



September 2015

It's hard to believe it's been a year since we first launched Rainbow Teaching. What started off as a disgruntled rant after another arduous day of combatting anti-LGBTQIA+ bigotry took on a life of its own when my partner made the seemingly innocuous comment, "well, why not write a blog post on it?"

As you well know, that blog post snowballed, and we ended up with a project that garnered more support in the first week than I'd expected to receive all year. It's involved making decisions I didn't even know were possibilities last August: mainly, did I want to gamble on taking Rainbow Teaching offline and into something even bigger, or did I want to stay firmly at the computer – and in the classroom?

I think we've made the right choice. There are some brilliant people and organisations out there touring schools and talking to staff and students alike. And it's allowed us to remain the grassroots project that's true to my heart and activism. Crucially – for both me and my politics – it's kept me in the classroom.

This past year, I've had the most amazing conversations with teachers, students, TAs, governors, SLT, librarians, union reps, parents, lecturers, pastoral staff and fellow activists. I've learned an awful lot.

Thank you. If you are one of those people, or you have applied our techniques in your classroom – thank you. We've got a long way to go. But hopefully, your efforts have already made a significant difference – even if just to one student.

-Allie George

1. Thanks, from Allie George
2. A Sound Used in Speech
3. Gay Abandon: Lifting a short nailed red varnished finger to patriarchy
4. Queering Presentation
5. Slurs: some thoughts on "gay"
6. No, I didn't change my profile picture. Yes, I still care about LGBT rights.
7. The complexities of being out, semi-out, and not out at work: some experiences of a nonbinary peripatetic music teacher
8. Bigotry is not a mental illness
9. Self-Care
10. On Teaching Consent via Photography
11. Conversations about drag: how transmisogyny is perpetuated in schools and how we can create safe spaces for gender exploration



A Sound Used in Speech - Roberta Orlando, Interdisciplinary Artist



So while feeling heartily depressed, constantly overly-sexualised and frequently getting homophobically bullied by students which was being forever glossed over by staff, some of whom seemed to think I was going to just jump on any woman who stood still long enough, I made this little pic collage. I would look at it on my iPad at work and smile to myself. Knowing that the voices telling me to hide, to pretend it doesn't matter where wrong.

-Anon Femme

Out of the Closet

Amanda is a cisgender, bi + grey-asexual woman who's recently escaped corporate life for academia. Kit is an agender queer teacher who never quite outgrew their grunge phase. They spoke to us about queering presentation and the implication that has on their teaching.

What does "queering presentation" even look like?

KIT: My personal aesthetic is "kid let loose in the dressing up box" – obviously, for work, I tone this down somewhat to "hipster meets off-duty ballerina". There's also a sociological bias in my attire: the attempts to refute femmophobia, whilst simultaneously rebuffing people's reading of me as a woman.

AMANDA: Part of it for me is about feeling comfortable in my own skin. There are lots of factors involved in that, including context, but I tend to alternate my presentation between a bit femme and "OMG it's a lumberjack!" Or when I'm very clever I sometimes combine the two. When I wear skirts and dresses, I tend to not feel comfortable in them unless I'm also rocking some stompy DMs, some masculine jewellery, or some other non-femme-coded item with them. I find this kind of look easier to pull off in higher education than in my previous, very corporate, job.

KIT: Yes, it's much harder to accomplish in a 'business attire' environment where masculinity is regarded as the default.

Isn't that just conforming to/reinforcing stereotypes?

AMANDA: I don't know, *is* it reinforcing stereotypes? What *does* a stereotypical bi + grey-a cis woman look like? I do think there's a certain value in being able to ping people's queerdar. I have very little patience with my sexuality being invisible/erased a lot of the time, so looking a little bit stereotypically queer is actually a good thing for me.

KIT: I'm hugely wary of the "but stereotypes!" argument. Yes, at times I'm a walking queer stereotype: some of that's just me - I like purple and rainbows and glitter and always have. And honestly, my refusal to wear make-up to work has *far* more to do with laziness and a desire to hit "snooze" an extra time than it has to do with how I present my gender. But some is a reaction to cissexist narratives: I'm short, with big hips and a chest that even the most ferocious binder won't tame, and a million other traits that mean I have to work bloody hard to "prove" my gender. (Oddly, my say-so on the matter just isn't good enough.)

