Positive Resistance and the Queering of Digital Media Theory
On Course Dis/contents and Classroom Spaces

Jörgen Skågeby and Lina Rahm

Much has been written about the classroom as a normative space, marginalizing all but the loudmouth male. For this essay, however, we want to extend that space to include the topic taught and ask how the content and media of the classroom can help in queering that space, making room for diversity. The classroom is a media space, and while courses (and entire disciplines) may claim to be untouchable by issues relating to gender and sexuality, the (un)learning media space of the classroom is always conditioned by, and conditions, gender performances and sexual practices. We subscribe to a socio-material view of the classroom space where bodies, information, media, power, and architecture co-constitute each other. While this essay will, somewhat ironically, not have the space to explore this entanglement in detail, it will give an account of how to rework a given course (on digital media theory) from within, deconstructing the all too common apolitical, hetero-normative, white-normative, and sexist unifying signifier that often comes with the field of new media studies. As such, this essay is divided into three parts: 1) working with official documents; 2) methods and forms of teaching; and 3) working with motivation and resistance. For each of these parts, we will deploy a queer tactic in order to challenge the given norms, namely disidentification, crisis, and failure, respectively.

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Working with Official Documents through Disidentification

To begin with, we assume that most courses are not developed in an institutional vacuum. Rather, there are often different forms of official documents that one has to relate to or come up against while designing a course. This can be anything from previous incarnations of the course to formal rules regarding examinations or forms of teaching. In order to provide us with a practical example to work with, this essay will use a short undergraduate course module on digital media theory and examine how it can be reworked without completely discarding the effort that has already gone into developing it. The course runs for five weeks and enrolls approximately seventy-five students each semester. Further, the course is intended to provide a theoretical introduction to digital media studies. To quote from the department’s course description:

The course aims to provide a basic orientation regarding the central questions, theories, and debates that co-develop with new media technologies. After the course, the student should be able to explain, discuss, and apply contemporary theories and key concepts such as networks, interactivity, convergence, virtuality, remediation, materiality, participation, media archaeology, and design fiction.

The standard iteration of the course mainly revolves around lectures, but also consists of a group assignment focusing on a theoretical application to an Internet-related phenomenon of choice. The group assignment is presented in a seminar intended to broaden theoretical knowledge and support the discussion of different theoretical perspectives. A written examination focusing on the explanation and application of theoretical concepts concludes the course. In summary, the course is at the undergraduate level, it hosts a large number of students, and it is theoretically oriented.

The current, prearranged lectures do not explicitly address feminist or queer approaches or power asymmetries, with the possible exception of class. The group assignment allows for some freedom of choice regarding elaboration on queer topics, but in practice, this is rarely the case. Thus, it is painfully obvious that no real norm-critical, let alone queer, approach has been pertinent during the planning of the course. Based on the current topics of
the lectures, there are however opportunities to make connections between queer theory and digital media theory. The current main topics covered are:

1. Remediation, premediation, media archaeology, and design fiction
2. Networks and archives
3. Information and simulation
4. Interface and interaction
5. Myths, hopes, and fears

These are fairly techno-centric topics, and the literature that goes with each topic is, as mentioned, not very norm-critical. As such, we propose the tactic of disidentification as a way to work with what is given.

