'Laughing ourselves out of the closet': comedy as a queer pedagogical form

Seán Henry, Audrey Bryan & Aoife Neary

Submit your article to this journal ⎘

View related articles ⎘

View Crossmark data ⎘

Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group

ARTICLE

'Laughing ourselves out of the closet': comedy as a queer pedagogical form

Seán Henry [a], Audrey Bryan[b] and Aoife Neary[c]

aFaculty of Education, Edge Hill University, Lancashire, United Kingdom; bSchool of Human Development, Dublin City University, Drumcondra, Dublin, Ireland; cSchool of Education, University of Limerick, Limerick, Ireland

ABSTRACT

This paper explores comedy as a *queer pedagogical form* that subverts problematic representational tropes of queerness pervading mainstream depictions of queer experience. Articulating 'form' less as a fixed arrangement of characters, images, objects, and ideas, and more as a kind of *formation* that positions these in dynamic relation to the wider context in which comedies are encountered, we mobilise the idea of *queer pedagogical forms* to capture how comedy can foster new modes of thinking about and embodying queerness for, and with, audiences. Drawing on specific examples from *Schitt's Creek* and *Derry Girls*, we document the potential of specific comedic modalities (e.g. irony, sarcasm, irreverence, and slapstick) to foster alternative representations of queerness, in which normative tropes are poked fun at, problematised, and reimagined. Through these examples, we demonstrate how comedies can enable us to 'laugh ourselves out of the closets' we live by, feel, navigate, and embody.

Introduction

> We're not teaching them a lesson, we're showing them what life could be like . . . I never learn when I feel like I'm being taught a lesson.

This statement made by Dan Levy, co-producer and actor in the situational comedy (sitcom) *Schitt's Creek* in the context of *Best Wishes, Warmest Regards* – a documentary exploring the Canadian sitcom's commercial success – ironically captures the show's *pedagogical* significance. Levy's comments foreground the tension that brings us to this paper: namely, the pedagogical capacity of comedies to foster new kinds of queer representations in ways that at the same time avoid doing so within a trite or moralistic tenor. Our purpose is to explore how comedies can enact a kind

CONTACT Seán Henry ✉ sean.henry@edgehill.ac.uk Faculty of Education, Edge Hill University, St Helens Road, Lancashire L394QP, United Kingdom

of queer pedagogy, the significance of which is realised less by any heavy-handed attempt to proscribe who and/or what *is* or *could be* 'queer,' and more by their capacity to subvert some of the tropes often appealed to in representing queerness. It is in these terms that we position select comedies as examples of *queer pedagogical forms*, where certain representational tropes of queerness (e.g. as vulnerable, at-risk, or in need of 'coming out' to be 'happy') can be resisted and refashioned anew in and through an attention to the dynamism of audiences' encounters with such comedies themselves.

Our move to thinking about comedies as pedagogical forms that foster these alternative kinds of representational tropes arises out of an interest in the more general increase in queer representations across film and television in recent years. Historically, the first of these tropes were typically tied to a moral framework where queer characters were depicted as 'abhorrent' figures. Representations of such characters as sad, suffering, in despair, tragic and/or dying quickly dominated in this context. Key mainstream examples include *Philadelphia*, *Angels in America*, *Milk*, *Boys Don't Cry*, *Laramie Project*, *Brokeback Mountain*, *The Hours*, *The Crying Game*, *The Danish Girl* and *Carol*. Several of these films also include the deaths of central queer characters – a phenomenon that, over time, has become known as 'bury your gays' (Birchmore and Hensman Kettrey 2022). Relatively recent examples include *Killing Eve*, *Orange is the New Black*, *Game of Thrones*, *Atomic Blonde*, *The Handmaid's Tale* and *Degrassi*. Indeed, by way of context, in the 2015–2016 season, out of 35 women-loving-women (WLW) characters on television (making up 1% of the overall population of women on television that season), 10 died, bringing the figure of WLW character deaths to 166 since 1976 (Waggoner 2018).