Queer people can't win the stereotypes argument: if I buzz my hair, I'm told, "you didn't need to do that just to prove a point" and yet if I wear a skirt, it's a real, "AHA! I *knew* you weren't *really* genderqueer!" moment.

Why do it?

AMANDA: For me, it's very much a mix between being myself and being a visible role model for others. And I do have days when I can barely tie my own shoelaces, let alone feel like anyone should look up to me as a role model, but that doesn't change the fact that in the institutional setting I'm in, people do see me that way. My choice is between ignoring that or acknowledging it and trying to make the best of it.

KIT: It's hard to be an LGBT kid. There's a set narrative you're supposed to fit into, and as a kid, not doing what you're told has consequences. And because of cisheteronormativity, it can be incredibly complex finding out who *is* safe. So yes, I could keep my head down and make my professional life that bit easier – but this is my shorthand that support *is* available, as well as challenging that narrative.

I *hated* PE as a teenager – I'm pretty much convinced my A in Drama is largely down to the practice I got at devising a million and one ways to get out of doing it. But there was one teacher I would actually work for, because she was as openly lesbian as it was possible to be under Section 28. I didn't fancy her, but I did want her respect because outside of celebrities, she was the only non-heterosexual adult I knew.

Isn't that propaganda/indoctrination/pushing an agenda?

AMANDA: Only in as much as showing that people like you can succeed and be visible/comfortable in their own skin is propaganda. As much as a lot of my presentation is for me, a significant chunk is also for others. I teach in a higher education setting, and I want to make sure I'm creating a safe learning space for LGBTQIA+ students. If they see me and think "This one's safe to come out to", or "Hey, someone a bit like me can be successful in an academic career" then that's a win.

KIT: Am I pushing an agenda? Absolutely. My agenda is that LGBT young people have access to the support they deserve, see their identities validated, and can learn in safe spaces.

Does the space you're in make a difference?

AMANDA: Yes, on several levels. Context is hugely important to me. I like sticking out a little bit, but not being totally inappropriate for the setting I'm in. So the kind of outfit I will feel comfortable in in a corporate setting is very different to the things I feel comfortable in at University. The other way in which context makes a difference is the potential for being a role model. The more likely I am to be in contact with younger people who may view me as an authority figure, the more likely I am to also try to be visibly queer.

KIT: There are practical elements for me as well – I like ties, but I've worked with students for whom that's an absolute no-go, simply because a tie can easily become a weapon to a distressed child who struggles to manage their behaviour.

AMANDA: I also do a fair amount of international travel (incl. to places like Russia and some of the more conservative parts of the US) and I don't always remember to take off the rainbow bracelets and badges, which may not be terribly clever of me. And there's also the thing where what looks queer in one culture doesn't necessarily translate as such in another.

KIT: I also find I'm actually more comfortable in LGBT spaces to *not* present queer. Possibly because the chances of my being misgendered fall dramatically, possibly because there's less need to use the "shorthand" I mentioned earlier when you're already *in* a safe space – and possibly because I'm obstinate and contrary.

Does your presentation ever place you at risk?

KIT: It alters the *type* of risk I'm exposed to: presenting in a more "butch/masculine" way means that I get significantly fewer cat calls, and men try to intimidate me less: I find it easier to hold my ground when they see me as "one of the boys" – or rather, they're often quicker to back down. But I also get more queerphobia and overt threats of violence.

That said, I'm white and hold a professional position and my accent underscores my middle-class credentials – all of which means if I chose to go to the police, I'd be listened to and taken seriously. It's worth noting that my accent alone has stopped a police officer who followed Amanda and me (I presume on the basis of our presentation).

AMANDA: I'm a white cis woman, so queering my presentation and standing out a little bit in certain settings will expose me to some risk but generally a lot less so than many other less privileged people. I sometimes have the privilege of not having to think about risk because my whiteness, my relatively posh English accent and my cisness override other considerations in people's perception of me.

KIT: There are definitely other factors that come into play that can elevate the level of risk. Case in point, I recently attended Pride with a group of friends, all of whom would be read, rightly or wrongly, as a woman. My partner was also with us, and is trans-feminine – they were in a simple skirt and blouse, whilst the rest of us were bedecked with sequins and glitter and various assorted flags. Despite this, it was my partner who was openly and unapologetically mocked by the conductor. Transmisogyny – the specific bigotry towards trans women and trans-feminine people – is a powerful and dangerous thing.