Disidentification refers to “the survival strategies the minority subject practices in order to negotiate a phobic majoritarian public sphere that continuously elides or punishes the existence of subjects who do not conform to the phantasm of normative citizenship.” Disidentification works from the paradigm of “yes, but . . . ,” meaning that the main ambition is not (necessarily) to refute or dismiss theories or ideas per se. Rather, the tactic is to rework and invest theories with new passion, new life, and new subjectivities. The question becomes, then, how to transform a standard, fixed course on digital media theory from within. In many ways, a disidentificatory tactic relates to the concept of remixing as it is used within contemporary music. It refers to a reworking of a song in which certain tracks are provided but there is still much room for recombination, tampering, and mischievous play, ideally resulting in an improved version of the original song. So, by adding literature that asks critical questions and problematizes normative understandings of the five topics above, we suggest that it is possible to make a connection between the original lectures and a queer line of inquiry and deconstruction. In relation to the classroom as a media space, this assimilation of queer readings can be seen as a way to tactically misrecognize the borders between public and private space. Arguably, this misrecognition is already an increasingly pertinent part of the performance of identities via social media, where distinctions between public and private may have lost its meaning. Still, by making a connection between public and private performances of identity and the convergence of virtual and physical space, we can bring into question how the classroom as a media-saturated space enables or disables diverse practices. That is, by using the
classroom as an object to think and perform with, a concrete and practical link is made to everyday experiences, where theories can be readily applied to imagine alternative scenarios.

**Methods and Forms of Teaching (Introducing Crisis)**

As a preamble to the introduction of crisis, we turn to Sara Ahmed, who takes an institutional perspective on how diversity work can (or cannot) be conducted within higher education. Ahmed goes on to describe institutional life as flowing. Drawing from our experience, we have met with certain resistances (e.g., regarding forms of examination, literature, administration), but we have been thankfully spared of open opposition relating to the general topic itself. As such, we have arguably been going with the flow—not experiencing any substantial antagonism. This could also mean that we have been reproducing institutional prejudices and helping to obscure diversity. In the words of Ahmed:

> Doing diversity work is institutional work in the sense that it is an experience of encountering resistance and countering that resistance. Each new strategy or tactic for getting through the wall generates knowledge of what does or does not get across.

Thus, the main issues for us become how to trouble our positions as teachers, how to queer the course on digital media theory, and how to go against the current. We propose that the reworking of canonical theories is a first step in the direction of what Kumashiro calls a “pedagogy of crisis”:

> Education is not something that involves comfortably repeating what we already learned or affirming what we already know. Rather, education involves learning something that disrupts our commonsense view of the world.

As a bootstrap to further efforts, we suggest an opening lecture introducing the topic of the course enmeshed with certain queer concepts (more on these later). More importantly, to kick-start thinking about normative subjectivity in relation to digital media, we propose a discussion around the non-diversity of subject populations in research. By discussing first how findings in psychology are virtually always based on WEIRD (Western, Educated,
Industrialized, Rich, and Democratic) subjects and second how technology development and media interaction research often build upon these results, augmenting certain subjectivities while suppressing others, we aim to highlight the non-neutrality of technologies that co-shape our subjectivity and put queer issues front-and-center from the very start. We want to stress that the WEIRD conceptualization should, of course, be put to additional critique, by including such conspicuously missing identity positions as able-bodied, white, heterosexual, male, and young amongst others. Nevertheless, we think that by acknowledging how an often taken-for-granted normalcy (and its consequences) can be seriously questioned, we may open up to queerness as a concept.

Our follow-up attempt to introduce crisis consists of including thematically organized concepts that connect to each of the current lecture topics. We cannot be entirely sure whether they will be able to produce a (fruitful) crisis yet, but the least they will do is create a wider space for students to position themselves and relate to previous binaries. Ideally, each theme can provide a different lens that can diffract one’s view in a new direction and begin a process of questioning detrimental stereotypes and revealing hidden histories of entrenched subjugation. As such, we have worked from the given topics and then tried to rework that topic through the adding of what we call resonating queer themes. Below we draft an outline matching lecture topics and these resonating queer themes.

