



# Queering the French Language Classroom: A Social Justice Approach to Discussing Gender, Privilege, and Oppression

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Homophobia and transphobia in schools have devastating impacts on LGBTQ+ youth. In a national climate survey on homophobia, biphobia, and transphobia in Canadian schools, two-thirds of LGBTQ+ students reported that they feel unsafe in school (Taylor et al. 2011). This number climbs to 78% for trans youth (Taylor et al. 2011). Schools remain particularly hostile environments for trans students (Chamberland et al. 2011; Haskell and Burtch 2010; McGuire et al. 2010; Taylor et al. 2011). Despite this troubling reality, “no education ministry in Canada has taken concerted steps to ensure that there is instructional attention to sexual diversity built into the overall school curriculum” (Rayside 2014, 205). Whether in Canada, the United States, Europe, or elsewhere in the world, the classroom is a place where LGBTQ+ people are invisible (Kjaran 2017; Richard 2019; Sadowski 2016). Although many Canadian schools

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prohibit discrimination based on sexuality and gender identity and expression, their anti-bullying policies and efforts to support diversity and inclusion do nothing to challenge the cisheteronormative perspectives found in curricula, educational materials, and teaching practices. For example, in September 2016, the ARC Foundation, in collaboration with the British Columbia Ministry of Education and other partners, developed SOGI (Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity) 1 2 3, a series of policies, procedures, and curriculum resources that aim to promote the inclusion of sexual and gender diversity in all public and independent schools.<sup>1</sup> However, SOGI is part of an inclusive pedagogical approach that promotes tolerance and acceptance but offers no interruption of the status quo because it is designed and articulated in such a way that considers the apprehensions, emotions, and sensitivities of a heteronormative and conservative readership (Hakeem 2020). On the other hand, queer pedagogy, which is a form of critical and anti-oppressive pedagogy, has the potential to transform the classroom into a truly equitable and critical space wherein students can learn to question the social norms and power relations that work to exclude and oppress LGBTQ+ people (Britzman 1995; Bryson and de Castell 1993; Meyer 2019; Neto 2018; Pennell 2019; Richard 2019).

Drawing on qualitative data from a case study of Canadian French Immersion high school students' (ages 17–18) perceptions of sexual and gender diversity, I will provide an example of what queering the French language classroom can look like through the use of two webcomics developed by Canadian trans writer, cartoonist, and activist Sophie Labelle: *Les vestiaires* [Locker Rooms] and *Jour du Souvenir trans* [Trans Day of Remembrance].<sup>2</sup> As Pennell (2019) explains, queering refers to the idea of questioning norms, with the goal of making students critically aware of how these norms are reproduced, how they came to be, and how they influence and construct our sense of who we are (Kjaran 2017; Richard 2019). To illustrate this process in practice, I will apply DiAngelo and Sensoy's (2019) social justice framework to the teaching of both comics to show how students can be guided in (1) "*critical analysis* of how mainstream knowledge is presented as neutral, universal, and objective; (2) *critical self-reflection* of their own socialization into structured relations of oppression and privilege; (3) *developing the skills* with which to see, analyze, and challenge relations of oppression and privilege" (2, emphasis in

<sup>1</sup> See <https://www.sogieducation.org/>

<sup>2</sup> Both comics draw from the larger webcomic *Assignée garçon* [Assigned Male] (2014) that broadly addresses issues of gender norms, privilege, heterosexism, and transphobia.

original). This framework can be considered part of a queer pedagogical approach because in order to deconstruct and challenge gender norms, students must first learn to question the knowledge claims on which these norms are based, as well as their socialization into these norms. Not to mention that relations of oppression and privilege emerge from the naturalization of dominant norms. I will begin by giving a brief overview of each comic and the questions used to initiate student discussion. I will then provide examples of student discussions using audio-recorded group conversations carried out in class with the goal of showing how certain remarks can be used as entry points to guide students in thinking critically about gender, privilege, and oppression.

