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CTL Fellows Program
2018-2019

Final Report

Introduction:

My project for the 2018-2019 session of the CTL Fellows program began rather ambitiously: my first objective was to create a project for my “RHET 320: Queer Rhetoric” course, which would challenge students to develop an oral history podcast series by interviewing community members about LGBTQ life in Hartford. Next, I planned to write about this teaching experience and submit an article manuscript about how a community engagement project was an inherently queer act. From the start, then, the project was bifurcated along two goals, the first pedagogical and the second theoretical. Naively, I figured there would be bumps in the road, but overall the groundwork was laid for a smooth, successful community partnership and research project. However, the actual journey proved much different. In this final report, I will lay out the scope of my project, detail the community partnerships I’ve developed, reflect on the lessons learned over the year, propose future improvements, and conclude with a reflection about queer rhetoric and pedagogy.

Scope of the Project:

Originally, I envisioned the first part of the project– the creation of the podcast– as a 7 week unit at the end of the semester. Students would progress through various scaffolded stages that would familiarize them with the genre of podcast narratives broadly speaking, walk them through multiple revisions of an interview script, and finally provide hands-on training with

recording and editing. Thus, the unit was designed with the more abstract, theoretical concepts at the beginning and concluded with the concrete, practical skills at the end. Along the way, I would explain how each scaffolded stage built upon the previous one, allowing students to bridge the theoretical and the practical. To convey the scope of the project, I've included the breakdown of the last seven weeks of the semester. Deviations and disruptions to this plan will be covered in the "Lessons Learned" section.

Course Sequence

Week 1: Introduction to Genre & Podcasts

- Students learn the about the concept of genre
- Students will then learn to recognize different genres of podcasts & identify their component parts.
 - Worksheet:
<https://static01.nyt.com/files/2018/learning/PodcastListeningActivityLN.pdf>
- Outcome: Students write a rhetorical analysis of a podcast of their choosing

Week 2: Introduction to Audio Editing

- Students will gather pieces for a 5 min podcast:
 - In class workshop: Identify a prompt, create a script, find a sound clip
 - Learn Audacity and stitch together pieces of a podcast
 - Write cover letter explaining challenges, successes

Week 3: The Composition of Narrative Podcasts

- Students will explore one genre of podcasts in more detail (narrative podcasts)
- Students will identify the features of a narrative podcast and explain how these work together in to create a story
 - Worksheet:
<https://static01.nyt.com/files/2018/learning/EffectiveStorytellingLN.pdf>

Week 4: Podcast Peer Review & Interview

- Students will use narrative worksheet to analyze one another's 5 minute podcasts, make recommendations
- Students will learn about interview practices and develop questions

- Students will practice interviewing and recording one another

Week 5: Practice Interview Podcast

- In-Class Workshops: Students write script and turn one another's interviews into 5-10 min podcasts

Week 6: Community Visit & Podcast Peer Review

- Students peer review one another's podcasts
- Students visit Chez Est in Hartford for Pink Drink Club night

Week 7: Creating Podcasts

- In Class Workshop: Students make podcasts

Community Partner Profiles

Before continuing to the “lessons learned,” I want to profile the two community partners mentioned in the course sequence above. Each of these partners have their own interests as stakeholders, while also mutually benefiting from the project.

Chez Est- Hartford, CT

The oldest “gay” bar in operation in Hartford CT, *Chez Est* has been serving the LGBTQ community for over 40 years. While the establishment traditionally caters to a mostly white male population, the new owners, John & Luis Pepe, have recently instituted new subcultural nights in order to create a safe and welcoming space for the entire community. These include WüF and BEER BASH (bear & otter community), ChezQueen, RPDR viewing night, Let's Have Kiki (drag and trans community), Girl Twirl (Lesbian community), and Pink Drink Club (middle-age to senior community). Currently, the owner is also looking for more resources and other opportunities beyond bar nights to connect with the community.

Pink Drink Club

Run by Jack Woodin, the Pink Drink Club began as a monthly, informal gathering of friends in different bars across Hartford. This group originally employed guerilla gay bar tactics, a queer social practice in which members of the LGBTQ community, who typically do not have a local LGBTQ establishment, temporarily transform a space into gay bar by coordinating and taking over a designated venue. However, as attendance grew over time to include 75-100 attendees, the needs of the group expanded as well. So, the Chez Est has recently begun hosting the club by providing food and a home venue. The Pink Drink Club is the only social organization created by and for a population of middle-age to senior LGBTQ citizens in the Hartford area.