What's the one thing that makes it worthwhile for you?

AMANDA: When people - colleagues or students - feel safe to come out to me. When they tell me that me doing the things that I do has given them comfort or confidence.

KIT: Amanda's summed it up really. So much of teaching is a performance, yet our students are so candid about who they are. By being, albeit in a small way, my authentic, weird self, it's kind of a way of saying that *their* authentic selves are valid too – however weird they think they might be.

Slurs

I'm all for pride.

It's just a little hard when all you hear is "that's so gay" (and that's just the staff). So I'm sure you'll forgive me for becoming a little d e t a c h e d from the word "gay."

I've had a lifetime of it. (Maybe it's a generational thing. I never had "queer" hurled at me in the same way as "gay". To me, "queer" sounds like a *kiss*.)

On the playground, I was told I couldn't get cross about it because it meant "happy" (though I knew it wasn't. not really. It was the equivalent of, "Nice lunchbox... NOT!")

Later, it had the undertone of rumours. Rumours I didn't like. Rumours I did.

Either way – you can't control a rumour.

But it's never been more ubiquitous, more uncontrollable than when I started teaching.

And then there's the etymology:

The word gay by the 1890s had an overall tinge of promiscuity... The suggestion of immorality in the word can be traced back at least to the 1630s, if not to Chaucer:

*"But in oure bed he was so fressh and gay
Whan that he wolde han my bele chose."*

etymologyonline.com

Happy. Bright. Carefree. Flamboyant. Gaudy. Promiscuous. Deviant. Homosexual.

Like most slurs, it has roots in: misogyny, sex shaming, outraged moralism, desire for control, policing of agency.

Its roots don't care for us, or for others who are also – to this day – oppressed.

We don't talk of reclaiming it. Taking back ownership. We don't demand care in using it.

We know little of its history. ("It means happy!")

And when we're careless with our things, they get broken.



No, I didn't change my profile picture. Yes, I still care about LGBT rights.

A comment the other week struck a nerve or twenty: "I'm surprised you didn't do that Facebook rainbow thing. I thought you supported gay rights?"

I smiled weakly and muttered, "I've not really been on Facebook this weekend."

Here's my honest reply: There are various reasons I didn't use the Facebook app to make my face all rainbow: politically speaking, I was incensed that UKIP had been invited to London Pride (they were later disinvited, though they seemed to miss that memo), placing people of colour at risk; this was mirrored in the US when a trans woman was vilified for standing up for trans migrants amidst the celebrations for a same-gender marriage bill being passed nationwide. Ignoring trans women and POC during the parades that mark the anniversary of Stonewall – which was led, incidentally, by trans women of colour – struck a wrong note for me. And with a trans-led boycott of Facebook occurring due to the site's damaging "real name" policy, a rainbow profile app seemed... like lip service.

But frankly, it also seemed like just too much of a risk. It seemed no coincidence that of the approximately 30 – 40 of my Facebook friends who did change their profile picture, only four were people who openly identify as LGBT. A larger small handful were people who have made anti-LGBT comments to me previously – or even since.

I feared the conversations that might arise. I feared this being the time that my intensely high privacy settings failed and I was seen by a student, a parent, a governor. And given that the week before, a student had declared their wish to "smash their skulls in" if they ever encountered a "paedo" (apparently synonymous to them with "gay person"), I doubted any conversation that came up would be pleasant.

I'm out to staff in my school – a decision I by and large regret. This is a new experience for me: I'm a floordrobe fan in every possible way – closets just aren't my thing. But in a school where the homophobic comments are almost as prolific from staff as they are from students, and any murmur of complaint from me is written off as a bad sense humour, I'm left hoping I can slide under the radar before things get ugly.

I heard somewhere that LGBT teachers are less likely than our straight, cisgender counterparts to challenge LGBT related bigotry in the classroom. It doesn't surprise me in the slightest: in schools where homophobia and transphobia are allowed to go unchallenged, the risks to LGBT teachers is significantly higher. Lamentably, in my experience, the more that needs doing, the less safe I feel doing it.