**Added initial lecture:** WEIRD Subjects and Media Technologies . . . and Beyond.

**Topic 1: Remediation, Premediation, Media Archaeology, and Design Fiction**
Resonating queer theme: temporality

The original topic is essentially about how to relate to media development over time—an attempt to discuss the relation between “new” and “old” media (in itself an untenable position). As such, temporality is something that aptly connects to queer theory here. The “not yet” of queer futurity becomes a point of convergence. Consequently, introducing queer angles on speculative fiction and technological futures,
as proposed by for example Lothian and Smelik, seems most appropriate.\textsuperscript{11}

**Topic 2: Network and Archive**
Resonating queer theme: *virality and anarchives*

When discussing both the material underpinnings of networks and the conceptual use of a term in for like “network society,” the notion of queer virality, as offered by Blas, is strikingly fitting, emphasizing notions of cloaking, paradox, and never-being-the-sameness.\textsuperscript{12} The same goes for Lothian’s archival anarchies (or anarchives), which brings queer theories of performance and ephemerality to the fore.\textsuperscript{13}

**Topic 3: Information and Simulation**
Resonating queer theme: *performativity and glitch*

This topic focuses on the performativity and agency of computer code as well as the conceptual pair of material-virtual. As such, van Doorn’s notions of virtual-digital actualization and distributed agency makes for appropriate connections.\textsuperscript{14} Additionally, Russell’s glitch feminist manifesto raises important questions relating queer theory to the unsustainable dichotomy between online and offline.\textsuperscript{15}

[See video: flo\textsuperscript{\slash} by V5MT, http://vimeo.com/20247975]

**Topic 4: Interface and Interaction**
Resonating queer theme: *heterodoxy and queer technologies*

This topic examines the relation between usage, artifacts and design(ers) and puts emphasis on how interaction is designed with certain foreseen and unforeseen intentions (often assuming “normal” or “average” users). As such, the pertinent insights from Light on queer design strategies are central.\textsuperscript{16} Additionally, the concrete examples from Queer Technologies will serve as stimulating material for debate.\textsuperscript{17}
**Topic 5: Myths, Hopes and Fears**

Resonating queer theme: *agency of change*

While this topic has aimed at asking students to relate to different future scenarios, we also want to install an agency of change—a feeling that there is something you can do, even though you may have doubts or even despair regarding our technological future.

In the final section of this essay we will develop this last position, arguing that the one can access such an agency of change through a resignification of failure. Before doing so, however, we also want to emphasize how different forms of performative writing can be used to avoid repetition and support creativity. Therefore, we will also propose the introduction of various writing exercises between the classes. Without going into detail, we will offer a number of unconventional genres that can aid in queering digital media theory, namely: anti-thesis (a negation of a common-sense idea/concept); media-archaeology (a diary describing the use/analysis of a forgotten, obscured, or slow medium); interaction criticism (a critique explicating relationships among elements of a specific interface and the meanings, affects, moods, and subjectivities it generates); media failure (describing a situation when technology has failed and its consequences); and manifesto (a declaration of intents relating to media futurity). Working with an element of crisis can help resignify the classroom as a socio-material media space where failure is acceptable. Halberstam argues that we are living with one particular model of success, which turns everything outside it into failure.

And while failure certainly comes accompanied with a host of negative effects, such as disappointment, disillusionment, and despair; it also provides the opportunity to use these negative affects to poke holes in the toxic positivity of contemporary life.¹⁸

Arguably this “toxic positivity” has also infiltrated the educational spaces.¹⁹

So, as a critical consequence, we could say that under a particular tyranny of success and efficiency, failing can in fact present more sustainable ways of becoming. As such, we argue that failure presents an important connection between media, classrooms, and queer subjectivities.
Working with Motivation and Resistance (Resignifying Resistance)

There are (at least) two different ways to think about resistance here. First, there is resistance against uncommon ways of doing things as it may arise from student, co-teachers, or co-workers. Second, with inspiration from Halberstam’s notion of queer failure, we can think of teaching as being about supporting resistance—namely, the resistance against repetition of commonsense and familiar stories. These two notions of resistance co-exist, but we shall focus more on the second since we think it can be an important step towards working with resistance.

Making students aware of their intersectional subjectivities—and thereby (many times) privileges and oppressions—may cause a sense of dissonance in their identities. To recognize oneself as in a position of oppression and/or privilege can result in many defensive strategies. (After all, change will cause frustration.) Not only might students react with blatant rejection or denial of the experiences of others, but they may tend to identify themselves as predominantly oppressed rather than opening up to and acknowledging any privileges they carry. These positions of being either ignorant or victimized can be seen as negative identities full of “bad” resistance. As mentioned previously though, we think there is positive resistance to be explored and developed.