Mutual Benefits of the Project

Creating an oral history archive and a podcast channel will further help the Chez Est establish its legitimacy as a historic institution in Hartford. This archive could serve as a basis for the bar to apply for and be recognized as a historical site in Hartford. By interviewing LGBTQ seniors about their lives and the challenges they currently face, I'm hoping to create an impetus to begin a local chapter of SAGE, an advocacy group that helps LGBTQ elderly find housing, obtain medical care, and seek legal protections. The Pink Drink Club itself thrives off informal membership and local publicity. This project will bring awareness to the club, hopefully extending its good reputation and increasing its membership.

Lessons Learned

Looking back at the scope of my undertaking—two community partners, a ton of new skills that I was learning and then immediately teaching to my students, two different software programs as well as recording technologies— I should've seen that several dead ends, potholes, and speed bumps that would inevitably arise on my journey. And yet, amidst the chaos, there were smooth stretches, moments of fun, and even more surprising opportunities for my students to teach me. Below, I discuss the struggles and the victories, as well as the lessons learned from each and how they impact the future of the project.

The Struggles & Their Lessons

One of the biggest challenges I faced was in creating the interview script. This portion of the project took a lot more time than expected. By the time students sat down to write out interview questions, they had learned a good amount about LGBTQ history, activist movements, and key legal and political debates. Through their in-class discussions and essays, I could tell students were grappling with these ideas and connecting to the history. However, when it came time to implement that knowledge and actually create questions, the class as a whole struggled. As a writing teacher, I knew one possible solution: revision. The script went through several iterations, peer review sessions, testing, and collaborative re-writing. This caused me to push our interviews back several weeks and also continue the script into another unit. As a result, a lot of my assignments overlapped.

However, in struggling through the script, I learned several important lessons. First, I quickly realized that my students were struggling because they wanted to do so well. However,

the trouble came when trying to implement knowledge and understanding that they were still earnestly working through in their own minds. What I've realized is that interview questions assume a confidence and openness that my students didn't quite feel yet. To be a good interviewer, one has to feel prepared, like they've done their research and know the ins-and-outs of their own questions. My students were definitely on their way, but hadn't arrived at that subject position yet. In the future, I think I would harness this energy differently. I'd invite community members into the drafting sessions, so that students could learn that this project involves mutual learning and collaboration. In other words, everyone involved is feeling out their role, figuring out how to ask and answer questions. Having more collaborative writing sessions with the students and community members would help mitigate the town and gown split between Trinity and its community stakeholders.

Another important struggle I encountered was how to scaffold the technical skills. As the course sequence illustrates, I move from podcasts as a literary genre of sorts to the more technical skills of production. Ideologically, I thought it made sense to build a foundation on the more abstract concepts of storytelling, so students would have a theoretical context for situating the hands-on work. Nonetheless, with the script taking so long, and pushing back the production lesson, I don't think the handshake between theory and practice happened as I had imagined. The lessons on genre and narrative appeared like part of one unit, while the production seemed like it belonged in another.

So, to fix this issue, I first toyed around with reversing the scaffold, so that the technical skills are up front and the more abstract, storytelling concepts are at the end. Yet, this decision

would still risk creating two separate poles, one practical and one theoretical. When I teach the course again in a year, I think that I will weave these two together. Given that the course meets twice a week, one class could be dedicated to a production workshop. The next can provide theoretical reflection on the skills. Now that my knowledge of podcasting and sound engineering is growing, I feel more comfortable leading the students through the workshops and then pausing to lead a metacognitive reflection on the process itself.

The Victories & Their Lessons

It is important to note that the struggles I've identified above actually weren't registered by the students. I have the benefit of writing this report after receiving my teaching evals. The overwhelming majority of students commented that they wouldn't change anything about the course and that they learned a lot about LGBTQ history, politics, etc. A few went so far as to say they wished the podcast unit could've been longer and that we could've interviewed more participants. I was pleasantly shocked by this assessment. I thought the podcast unit dragged on too long, but these students clearly wanted more production. Even more, the desire for more interviews reveals a deeper investment in the community. At least one student recommended us leaving the classroom to conduct interviews in community spaces. From these reviews, I've learned to trust my instincts as a teacher. I was very nervous about basing a course around an LGBTQ project, particular given the hostile environment the Trump administration has created for this population. Perhaps my caution was unwarranted and the project should've been even more community based. My pipeline dream for this partnership is to host a social event on Trinity's campus for the Pink Drink Club and record participants in another room. It is still going to be some time before I can host this event. The script must be improved for clarity and

streamlined. Also, my own skills of recording and editing a podcast must be strengthened before I can train a whole team of interviewers. However, the excitement and interest registered on the teaching evals suggests that this goal is achievable.