The complexities of being out, semi-out, and not out at work: some experiences of a nonbinary peripatetic music teacher

I work in several primary schools as a peripatetic and at a weekend music school, teaching specific instruments, as well as classroom music lessons. I am visibly queer in my presentation, transgender, nonbinary and sometimes add the label genderqueer. I am also polyamorous, bisexual and kinky. Ideally, I would be completely out as all these things in all aspects of my life, but reality is not that simple. Below are examples of where I've been able to be out or semi-out at work, and where I haven't.

In schools, I don't correct adults or children who read me as a woman because I'm only in each individual school for a few hours per week, and I need to get on with my job of teaching without constantly being diverted into Gender 101 conversations. If I was in the same setting for more hours per week, I feel I could work with other staff to help them understand my gender and give students space and support to understand it too, as well as challenging a cissexist culture that may exist in the school, but not when I'm only there a few hours per week.

One of the organisations I teach for is very accepting of who I am, although I have never formally come out to them. I have had several conversations with managers about gender in general and my gender in particular and they've been appropriate and supportive. On one occasion a manager came to me to talk about a radio interview she'd heard with a nonbinary teenager and asked about how to go about using pronouns for nonbinary people.

Another manager was supportive when I asked a Jewish school I was due to start working at about their dress code and received the reply that women should wear skirts: she emailed straight away to say I shouldn't worry and she would phone the school to sort it out. I wear trousers at that school.

Recently this organisation asked for my biography for their website. I thought carefully about what pronouns to use in it, as I've gone with "she" so far in this job, not because I would feel uncomfortable discussing my pronouns and asking managers to use specific pronouns, but because I don't wish to lumber them with the task of becoming a Gender 101 class for my students, their parents and my schools. I feel their job is to get on with running the organisation and supporting students and teachers, not to correct pronouns and get side-tracked into explanations of my gender and reassurances I'm a suitable person to be working with children. I couldn't write a biography of my self as "she" -- I felt anxious just thinking about it--but "he" would open a can of worms for me and the organisation, so I compromised with "they", which I hope won't cause problems.

My obvious queerness and semi-outness whilst working for this organisation has probably lost me, and them, at least one student: when I told a parent I wouldn't be teaching the

following weekend he asked me why, and I replied that I was going to a retreat for polyamorous people. He was friendly, and the next time we met he asked how the retreat went, but shortly after he withdrew his child from lessons, citing a timing clash and saying they'd be back. They never returned, and although I can't say for sure this parent felt I was too queer to be teaching his child, I suspect this was a factor: no-one's going to say "I don't want this queer teaching my kid" after all.

My other teaching job is for a local authority. I asked my department's office manager to ask HR to update my recorded title from "Miss" to "Mx.". I continued to receive correspondence and payslips addressed to "Miss", so I asked her to chase it up. She was furious this hadn't been changed and my payslips have all been addressed to "Mx." since.

One of the schools I teach in is a large, traditional primary school (children wear shirts and ties, call the adults--except me--by title and surname, have house point and conduct mark systems, and the staff have a rigorous dress code). Some children are uncomfortable calling me by my first name, and prefer to use a title and surname. I've explained--on numerous occasions--that my title is "Mx.", but they revert to calling me "Miss" and I have to remind them. "Mx.", being something most cis people have never heard before, it's too unfamiliar for them to use comfortably.

At this school I teach a song which allows the opportunity for children be the protagonist and choose role to be for their turn. I feel this is a valuable activity, as it allows children a safe space to try on identities they may not otherwise get to. Seeing classes for 45 minutes every fortnight, I'm limited in how much of an ethos of acceptance and experimentation I can create, but I feel using this song is one of the ways I can take my children into this area. Other adults seeing this activity worry children are being "silly" and try to shut it down or police roles the children take on. I don't feel there's the understanding in the school, or that I work alongside the adults long enough to foster this understanding, for me to explain why this exploration is important. Coupled with the pervasive attitude in schools that music isn't as valuable or serious as, say, maths, I find it difficult to ask adults to trust me in this activity.

To return to dress code, the school's current code is expressed in binarist language which makes me panic. Recently, the Head canvassed staff feedback in preparation for revising the dress code, and I explained I found the binarist language difficult, and that it could be difficult for other transgender staff. I felt he listened to me respectfully and I found out today the new dress code uses less binarist wording and awaiting ratification from the school governors.

