

Reflections on Teaching an EUI Course

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I have taught my course “Locating Queer Culture” (GWS 467) twice for the Ethnography of the University Initiative (EUI), since Spring 2009. This course revolves around two key questions: How might we understand the role of Midwestern public universities like the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign (UIUC) – and their surrounding communities – in the production of queer culture? And how might such knowledge revise our understanding of queer culture and its locations, both in the past and in the present? Students who have taken the course tend to be majoring in Humanities and Social Sciences fields, including Gender and Women’s Studies, English, History, Economics, Spanish, Anthropology, Psychology, and Sociology. They do not all identify as “queer,” “lesbian,” or “gay.” Students are from a variety of racial and ethnic backgrounds, including Latina/o, African American, Asian American, and White students. Using our own university as both the object and site for primary research on queer culture, the course introduces undergraduate students to two research methods: archival research and ethnography. There is, of course, nothing inherently queer about either method, so the course involves first introducing students to the basic tools of each approach. But we also consider the extent to which taking queer culture as the object of study might require us to adjust these methods. What, in other words, are the possibilities for queering archival and ethnographic research methods?

The course is designed to help students see that knowledge does not simply exist “out there” in the world, but that it is actively produced and preserved by people like themselves. This is true for any culture, but is especially relevant for queer culture, because it has historically been overlooked or minimized in scholarship on American culture generally. Thus, the course focuses on a vital but contested element of the university and its surrounding community that

is often neglected in “official” university records, narratives, and histories. After reading and studying examples of existing s in two research assignments: (1) an archival research project on some aspect of local queer history at UIUC; and (2) an ethnographic research project on some aspect of contemporary queer culture at UIUC. Thus students both draw upon the existing archives of the university and contribute to these archives by producing their own original research on queer culture.

Students have tackled an amazing range of subjects, from coming out in fraternities, to the experiences of queer women of color, the history of lesbian student activism, the university’s role as a resource for local queer youth, the experiences of Black gay men at UIUC, the intersections of LGBT and Christian communities on campus, lesbian and gay issues in sexual health programs at UIUC, and queering the curriculum. I’m very proud that this course has provided space for students to pursue such impressive original research, which they have all presented publicly at the EUI conference and which is now archived in IDEALS. I’ve learned an incredible amount from my students and look forward to the chance to teach this EUI course again soon.