Thereafter, there arrived the somewhat more celebratory, glossy and/or homonormative-leaning representations of queer 'happiness' in film and TV. Examples include *Will and Grace*, *Modern Family*, *Glee*, *Queer Eye for the Straight Guy*, *The Kids are Alright*, *Happiest Season*, *Love, Simon*, *The L-Word* (and its more contemporary inception as *The L-Word: Generation Q*) and very recently, *Uncoupled*. On the whole, representations of queer characters across these films and TV shows largely reproduce homonormative representations of queer characters and their happiness, thereby preserving cis-heteronormative and chronological arrangements of temporality and happiness. Films of more recent times tried to offer 'impossibly "good" or positive characters;' neither of which represent the complexity of personhood (Halberstam and Rouleau 2021). In reflecting, for instance, on the character of Taylor Mason in *Billions*, Halberstam and Rouleau (2021) point out how such representations might be homonormative (Duggan 2002), cautioning that we ought 'to be careful not to imagine . . . that the appearance of a non-binary body here, a trans body there, a queer relationship somewhere else, signals new worlds of possibility. It might just indicate that capitalism has found its next market' (2021, 3).

With this conglomerate of queer representation in mind, in this paper, we mobilise the idea of *queer pedagogical forms* to capture the shifting ways in which comedies can foster new modes of thinking about and embodying queerness for, and with, audiences. Thinking with Bergdahl and Langmann (2018), we say 'foster' out of a sensitivity to the fostering task of education, which we tie to the capacity of pedagogical encounters to expose what is studied or 'passed on' in pedagogical spaces (in this context, representations of queerness) to new or alternative futures. Our specific description of comedies as queer pedagogical *forms* in the context of education's fostering task is central in this regard, particularly in how we understand 'form' less as a fixed arrangement of characters, images, objects, and ideas, and more as a kind of *formation* that positions such characters, images, objects, and ideas in dynamic relation to the wider context in which comedies are encountered. In this sense, we draw from Todd's (2023) reading of Bourriaud, who, in the context of observing contemporary art practices, writes of how 'we ought to talk of "formations" rather than "forms" … present-day art shows that form only exists in the encounter and in the dynamic relationship by an artistic proposition with other formations, artistic or otherwise' (Todd 2023, 99). Todd's reading of Bourriaud's distinction between form and formation is helpful for understanding the queer pedagogical significance of comedies as it allows for a more dynamic and relational understanding of these to emerge, in which typical representations of queerness are 'formed, deformed, and transformed' through audiences' encounters with such comedies themselves (Todd 2023, 101). Homing in on the relational and context-bound nature of 'form' at the heart of some comedies is important as it allows us to tap into their generative pedagogical potential (generative in the sense of fostering new kinds of queer representations that arise from processes of formation, deformation, and transformation), without at the same time streamlining this fostering task within a moralistic or instrumentalist register that flattens the dynamic ways in which comedies shape, and are shaped by, representations of queerness within affectively charged social and political encounters.

Our paper proceeds in four main stages. We start by offering a rationale for our turn to comedies as queer pedagogical forms. This rationale is worthwhile because of the multiple other pedagogically significant forms in which queer representations can be fostered (e.g. tragedy, melodrama, gothic, and horror), as well as because of the recent turn to humour, laughter, and affect in educational research about queer experiences and issues of social justice more broadly (Mayo 2010; Stengel 2014; Quinlivan 2018; Zembylas 2018). From here, we move to the pedagogical significance of comedies themselves, exploring, with reference to some contemporary mainstream TV examples, how they can form, deform, and transform some of the conventional tropes appealed to in representing queerness. Specifically, we suggest that comedies, using humour as a 'slantwise' tool of engagement, can disrupt typical representational

tropes by fostering other kinds of queer subjectivities and queer futures that resist positioning queer people within 'at-risk' narratives of victimhood and vulnerability. From here, we suggest that comedies can also enact a queer pedagogy by deforming and transforming the trope of the 'closet,' exposing the limits of the 'coming out' discourses that conventionally surround queer experiences. Third, we reflect on how comedies can affectively transgress notions of temporality and happiness that characterise heteronormative and homonormative representations of queerness, before offering some final reflections on the overall significance of these queer pedagogical forms for progressing how we think about education, affect, and social justice.