I'm aware that as a mostly self-employed nonbinary person anti-discrimination legislation does little to protect me, which influences how cautious I am being out at work. I would love it if I were able to be fully myself at work, but the combination of a cissexist society and the peripatetic nature of my work means I don't feel I can be.

-Mx Sally AngryQueer

Bigotry is not a mental illness

[content warnings for slurs, mental illness, self-harm, eating disorders, queerphobia]

At three, I had panic attacks so severe, the doctor diagnosed me with asthma.

That was the year Section 28 was enacted.

At twelve, I blamed the cat, brambles, must-have-had-an-itch for the strange marks on my arm.

That was the year I was told it's "dirty" to be bisexual, and the magazines told me "it's normal to look up to other girls and mistake it for a crush."

At fourteen, I climbed out of my English room window and hid under a picnic bench for half a day, too scared (of what? *I don't know*) to come back in.

That was the year I was put in detention when I told a class mate to *fuck off* for calling my friend a "P*ki c*nt."

At sixteen, I spent more time in a bottle than in class.

That was the year I told my best friend I was "a gay man trapped in a lesbian's body" and meant it more than either of us knew.

At seventeen, I fell down the rabbit hole and refused anything that read "eat me".

That was the year my friends and I had to run for our lives from a gang hollering "dyke" and "faggot" at our backs.

At nineteen, I was discharged, because my teen angst should be behind me now.

That was the year my best friend told me "breeders" deserve all we get, abuse and miscarriage and all.

At twenty-two, it took half an hour to leave the house, because I had to check the plugs and cooker and windows and lights and taps and door and door and door before I could go out.

That was the year my mentor wouldn't be in the same room alone as me, because I liked women and she didn't trust that.

At twenty-three, I tried four different anti-depressants, two therapists, and accepted I can only *manage*, not cure my mental illness.

That was the year I was advised *not to let them know you're... (queer?) yes, that* and I realised Section 28 still flourished.

In my mid to late twenties, I sat at rallies, and heard bigotry denounced...

...as crazy.

"It's insane how bigoted people can be!"

"Such nutters."

"Mental, isn't it?!"

It's difficult being a queer teacher.

But it's just as difficult being a mentally ill teacher.

My mental illness does not make me a bad teacher – or a bad person.

Do not use my mental illness to excuse bigots.

Do not use bigots to stigmatise my mental illness.

Self Care

Teachers. Activists. Two groups that are pretty bad at self-care. Case in point, a conversation with my partner:

"I'm struggling with this scheme of work. Maybe I should do the self-care thing instead?"

"Might be a good idea."

"I meant writing the article about self-care."

Example 2, a Facebook status before the last union strike:

"I work in excess of 60 hours a week [...] I don't mind doing this in terms of the impact on *me* but it has a negative impact on my pupils too."

It's a radical notion for many of us: that we are deserving of some time to ourselves – even time for the basics. (Be honest: how many days this week have you gone a full day without drinking, or even going to the bathroom?) Too many of us feel there's no time to be "selfish", that the marking/planning/saving the world simply won't do itself – and many of us feel pressured to prove the Daily Mail journalists wrong about our working habits.

But self-care is crucial: not just to avoid burn out, but to live. "We work to live," my mother often points out. "We don't live to work."

Finding what works for you can be tricky – particularly when the lines between your job and your hobby are blurred. Pre-teaching, reading and creative writing used to be a form of self-care for me; now as an English teacher, I tend to find myself planning lessons even around my holiday reads. Instead, I've taken up drawing, safe in the knowledge that anyone looking at my sketches won't be inviting me to try my hand at teaching art teaching anytime soon.

And a word of caution: don't even try to convince yourself of the "activism *is* my self-care" line. Activism is hard work. It's draining, and you *will* need a break.

Can't save the world if you've collapsed from exhaustion.

Now, if you'll excuse me – it's gone midnight and I've yet to stop working...