### THINKING CRITICALLY ABOUT GENDER IN *LES VESTIAIRES*

In *Les vestiaires*, Sophie Labelle tells the story of a young trans girl who dreads her high school physical education class because she is forced to use the boys' locker room where she is bullied and physically beaten.<sup>3</sup> She finds herself helpless with no allies, except her grade 11 ("secondaire 4" in Quebec) teacher who finally acknowledges her struggles and confronts her aggressors. Prior to the student discussion, I presented a brief overview of Sophie Labelle's work. I then read aloud the comic with students (a content warning was provided to warn students of images of trans violence). The main purpose of reading the text aloud was to ensure all students access the material and understand the story. I then asked them to discuss the following questions in small groups: "(1) Pourquoi l'anxiété du personnage principal augmente-t-elle avec l'âge ? (2) Pourquoi l'espace des vestiaires en particulier n'est-il pas sécuritaire pour le personnage principal ? (3) Selon vous, quel est le principal facteur contribuant à la transphobie dans la bande dessinée ? Pourquoi ? (4) Pourquoi le personnage principal dit-il : 'L'oppression dont j'étais victime, je n'avais jamais eu l'impression qu'on la prenait autant au sérieux?'" [(1) Why does the anxiety of the main character increase with age? (2) Why is the locker room space in particular unsafe for the main character? (3) What do you see as the biggest factor contributing to the transphobia in the comic? Why? (4) Why does the main character say: "I never thought the oppression I suffered had been taken so seriously"?].<sup>4</sup> Given that the goal of the study was to

<sup>3</sup>The full comic can be accessed here: <http://assigneegarcon.tumblr.com/post/102552095635>

<sup>4</sup>All translations are my own.

activate students' prior knowledge about gender and sexual diversity, and identify their knowledge gaps, concepts such as sex, gender, or transphobia were not defined prior to the discussion.

It is important to note that within a queer pedagogical framework, questions are merely a springboard for discussion. I included a statement on this by encouraging students to answer the questions to the best of their ability, but to not hesitate to take the discussion in another direction when appropriate. Part of queering the classroom is accepting that there does not necessarily need to be an end goal for discussion (Pennell 2019), as this uncertainty can lead students to raising questions and ideas that, although not directly related to the comic, can serve as entry points to helping them think critically about the knowledge they produce and validate about gender, and how the latter is connected to their socialization (Sensoy and DiAngelo 2017). In the first discussion of *Les vestiaires*, one group of students, in the process of answering the first question, became confused over the gender identity of the protagonist, ultimately concluding that *she* is a boy:

- D: Je pense que l'anxiété du personnage principal augmente avec l'âge à cause du fait que la puberté commence à être une chose pour elle, donc elle commence à voir qu'elle est une fille.
- P et E: C'est un garçon.
- D: C'est un garçon?
- P: Oui, c'est un garçon.
- D: « Well, fuck ».
- P: Oui, je comprends pourquoi tu penses que c'est une fille parce que c'est un garçon qui ressemble à une fille dans les images de la bande-dessinée.<sup>5</sup>
- [D: I think the anxiety of the main character increases with age because puberty starts to become a thing for her, so she starts to see that she's a girl.
- P & E: It's a boy.
- D: It's a boy?
- P: Yes, it's a boy.
- D: Well, fuck.
- P: Yeah, I understand why you think it's a girl because it's a boy who looks like a girl in the images of the comic.] (Dis-Vest-May-2019)

<sup>5</sup>For ease of readability, grammatical errors in participants' quotations were corrected while retaining the original content.

Although the protagonist identifies as a girl, her gender identity is dismissed by her peers and teachers, as it is also dismissed by two participants (E and P). Indeed, they assert that the protagonist is a boy. This suggests that for them, gender is not only binary, but determined by biological characteristics. In fact, participant D makes this point explicit in the introductory discussion about gender identity: “À mon avis le genre c’est quelque chose que tu es né avec, donc c’est ta biologie qui te fait mâle ou femelle. Et c’est des caractéristiques biologiques qui déterminent ton genre” [In my opinion, gender is something that you are born with, so it’s your biology that makes you male or female. And it’s biological characteristics that determine your gender] (Amr-D-May-2019). The claim that gender is biological is presented here as objective, neutral, and universal. Following Sensoy and DiAngelo (2017), there is here an opportunity to guide students in a critical analysis of this knowledge claim. The idea is to ask questions that can help them understand gender as socially constructed. For example, whose perspective is reflected in the idea that gender is biological? Who benefits from this claim? Which groups are invested in challenging this notion? These follow-up questions, which would be part of a large class discussion, is a scaffolding strategy that can allow students to become critically aware of how their knowledge about gender (in this case, that it is biological) is connected to “who they are” and “where they stand” (Sensoy and DiAngelo 2017, 30). Although this type of intervention may appear to be off-topic or unrelated to the comic, it allows students to move beyond surface-level comprehension to a place where they can use their French to question knowledge claims often taken for granted. The goal is to accompany students in the deconstruction of ideas that are at the root of oppression (i.e., gender as biological), rather than simply attributing the transphobia in the comic to a few bad apples. This is because more often than not, students will agree that the bullying of the protagonist is unacceptable and that everyone should be accepted. However, within a critical social justice framework, it is important to move past consensus to a place of discomfort where claims deeply rooted in students’ socialization can be deconstructed. Before students can critically recognize the causes of oppression (Freire 2018) and begin to challenge its mechanisms, it is imperative that they first become aware of how their own socialization shapes the way in which they understand and think about gender, as well as trans realities. This deconstruction of ideas is therefore scaffolded through asking questions that allow students to see and understand the connection between their social position and

worldviews. Reflecting on those same questions individually at home, as part of a weekly journal, can further deepen this understanding and build on ideas emerging from class discussion.