Why comedies? Humour, laughter, education

We have chosen to focus on comedies as queer pedagogical forms given the association of the form of comedy with *qualities* like humour and *experiences* like laughter, both of which have been positioned as educationally significant in recent years (Mayo 2014). We begin from the position that humour and laughter are connected though distinct. As Zembylas notes, 'although *humour* and *laughter* are often used interchangeably, there is an important distinction between them' (2018, 302). Indeed, Zembylas points to how laughter can be understood as a corporeal *experience*, a bodily reaction that happens automatically, often without reason. As Vlieghe explains, an important characteristic of laughter is that 'we involuntarily lose ourselves' (2014, 150) because of the physical reactions of our body in certain situations. In contrast to the phenomenon of laughter as a bodily experience, humour can refer to a quality of the comic that can lead to laughter in particular instances, e.g. oddity, jocularity, irony, fun, and so on (Zembylas 2018).

Humour, of course, can be used and experienced in ways that reaffirm potentially oppressive social arrangements and inequities. Ahmed (2008), for example, has pointed to the capacity of humour and laughter to orient people towards normative and potentially exclusionary understandings of happiness that keep the status quo intact. Mayo (2010) makes a similar point in the context of education, pointing to the varying ways in which humour can be deployed to reproduce structural marginalisation in educational contexts. Indeed, as Pailer (2009) asserts, the laughter engendered by comedy can sometimes 'smooth over differences' and at other times 'exacerbate them' by reasserting 'hierarchical distinctions within groups, to exclude others, or to undermine hierarchical relations and their presumptions' (Pailer 2009, 8). In this sense, humour and laughter can act as an 'instrument of discrimination, or of ridicule and humiliation' (Pailer 2009, 8).

This critique notwithstanding, humour and laughter have also been theorised in connection to the possible transgression and transformation of collective experiences in school/classroom settings. Mayo (2010), for instance, has pointed

to the transformative pedagogical effects of incongruity as a central character-istic of humour. By incongruity, Mayo is referring to humour's capacity to disrupt the status quo (to 'short circuit accepted meaning') by bringing together see-mingly unresolvable ideas and/or experiences that, through their temporary 'coming together,' expose other ways of being and relating in the world (2010, 511). Put differently, humour enacts an 'incongruous' or unsettling quality by playing on the fact that the supposed fixedness and security of established norms are not so fixed or secure after all. Furthermore, it is the indirectness or distance afforded by the enjoyment of jokes, wordplay, irony, etc., that allows audiences to be unsettled by the incongruity of humour, without at the same time being alienated or outrightly confronted by it. In this way, humour plays 'out what might be said and what could be tried' but in ways that provisionally manage to create a 'sense of safety via shared laughter with its disruptions' (Mayo 2010, 510).

Building specifically on the role laughter can play in educational settings, Mayo points to how laughter can build a sense of the collective across differ-ence by engendering 'a momentary pause, a surprising fraction of time in which the antagonisms that precede the moment of concord abate ever so slightly in order to allow what one might think of as contingent communication' (2010, 511). Read in these terms, Mayo's account of laughter speaks to that of Lewis, who argues that the physical nature of laughter can act as 'a type of embodied deconstruction where normalised discourses and power hierarchies demon-strate their artificial and thus fugitive natures' (2010, 637) in ways that can build alternatives to 'the givenness of the social world' (McLaren 1999, 289). Humour and laughter, in this sense, can disrupt the status quo while also generating new, provisional forms of solidarity that 'move participants out of their usual, habitual understandings, and into new relations with others' (Mayo 2010, 521).