Self-Care Checklist

Have you:

- Eaten today?
 - An actual meal, not just a cereal bar on break duty?
- Had a drink?
 - That wasn't for the sole purpose of caffeine?
- Gone to the toilet? (Crass? Yes. But the teacher-habit of iron bladders only leads to infection.)
- Taken any medication you need to take?
- Done something for yourself today?
- Spoken to a friend and/or loved one in the last three days?
- Spoken to *anyone* who wasn't a colleague or student in the last three days? (No, the person at OCR *doesn't* count.) (Sorry, OCR Person. I'm sure you're lovely.)
- Had at least one full nights' sleep this week?
- Given yourself at least an afternoon/morning off this week?

PERMISSION SLIP

I, _____, give myself permission to
engage in the following act of self-care:

Signature: _____

On Teaching Consent via Photography

I'm getting my year seven class ready to go on a photography walk around the school. It's a small class – five in total – so each is able to have a camera of some description (built in to the learning task: what makes a good camera? Size and quality? Or lower grade photos but easier usability?) Before we go though, they must all be able to tell me the number one rule of photography.

“Always use sports mode!” To be fair, it's a good rule for a kid who disdains sitting still, but no.

“Always have the camera strap around your neck?”

“Even more important than that.”

“Always ask before taking a photo of someone.”

“And if they don't say 'yes'?”

“Don't take the photo!”

Photography is picking up pace in the school. Photos are used in a range of ways: on our welcome screens, evidencing learning in pupil books, and occasionally on the school website. And whilst we have their parent or carers' permission for images of all our students, that doesn't mean they don't get a say too. Some enjoy being photographed, some actively spurn it, and for some, it depends on their mood – and what the image is being used for. They always have the chance to view their images: I'll willingly delete images if they wish.

Why? There are a number of reasons. To hear my colleagues speak, an outsider would be forgiven for mistaking us for a group about to prowl down the catwalk. *Modelling*. It's the crux of what we do – we model writing, we model sums, we model art work. It's the Blue Peter *here's one I made earlier*. And it applies to our interactions with one another as well.

I got into photography in sixth form, when I realised a crucial point: being behind the camera spared my having to be in front of it. There's a photo of me still floating around the internet somewhere, at the Freshers' Ball in lower sixth. I'm crying, holding my hands in front of me and trying to hide behind someone else – yet the photo was still not only taken, but published online.

It's not a one-off. Non-consensual photography is prolific, whether it's sly candid or forcing an unwilling participant. One of my keenest priorities in this endeavour

is to ensure the kids not only have autonomy over their own image – but that they *know* they do as well.

Additionally, they know that the responsibility of seeking consent is up to them. Note I don't ask, “What do you do if they say 'no'?” but “What is they *don't say 'yes'?*” And they know that the person(s) featured in the image should maintain control – if a student says they're happy for the picture to be used in assembly but don't want it on the school website, we honour that. And consent can be withdrawn – students are free to change their minds.

Teaching consent in relation to photography and image sharing is crucial: everyone is a photographer nowadays. It's nigh on impossible to get a phone without a camera (my father spent three months trying to track down a usable Nokia 8210, before cracking and buying an iPhone). And the plethora of sites dedicated to shaming and humiliating, or otherwise gawping and leering at unsuspecting photography subjects makes it clear: our kids need to be taught how to navigate these issues – from *both* sides.

A previous school I was in had issues with students taking and sharing photos and videos without consent: of each other, of staff, of visitors. The solution was a lesson in being careful what images you share of yourself – missing the point by a wide mile. It's simply not enough to pretend our students will always be the victims of these – and more serious issues. Sometimes they will be the perpetrators: it's up to us to teach them not to be.

Consent is key. It's a PSHE buzzword, and not before time. But we run the risk in PSHE, when there's so *much* to fit in, and usually in not enough time, of things being lost. A student's having a bad day, or is off ill, or misses the point of a one-off lecture. We need to find other ways to embed the message.

Hopefully, what we are doing with this approach is modelling one way in which dialogue is created, in which communication is at the heart of negotiating permission – or a lack thereof – and the appropriate responses when that consent is denied.

Interestingly, since starting this approach, there has been an upward trend of students actively asking for their photograph to be taken – and decidedly fewer yelling or waving fists at an approaching photographer.

Next term, I hope to further this and explore true autonomy of photography: the selfie.

Conversations about drag: how transmisogyny is perpetuated in schools and how we can create safe spaces for gender exploration

What are your experiences of drag in school?

