our own bodily voices through innovative means provided by social media, it may surprise us just how diverse the collective body of the pedagogical community really is. Future studies of embodied pedagogy might include examples of student response to the practices I have described in my own voice here. Diverse voices lead to richer understandings and experiences (Brown et al.), which is why I am part of the Twitter and social media faithful. More than ever I am now living feminist and queer theory as a teacher, participating in a conversation with my students. So far, I have learned that, in most cases, this online space appears to have bolstered student confidence offline as contributing members of a knowledge community. Tina S. Kazan argued for
the importance of how we construct our online selves so that we might also better understand our offline selves.

In conclusion, these online bodies constitute a community that “spills out” (Smith and Kollock 19) into our offline community. Moreover, Web-based classrooms demand flexible boundaries (Turpin), which can spark understandings and appreciation of flexible norms. To be sure, through this “pedagogy of production” (Kazan 263), we still operate within a particular heteronormative system (Warren and Davis). The examples I have shared here speak to a particular identity experience—one of a white, middle-class bisexual trying to cultivate a space for more flexible understandings of sexuality and gender. Issues of race and class need to be further explored in future projects, as these sometimes divisive cultural markers implicate the success of the pedagogical body as a theoretical framework. While my queer body may still be ambiguous, my white body is clearly visible. Issues of the raced body, then, still need to be interrogated. Some of us have more at stake in our bodily performances, especially considering that women and minority faculty are “most inscribed” by our bodies compared to others (Fisanick 328). To say that Foucault, Butler, Grosz, or the work of any other critical theorist can erase norms toward a truly liberatory pedagogy is a fantasy. However, the lived experiences of teachers, students, and other occupants of the technobody (McWilliam and Palmer 165) of higher education provide a creative energy of bodies in performance (Niu Wilcox 107) that can begin to question norms, influence change (Rheingold) and encourage bodily pliability. In sum, an awareness of living pedagogically, informed by an embodiment of Foucault’s power/knowledge systems, provides necessary hope in the much-maligned American education system.

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