Mayo is not alone in her attention to the new, potentially transgressive, kinds of relationship that humour and laughter can enact in the context of education and its difficulties. Stengel (2014), for example, makes the point that laughter is not only the result of intentional or unintentional humour but also occurs in the face of difficult circumstances. In such situations, Stengel (2014) suggests that laughter diffuses difficult affect and, in doing so, clears a space for response rather than reaction. It allows the one laughing to think and feel through immediate discomfort or delight towards a considered action … ' (Stengel 2014, 201). For Stengel, laughter can render students' and teachers' discomfort more bearable (the example of laughing at a funeral service comes to mind), and because of this creates an opening for us to respond in educational settings to others in less defensive and more empathic and considered ways. Building on Stengel's perspective here, Zembylas (writing in the context of laughter for Holocaust education) suggests 'that the outcome of laughter' in education can be 'both concealing and revealing' at one and the same time: 'it is

concealing, because it diverts attention away from the discomfort that threatens the self-as-is or [one's] status in a sociopolitical situation . . . [it] is also revealing, because it directs attention towards listening more carefully and seeing more richly' (2018, 304). In these terms, laughter can signal both the potential break-down of experience, 'a breakdown that is integral to and, in some cases, necessary for growth' (Stengel 2014, 206) as well as 'the development of self-as-might-be in a potentially new social and discursive space' (Stengel 2014, 201). Indeed, it is the potential of laughter to disrupt social hierarchies and embody other ways of being in the world that leads Vlieghe, Simons, and Masschelein to the conclusion that 'laughter not only grants the possibility to revolt against the unequally structured organisation of the Western schooling apparatus and society, but moreover that it might constitute a moment of radical equality or democracy' itself (2010, 720). In other words, laughter as a modality has the potential to foster alternative social and political arrangements.

Having situated our turn to comedies within this wider concern for humour and laughter within educational research, we now move to providing some illustrative examples of comedies as queer pedagogical forms, focusing espe-cially on their capacity to deform, form, and transform typical representations of queerness, and in this way foster alternative queer futures.

Narratives of victimhood/vulnerability

A particularly vivid example of how comedies can form, deform, and transform the representational tropes of queerness can be found in those scenes from *Schitt's Creek* involving Connor, a self-identified 'gay kid living in a town that makes [him] wanna throw up' who features in Season 1, Episode 11, 'Little Sister.' In these scenes, audiences encounter comedic modes such as irony, sarcasm, irreverence and slapstick humour in a way that potentially disrupts dominant representations of queer youth as vulnerable and in need of protec-tion. Assuming that Connor is 'struggling with his sexuality' and having trouble 'fitting in,' his teacher, Jocelyn, approaches David (while he is purchasing toilet paper in the local store) to ask if he will speak to Connor to reassure him that 'things only get better' – a (not so) subtle dig at Dan Savage's *It Gets Better* campaign (So far, so familiar!).[1] The irony of the situation is that things have not exactly gotten easier or 'better' for David; most immediately, he is jealous because Stevie, the motel clerk with whom he has a 'friends with benefits' arrangement, is flirting with Grant, the motel handyman, whom David describes as 'one of those guys that has a candy bowl of condoms on his bedside table.' Despite being preoccupied with his own problems and hence reluctant to offer life advice to anyone else (As he puts it to Jocelyn: 'The idea of me life-coaching another human being should scare you. A LOT!'), David is ultimately persuaded to impart some words of adult wisdom to the 'troubled' gay teen and slowly

begins to embrace the idea of becoming a 'mentor to a teen in crisis' who will be 'helping to change his life.'