“At my year 11 Leavers’ Show, our Head Boy put on a short, too-tight dress that showed his boxers and prowled the stage to riotous laughter. There was no punchline other than him being dressed – poorly – in feminine clothes.”

“I can’t remember a single charity non-uniform day without someone dressing in full drag. Always one of the popular boys, and they’d change before catching the bus back home.”

“One of my placement schools ran a Eurovision contest, and all bar two form groups had a boy dress as a woman. Even the teachers did it – one conversation in the staffroom stands out, where they deliberately chose an incredibly masculine TA because, ‘it will be hilarious’. And yes, they knew I’m trans. Didn’t stop them.”

“I agreed to help with the make-up for a school production of Grease. During ‘Beauty School Drop Out’, one of the male TAs was to stumble about the stage in a short skirt, ripped tights and heels. I was told to make his make up, “as OTT and hideous as possible”, whilst he was asked not to shave for the week. There was no purpose I could see in this other than laughing at a man in drag.”

“There were decided gender roles set, even in genderplay. Girls could play boy’s parts in the school plays; boys could do drag for a quick laugh. I don’t ever recall it working the other way around.”

Isn’t it just a bit of a laugh? Where’s the issue?

“Mainstream drag is often incredibly misogynistic – for example, gendered slurs are often used in the artists’ names. It’s poking fun at women, especially transgender women, not celebrating them. If it were a celebrating, why would it be a comedy act?”

“It suggests that trans women are just men in dresses. Not only does this invalidate trans women, it also can lead to violence – even death. Drag queens can remove their costume and the risks that come with it; for trans women, it’s not a costume, it’s daily life.”

“Blackface is far too common in drag culture. It’s no coincidence black trans women are statistically more at risk of violence, even within the supposedly ‘LGBT’ community.”

“In my experience, the crux of the act is, ‘haha I’m dressed as a woman’. Compare that to say, Eddie Izzard, whose attire is, yes, an integral part of how we see him, but not the sole purpose of his act.”

“There seems to be a cut-off point at which it goes from okay – even cute – for young boys to dress up in tutus or Disney princess costumes to being regarded as abnormal. And that seems to be the point at which we start prescribing agency to kids. Like, it’s okay when they *don’t know any better* but the moment it’s a choice – that seems to scare a lot of people.”

Is there space for gender exploration in the creative arts?

“[It’s] pretty mainstay in theatre historically, for various reasons. I can’t see it as an issue, as long as it’s done respectfully, and students are aware of the historical context of cross-gender acting in plays.”

“[I feel that] playing “woman” in a school play would have been viewed a more legitimate thing by peers/teachers than experimenting outside of the drama class/stage.”

“Absolutely! Creativity, especially in schools, is all about exploration of identities – self and others. Gender is a crucial part of that – *why shouldn’t* it be explored?”

“Yes – but it needs to be done with care, or it risks causing trans students more harm.”

“By the time they come up to secondary, children have often been exposed to transphobia in the media, and most staff aren’t equipped or trained to tackle that.”

“I’d love to say ‘yes’. But I’d honestly be too afraid of parental and SLT kickback to try it.”

“Advocating for everyone to stick rigidly to the expectations of presentation and behaviour for their gender is obviously ludicrous. But there are ways of playing with gender and letting it be a thing to be explored and breaking gender rules that aren’t actively harmful to transgender kids.”

Other thoughts on drag

“Drag has a rich history, which seems to have got lost somewhere down the line. Something that once provided a safe haven for gender non-conforming folk has turned mainstream. The drag culture that most people are exposed to nowadays has fallen into the hands of the very people it once sought to escape.”

“Drag can be an incredibly subversive tool for poking fun at gender norms – but you *have* to punch up.”

“It’s key to remember drag as we know it today exists in a historical context. I suspect that many drag queens or transvestites of the 60s would identify today as transgender women; that language didn’t exist on such a scale as it does now. It’s called a ‘movement’ for a reason.”

“Drag queens were the only people who ever showed me any warmth/kindness/ time. The gay world, and unfortunately the queer and trans world too, are much more receptive and welcoming to masc/butch presenting people, and can be specifically hostile to AMAB femmes, so I’ll always hold a very positive place in my heart for the drag queens who welcomed me when others in my community turned their backs.”