Another important victory resulted from the students own technological know-how and community spirit. While I acknowledge that I actively worked to build a team dynamic into the course, the students took this to a whole new level. Most of my students were from the Trinity College football team. So, the biggest challenge was to help this group of allies build connections with the other students. By mixing up the students into groups and constantly reforming these groups through a variety of collaborative projects, I saw the walls of social division break down. This became most apparent with the podcast assignment. During our production workshops, students helped one another with the podcasting software. Some became resident experts on different facets of the program and taught their classmates what they knew. As a result, the finished products exceeded my expectations greatly. Students learned to incorporate music and fade their own voiceover in and out of the podcast. Their phrasing and tones were professional and engaging. When we played their examples in class, students would laugh, clap, and appreciate one another's work. This camaraderie was achieved through their ownership of the project. What I've learned, then, is that I don't have to be the expert in the room. Sometimes, stepping back and letting the students run portions of the class can build respect for me, each other, and the learning process. During these moments, the classroom truly felt student centered.

Overall, I am happy with the initial run of the project. In summer of 2019, I have two research students who will help continue the work begun in my Queer Rhetoric course. Together, we are revising the scripts, creating release forms, re-recording and editing Jack Woodin's interview, finding additional participants, and recording more oral histories.

Conclusion: Reflections of Queer Rhetoric

At this point, I have a much fuller understanding of the community partners, the scope of the project, and the valuable insights I've gained over the course of the semester. Yet, one question remains unaddressed: is this project actually queer? Traditionally, queerness is an identity pertaining to people and bodies, so it might seem strange to label pedagogy or a course sequence as queer. However, the term has migrated to other contexts beyond realm of the individual and the corporeal form. For instance, it's not unusual to hear of queer art, queer activism, queer fashion, etc. Within my home discipline of Rhetoric and Composition, a growing body of scholarship is exploring queer rhetoric. In one foundational article, Jonathan Alexander and Jacqueline Rhodes define queer rhetoric as "self-conscious and critical engagement with normative discourses of sexuality in the public sphere that exposes their naturalization and torques them to create different or counter-discourses, giving voice and agency to multiple and complex sexual experiences" ("[Queer Rhetoric and the Pleasures of the Archive](#)"). The project meets this definition on many levels. First, as a podcast, all of the research is conducted and shared within the public sphere. The topic of each oral history addresses norms of sexuality and discourse, collectively demonstrating how narratives of sexual development, coming out, and living as one's identity are standardized over time and within a particular culture. Even more, the

two subjects we interviewed talked back to these narratives, acknowledging the typical story and noting where their own experience diverts. As a result, we are giving voice to a multiplicity of individuals and challenging the archetypes of LGBTQ narratives.

Yet, in each context where queerness has left the body, there is a human agent behind the object or act. Queer artists and designers create the art and fashion, queer activists incite the activism, and at the very least, queer individuals are the beneficiaries of these movements. However, can we rightfully assert that pedagogical arrangements, like a community service project, is queer? Quite frankly, I don't know. I also don't know how to grapple with the human agency question. After all, this is my project, my course sequence, and my design. I am the human agent behind its invention and operation. Nevertheless, as my reflections on the lessons learned illustrate, sometimes the course had a mind of its own, running counter to my plans, but in service to my ultimate pedagogical goals. Apart from improving the project in future iterations of the course, my future work revolves around exploring and researching two important questions: can a course be queer and how necessary is a human agent in queer action? The support of the CTL Fellows program has helped me achieve this level of consciousness about my project. I am grateful for the opportunity to bounce ideas off my colleagues, troubleshoot my lesson plans, and reflect on my project once a month. With a firmer grasp on the pedagogical side of the project, I now can begin researching the queer theoretical underpinnings behind my teaching with more confidence and focus.