David's and Connor's first (and only) 'mentoring' session gets off to a bad start; in classic slapstick style, David accidentally knocks over a display of the solar system just as Connor enters the room. The incongruity of this slapstick moment with the 'teen in crisis' motif provides us with a major clue that David's encounter with Connor is not going to run smoothly. Connor senses the irony that David – who happens to be sporting a flamboyant, floral sweater and cropped pants – should be giving anyone else advice about 'adjusting' or 'fitting in.' Complete with dramatic hand gestures, the self-assured Connor is appalled by David's fashion sense and questions his ability to 'help' him ('WHO, WHO, WHO *are* you?;' 'Why would I talk to you?;' 'Look at your pants!'). Connor immediately rejects David's depiction of him as someone who is having a hard time fitting in, clarifying that 'The issue is not me not fitting in. It's me not *wanting to* fit in!' When David asks him if he's 'gonna be okay' and if he's 'stable' (another reference to stereotypical representations of queer youth as vulnerable and psychologically unbalanced), Connor refuses to dignify the question with an answer, asking him to buy him some beer for a party he is attending that night instead. In an ironic twist, Connor (who David subsequently describes as 'some snippy teen who told me my life was a mess') ends up being the one to offer David advice, upbraiding him for his failure to do something about the fact that Stevie is currently 'on a date with someone else' and 'instead of doing something about it, you're here talking to me, a kid who practically has no respect for you.' Even more ironically, David later acts on the teen's advice – telling Stevie that 'word on teenstreet is our little friends with benefits situation is a bad idea.'

Encountering the affective modes of irony, irreverence, slapstick, and sarcasm throughout these scenes enables audiences to question a number of dominant, problematic representations of queer youth, such as the assumption that they are automatically vulnerable and invariably struggle with their sexuality or gender identity, or the misleading mantra that 'it gets better.' Refusing to 'fit in,' and actively rejecting the protectionist logic of mainstream discourses of queer youth, Connor embodies and exudes queer youth agency while illuminating the misguidedness of well-meaning initiatives premised on a homogenising logic of queer youth vulnerability or overly simplistic portrayals which suggest that It (necessarily) Gets Better. As such, *Schitt's Creek* invokes comedic tones and affective atmospheres which form, deform and transform typical depictions of queerness. It opens up spaces for audiences to encounter more reflexive, expansive understandings of what it means to be queer, and in particular what it means to be young and queer against a backdrop of problematic mainstream depictions of queer youth as automatically vulnerable, at risk, isolated, unstable and unable to 'fit in' or 'adjust' by virtue of their sexuality and/or gender identity. In this sense, it has the capacity (in spaces like classrooms, for

example) to foster other kinds of relations to queerness, in which the agency and complexities of queer lives are brought to the fore.

'The closet'

'The closet' has been a longstanding source of contention in queer critique, with discourses of 'coming out' being positioned alongside a politics of inclusion that links disclosure and visibility to acceptance by oneself and others. Coming out, so understood, has been likened to a homonormative discourse that legitimates the 'inclusion' of queer people within the terms of heterosexuality's uninterrupted social, cultural, economic, and political dominance (Duggan 2002). The frequency with which the trope of the closet features in cultural and media representations of queerness has been explored for some time, with scholars pointing to the effects of this trope in terms of 1) propounding melancholic stereotypes of queer people and the process of 'coming out' (Rasmussen 2004; Todd and MacGillivray 2007 and 2) reifying queerness within a logic of identity that has a core 'essence' to be declared and accepted by (heterosexual) others (Butler 1997; Kopelson 2002). In this context, thinking about comedies as queer pedagogical forms is a useful approach in foregrounding the capacity of these to deform the dominance of the closet in queer representations, while at the same time fostering a potentially transformative queer utopianism that resists what Muñoz (2019) refers to as the 'presentism' of pragmatic gay identity politics.