Interestingly, when one student was asked about which key factor contributed to the transphobia in the comic, she mentioned the lack of education about the topic all while establishing an implicit comparison between more progressive societies (i.e., British Columbia) and more conservative ones (i.e., the southern United States): “Je crois que le facteur principal contribuant à la transphobie, pas seulement dans la bande dessinée mais dans la vie, c’est le manque d’éducation à propos du sujet. Pour nous, c’est assez ok parce qu’on est en Colombie-Britannique et il y a les Pride Parade ici et tout cela et on connaît beaucoup à propos du sujet. Mais dans beaucoup d’endroits qui sont plutôt conservateurs, comme dans les États-Unis du sud, ce n’est pas le cas” [I think the biggest factor contributing to transphobia, not only in the comic but in life, is the lack of education about the topic. For us, it’s mainly ok since we’re in British Columbia and there are Pride Parades here and all that, and we know a lot about the topic. But in many places that are rather conservative, like in the southern United States, it’s not the case] (Dis-Vest-I-May-2019). Although it is true that certain parts of the world may be more progressive (both legally and socially) than others when it comes to gender and sexual diversity, the comparison is problematic because it functions to hold oppression in place and echoes other forms of homonationalism (see Puar 2007). If transphobia is not a *serious* issue in British Columbia and that for the most part, people are well educated about the topic, it follows that no solution to improve the status quo is necessary and the latter is therefore maintained. This student also fails to recognize that if Pride Parades are necessary, it’s also because many LGBTQ+ people are still marginalized, subjected to violence, and deprived of basic human rights. Therefore, it is important to create opportunities after class discussion for students to rethink such knowledge claims through, for example, researching news articles about the current situation in British Columbia or analyzing statistics around LGBTQ+ hate crimes. By doing so, students learn that there is in fact a high degree of resistance from religious and white supremacist groups against the SOGI 1 2 3 education program in British Columbia (MacLeod 2019) or that anti-LGBTQ+ hate crimes increased by 77% from 2017 to 2018 in British Columbia alone (Statistics Canada 2020). After completing their inquiry, a teacher can then ask students to present their findings in small groups to the class and reflect on why there may have been a

disconnect between the reality of transphobia in British Columbia and their impression of a more open and progressive society.

As a follow-up to the presentations, students can be asked to individually reflect on a series of questions (this can take the form of a blog or online discussion post) that can help them process how their social position (gender, class, sexuality, race) influences what they believe to be *true* or legitimate knowledge (Banks 1996; Sensoy and DiAngelo 2017). For example, who benefits from the claim that transphobia is not an issue in British Columbia or that it is a thing of the past and found only in less progressive societies? Which groups may be invested in staying silent about transphobic bullying (as seen in the comic)? When students become critically aware of the relationship between the knowledge they validate and how it is deeply connected to their socialization, they can begin to deconstruct their worldviews, especially those that reinforce oppression and maintain the status quo. Positionality is hence a crucial tool for queering the French language classroom; by helping students understand that knowledge is never neutral nor objective, rather that it serves particular social and political interests (Kincheloe 2008), they can “develop the skills with which to see, analyze, and challenge ideological domination” (Sensoy and DiAngelo 2017, 29). The comic *Jour du Souvenir trans* is one example that can guide this type of critical analysis.

### CHALLENGING CISGENDER PRIVILEGE AND TRANSPHOBIC OPPRESSION IN *JOUR DU SOUVENIR TRANS*

In *Jour du Souvenir trans*, Labelle tells the story of a father who questions his daughter about the purpose of a trans day of remembrance, deploring the fact that such a day does not exist for cisgender folks.<sup>6</sup> His daughter responds by insisting on the specificity of the trans experience, evoking the example of trans women of color who continue to face daily violence. The final panel, which shows the father visibly concerned and holding his daughter in his arms, suggests that he becomes aware of the reality of this violence, especially given that his daughter (who is trans) could very well become a victim. This comic, although quite short, is very rich in terms of its potential for deepening students’ understanding of the systemic nature of transphobia and of oppression more broadly. Given its complexity, I use

<sup>6</sup>The full comic can be accessed here: <http://assignegarcon.tumblr.com/post/103111386410/jour-du-souvenir-trans-la-violence-envers-les>

this comic to encourage students to challenge ideological domination (reference to *cisphobia*, for example) once they have become aware of their positionality and of the social, historical, and political dimensions of knowledge (Sensoy and DiAngelo 2017).