So, instead of trying to defeat (negative) resistance, one should perhaps try to develop (positive) resistance. By this we refer to the development of resistance against oppression and the appeal to values such as fairness, social justice, and ethical accountability. A systematic connecting of values like the ones mentioned to positive resistance would ideally boost a view of oneself as doing the right thing. At this point, we think it is important also to acknowledge that as educators/teachers we have much responsibility and much power to influence. Thus, by being consistent in promoting a positive resistance it may also catch on with students. Students would then be motivated to go against the flow. As such, we could potentially avoid feelings of guilt, shame, or being accused of supporting oppression and instead support awareness of (unearned) privilege. Ideally, the more we learn about the variety of intersectional power differentials, the more connected we
become to stories of systemic disadvantage. It is important to remember, we think, that the classroom is always already permeated by heteronormativity. Thus, the ambition to disrupt preconceptions of how bodies should or should not perform in the classroom also comes with an ambition to challenge students to think about what types of normative thinking regulate or castigate certain bodies in specific spaces and times. Rouhani combines insights into radical pedagogy and critical geography and points to the classroom as a place that has the potential to be socially transformative. We argue that a resignification of resistance can help in creating a meaningful space from which many boundaries can be questioned. While Rouhani specifically proposes an anarchic perspective on education, the general approach is also valid for this paper:

Some of the ways in which we can synthesize anarchism, geography, and critical pedagogy are in creating places of education that counter the placelessness imposed by neoliberalization, queering the classroom in ways that open up non-normative possibilities for teaching, learning, and living, and expanding our pedagogies to include a multiplicity of spaces and realms, without losing focus on the activist possibilities in the classroom itself.²²

We have argued that the queer tactics of disidentification, crisis and (resignification of) failure are ways to retain the classroom as a place from where critical perspectives can emanate.


Finally, we propose the use of “fantasy media” (TV-series, movies, video games, and graphic novels, but also user-generated content) as spurring a more vivid engagement with various issues and debates.²³ The very idea of using fantasy media is to overcome resistances against boring, expected, or remote objects of analysis. In addition to this, we would have to design discussion questions that can could about conversation relating to unfamiliar or unnatural aspects and interpretations. We must be careful not to delimit thinking here—we would not want to impose a preferred reading of the
material (or “foreclose the possibility of seeing oneself in ways neither the student nor the teacher could have predicted” as Kumashiro puts it).\(^{24}\)

Perhaps all this is just another way to make the already privileged even more content with themselves, but we think that it could serve as a general strategy underpinning a raising of awareness and maybe even an understanding of oneself as privileged and part of larger structures of oppression. With this essay, we hope we have shown how media, space, and information can work together for learners of all kinds (both students and teachers) in order to fight discrimination from within.

**Notes**

6. Ibid.
8. Ibid., 175.
18 Halberstam, The Queer Art of Failure, 3.
20 bell hooks, Teaching to Transgress: Education as the Practice of Freedom (London: Routledge, 1994).
22 Rouhani, “Practice What You Teach,” 1738.
23 Emily Dial Driver, Sally Emmons, and James M Ford, eds., Fantasy Media in the Classroom: Essays on Teaching with Film, Television, Literature, Graphic Novels and Video Games (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2012).
Jörgen Skågeby is a research fellow at the Department of Media Studies, Stockholm University, Sweden. His research bridges media studies, design studies, informatics and gender studies. Recent publications cover topics such as the performativity of digital gifts, audiovisual parody prosumtion, and the media archaeology of file-sharing.

Lina Rahm is a doctoral student at the Department of Behavioural Sciences and Learning at Linköping University, Sweden. She holds a BSSc in gender studies and an MSSc in social and welfare studies. Her current research includes citizenship in adult education and socio-material aspects of survivalism and prepping.