In developing how comedies as pedagogical forms can resist melancholic representations of the closet, we turn firstly to Season 5, Episode 11 of *Schitt's Creek*. This episode, called 'Meet the Parents,' sees Johnny Rose welcoming Patrick's parents, Clint and Marcy, to the Rosebud motel ahead of Patrick's surprise birthday party, which David (Patrick's partner) has organised. Through a series of misunderstandings, Johnny mistakenly 'outs' Patrick to his parents, leaving David surprised at the news that Clint and Marcy had only ever considered him their son's 'business partner.' Several aspects to this episode are significant from a pedagogical perspective. Firstly, in encountering David's supportive reaction to the news (telling Patrick that 'coming out' is 'something you should only do on your own terms'), audiences are confronted by an alternative kind of 'coming out' story, where expectations of anger, betrayal, or disappointment are displaced by tenderness and compassion: in this sense, what audiences might 'bring' to the moment is transformed by the nature of David's response, deforming certain tropes of the closet in the process. This resistance to the typically melancholic nature of coming out stories is further emphasised by the positive response of Clint and Marcy (who are upset less because of their son being gay, and more because he couldn't tell them sooner), as well as by David's irreverence for the closet itself (he says to Patrick that he will 'laugh himself out of the closet' at the news that his parents are in town, and

also plans with Clint and Marcy to keep their son 'in the closet' till the evening's events). Audiences' laughter at David's irreverence is pedagogically significant in deforming and transforming the affective landscape of the closet itself, making alternative kinds of affective encounters with the closet possible without at the same time falling into a trite or moralistic sentimentality (achieved, for example, in the juxtaposition of Patrick's coming out experience with David's own story, who recalls how: 'I brought this couple home one day in college, and just told my parents to deal with it').

Schitt's Creek is not the only comedy of interest to us in exploring the queer potential of the genre as a pedagogical form in relation to the trope of the closet. Indeed, audiences' encounters with Clare in *Derry Girls* further points to the capacity of comedies to deform and transform the typical trajectories we might come to associate with the coming out process, fostering different kinds of possibilities for the closet itself. Set in the 1990s as the Northern Ireland peace process was underway, *Derry Girls* has been applauded for the skillfulness with which it manages to combine comedy with great poignancy in relation to the so-called Troubles, serving as both a cultural outlet for, and container of, societal-level trauma and collective pain (Coulter 2022; Long 2021). The show deploys numerous comedic and affective modalities to illuminate the absurdity of the Northern Irish conflict as well as other forms of prejudice and discrimination that were prevalent in that historical moment, such as homophobia, in order to transcend them.

Unlike the reactions of Clint, Marcy or David in *Schitt's Creek*, when Clare reveals her lesbian identity to her friend Erin, Erin reacts badly. She tells Clare not to 'blame her' (Erin) for being a lesbian, and is incredulous at the thought of Clare '[fancying] girls.' It is encountering Clare's response to Erin's discomfort that deforms and transforms the closet in new directions for audiences. Rather than try to win Erin's approval (which we might expect of her) Clare instead turns the process of coming out on its head, responding to Erin's discomfort with sarcasm ('[Fancying girls] is a literal requirement, Erin!') and with put-downs at Erin's expense ('I'm not interested in you like that, look at the state of you!'). Indeed, when Erin says to Clare that she shouldn't come out at all and that she should 'go back in,' Clare resists, stating simply 'I don't want to go back in.' Like David, Clare refuses the significance of the closet with the agency here, positioning it as something to be wilfully rejected rather than conformed to. Through this, the shame of the closet is deformed for audiences, queered even, and a new way of thinking about Clare and her sexuality brought to the fore. Crucially, this moment is pedagogical in the sense of it casting light on alternative kinds of queer representations, but it achieves this pedagogical effect without being moralistic precisely through Clare's humour: through sarcasm, her agency is preserved, and her story safeguarded from the status of a woe-begotten morality tale. Furthermore, in Clare's refusal to cow-tow to Erin's reaction, Clare carves out new frontiers for herself, beyond the power

dynamic of having to be accepted by Erin. And while Erin soon comes round and becomes one of Clare's biggest supporters (wearing a rainbow badge to demonstrate her allyship, along with their other friends), we as an audience know that Clare's navigation and ultimate refusal of the closet doesn't rely on Erin's approval in advance, nor can it be streamlined within a neat narrative of what 'being' lesbian 'is' or might be. In this way, the power of the closet is deformed, audiences' expectations reworked, and the possibility for new kinds of queer futures passed on for the coming generation.