The following discussion questions were used when piloting this comic as part of my qualitative study: “(1) Quel est le message central que l’auteur a voulu véhiculer dans cette BD? (2) Pourquoi la fille trouve-t-elle le concept de cisphobie inapproprié? (3) Pourquoi le père est-il bouleversé dans la dernière planche?” [(1) What is the central message that the author wanted to convey in this comic? (2) Why does the girl take issue with the concept of cisphobia? (3) Why is the father distressed in the final panel?]. In their discussion of *Jour du Souvenir trans*, some students demonstrated a capacity for critical reflection, evoking and explaining concepts such as privilege and oppression without them being mentioned explicitly in the comic:

- F: Je pense que souvent des personnes, dans ce cas ce sont des personnes cisgenres avec le privilège, ne veulent pas nécessairement que les personnes qui n’ont pas ce privilège aient d’autres avantages ou soient plus considérées. Elles veulent encore être connues comme importantes. Alors la petite fille trouve que la cisphobie est vraiment inappropriée, parce que ce n’est pas vraiment quelque chose de vrai. Parce qu’il n’y a pas de problèmes avec leur vie. Il n’y pas de discrimination envers les personnes cisgenres.
- T: Oui comme F a dit. Souvent quand les personnes cisgenres réalisent que d’autres personnes n’ont pas le même privilège qu’elles ont, elles veulent garder ce privilège même s’il n’est pas égal à d’autres personnes. Et quand d’autres personnes reçoivent plus de privilèges, elles pensent que c’est de la discrimination contre elles.
- [F: I think that people often, in this case it’s cisgender people with privilege, do not necessarily want others without this privilege to have access to other advantages or be given special consideration. They still want to be seen as important. So, the young girl takes issue with cisphobia because it’s not really something that’s true. Because there are no problems with their life. There is no discrimination against cisgender people.



T: Yeah, as F said. Often when cisgender people realize that other people don't have the same privilege as them, they want to hold on to that privilege even if it's unequal. And when others receive more privileges, they see it as discrimination against them.] (Dis-Jrtrans-May-2019)

Both students explain the extent to which cisgender people, despite being unequally advantaged, often try protecting their privilege. The students' mention of *privilege* is an opportunity to provide them with a definition and further their reflection about the concept as not simply being the outcome of luck or fortune, but rather of systemic advantages afforded to those who are members of a dominant group (Sensoy and DiAngelo 2017). Building on this opportunity should nonetheless be done with caution. It is best to avoid the "one step forward" exercise, wherein a teacher reads aloud a series of statements (e.g., "No one has ever asked me if I was a girl or a boy") and each time one of the statements corresponds to a student's lived experience, they take a step forward. Those moving forward hold the greatest number of privileges, while those left behind are least privileged. Although the "privilege walk" has been popularized in some social justice classrooms, this exercise is deeply problematic given that it uses the marginalization, pain, and trauma of minoritized students as a pedagogical tool to teach the privileged about their socialized position of dominance (Turner III 2014). Rather than place privileged students at the center of the learning experience (since marginalized students are reminded daily of their societal disadvantages), I would recommend unpacking the concept of *privilege* through a text. For example, in *Jour du Souvenir trans*, participant T recognizes the extent to which the father, due to his privilege and position of power as a cisgender man, perceives equity as discrimination. This comment can be used as an entry point to develop probing questions during a large group discussion or reflective assignment. In other words, why does the father view a trans day of remembrance as unequal or unfair? What does his initial reaction tell us about his social position? These types of questions create a more meaningful opportunity to reflect on the difference between *equity* and *equality*, as well as how certain disadvantages are rooted in a history of oppression.

Participant F goes even further to affirm that cisgender people do not experience discrimination. Although it is oppression (and not discrimination) that "occurs when one group's prejudice is *backed by legal authority and historical, social and institutional power*" (Sensoy and DiAngelo 2017,

62, emphasis in original), his remark suggests an implicit understanding of this distinction because he is challenging the notion of reverse oppression (referred to as *cisphobia* in the comic). Despite not always using the correct terminology, these students were able to articulate a relatively sophisticated reflection of critical concepts such as oppression and privilege, thereby showing the comic's pedagogical potential in guiding students toward an understanding of transphobia as a systemic form of discrimination. It also becomes an opportunity to provide students with the terminology that they often lack for critical reflections.

Connections can even be made to understand other forms of oppression, but also to highlight the intersections between racism and transphobia, as mentioned in the comic. In fact, one student uses the concept of reverse racism to dismiss *cisphobia*: “Vous ne pouvez pas être raciste contre les personnes blanches à cause du fait que la plupart du temps les Blancs sont les personnes qui sont les oppresseurs. Alors c’est la même chose. Vous ne verrez pas des personnes cisgenres opprimées. Mais au contraire, on parle de quelqu’un qui est oppresseur. Alors vous ne pouvez pas être cisphobe à un groupe de personnes qui ne subissent pas de discrimination” [You can’t be racist toward white people because most of the time white people are the oppressors. So, it’s the same thing. You’re not going to see cisgender people oppressed. But on the contrary, we’re talking about somebody who is an oppressor. So, you can’t be cisphobic to a group of people who don’t experience discrimination] (Dis-Jrtrans-S-May-2019). Although this student does not distinguish between being an *oppressor* and benefiting from a system of oppression, she nonetheless grasps the notion of oppression from a critical perspective because by using the concept of reverse racism—which she acknowledges does not exist—to advance that cisgender people do not experience discrimination, she shows an implicit understanding of the idea that power relations do not flip back and forth, “one day benefiting one group and the next day the other” (Sensoy and DiAngelo 2017, 149). The student’s analogy hence becomes a way of similarly understanding transphobia as oppression, that is as a form of discrimination that does not occur at the individual level, but that is “built into society as a whole and becomes automatic, normalized and taken for granted” (Sensoy and DiAngelo 2017, 62). Furthermore, the student’s reference to racism opens the possibility for introducing the concept of intersectionality (Crenshaw 1989), especially given the mention of violence against trans women of color in

the comic, with the aim of encouraging students to reflect upon what it means to be both trans and racialized, as well as how and why this intersection of identities shapes the experience of oppression differently.

## CONCLUSION

Through an examination of student discourses on gender and transphobia as represented in two webcomics, my goal in this chapter was to show how student-centered discussion can be a useful tool for queering the French language classroom, in both high school and postsecondary contexts. Drawing on Sensoy and DiAngelo's (2017) social justice principles, I would argue that allowing students to discuss LGBTQ-themed texts often relegated into the realm of invisibility in language classrooms, and intervening accordingly to ask questions that guide them in critical analysis of "objective" knowledge and reflection on their own socialization is key to helping them develop the skills to understand the mechanisms and ideologies that function to reinforce and hold oppression in place. Teachers must play a central role in combating all forms of systemic discrimination in the classroom and in schools, and need not only become allies of queer students, but "activists" through incorporating LGBTQ+ realities in their classroom practices and speaking out against social injustice (Blackburn 2012). In the context of my study, the participants' teacher welcomed queer works in his French classes and had in fact been studying Quebecois author Simon Boulerice's novel *L'enfant mascara* (2016) [*Mascara Child* (2016)] with his grade 12 students. Although this was encouraging, there is still a high degree of resistance to LGBTQ+ education and anti-oppressive values in teacher education programs (DiAngelo and Sensoy 2009; Robinson and Ferfolja 2002). Not to mention that my study was rejected by four school districts prior to receiving approval.

A critical social justice approach must therefore go beyond merely *including* LGBTQ+ people; it must *deconstruct* the very norms on which relations of oppression and privilege are founded. In other words, challenging dominant perspectives about gender requires that the norm (i.e., cisgender identity) be made visible and not sheltered from critical analysis. This recommendation stems in part from the fact that many students indicated not knowing the meaning of the term *cisgender* when discussing Labelle's comics. This suggests that cisgender identity (like heterosexuality) does not have to be defined, as it constitutes the default position that

is automatically imposed on students. Unlike trans and non-binary folks, cisgender people are often presented as not having a gender that can be contested critically. This is why it is especially important that cisgender teachers (like myself) name their gender in order to show that the latter is part of an ongoing process of construction for everyone and not only for trans and non-binary people (Airton 2019), thus helping to “desensationalize” LGBTQ+ people and content (Knisely 2020). A queer pedagogical approach anchored in social justice values should hence not center its focus on marginalized groups, but on the dominant models (Richard 2019) that shape the ways in which students see and understand the world. It is only through such a commitment to queer, critical, and anti-oppressive pedagogies integrated transversally through the entire curriculum that we can begin to imagine a truly “democratic education” (Richard 2019, 12) for all students.

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