The temporalities of happiness

We turn lastly to some of the ways that the concept of happiness is mobilised via comedy to form, deform, and transform heteronormative arrangements of time. Freeman (2010) illustrates how normativity is reproduced through the banal, chronological logics of time. She terms this 'chrononormativity' and argues that these chronological temporal arrangements bind people together and make them 'feel coherently collective' in the (re)production of normativity (Freeman 2010, 3). In this way, time is also cis-heteronormative. Muñoz (2019) calls this 'straight time,' drawing attention to how these logics can seem like 'a self-naturalising temporality' to those who are privileged by it. But, as Muñoz (2019) explains, this common-sense temporality has served to 'make queers think that both the past and the future do not belong to them.' The concept of 'queer temporality' then interrogates these chrononormative/cis-heteronormative logics of time, calling 'reproductive futurism' into question, and facilitating alternative temporalities to emerge, whereby futures can be imagined outside of normative social scripts prescribed by the 'paradigmatic markers of life experience' – birth, marriage, reproduction and death, for example (Halberstam 2005, 3). Muñoz articulates this as a 'queer utopia' and asserts that 'to live inside straight time and ask for, desire, and imagine another time and place is to represent and perform a desire that is both utopian and queer' (2019, 26). This is not a claim to a queerness or a queer future that can be known, but rather, it is to 'extend a glance toward that which is forward-dawning, anticipatory illuminations of the not-yet-conscious' (Muñoz 2019, 28).

The concept of happiness too is bound up in these cis-heteronormative, chronological logics of time. We are orientated collectively towards happiness as a future, heteronormative 'good,' and there is 'a pressure to inherit this line, a pressure that can speak the language of love, happiness, and care, which pushes us along specific paths . . . [and] insists that happiness will follow if we do this or that' (Ahmed 2006, 90). In this way, happiness proffers itself as a promise and quest for happiness that sends particular 'happy objects' forth and maps out cis-heteronormative directions (Ahmed 2010, 160). The tendency then, as Ahmed points out, is to 'endure our struggles in the present by deferring our hope for happiness to some future point' (2010, 183). In a queering of

happiness, Ahmed sets forth the idea of having 'the freedom to live a life that deviates from the paths of happiness, wherever that deviation takes us' (2010, 195). This 'freedom to be unhappy' activates 'a new political ontology' that finds joy in deviating from the straight path and opens up to the potential in 'happenstance:' becoming 'alive to chance, to chance arrivals, to the perhaps of a happening ... the happy future is the future of the perhaps' (Ahmed 2010, 198).

There have been many examples of film and TV productions that play with and destabilise chrononormative/cis-heteronormative formations of temporality and happiness in queer cinema and TV over time (see, for example, 'Scorpio Rising,' the 'Adventures of Priscilla Queen of the Desert,' 'Hedwig and the Angry Inch,' 'But I'm a Cheerleader,' and 'Tangerine'). But, there are also several recent mainstream examples, all on the small screen. Indeed, as Halberstam and Rouleau (2021) explicates, 'television can do something that film can't do right now because it offers longer duration ... you can tell much more complicated stories, slowly, and you can avoid being limited to good or bad versions of any given character.' An illustrative example of recent mainstream comedic productions that push queerly at and de-stabilise cis-heteronormative conceptualisations of temporality and happiness is *Schitt's Creek*, in particular the final episode of the series entitled 'Happy Ending.'

The episode begins with David discovering on the morning of his and Patrick's (outdoor) wedding that their officiant has cancelled due to bad weather. While the local townspeople come together to help the couple in their preparations, Patrick arranges a massage in his apartment for the anxious David, leaving a note for the masseur to 'take very good care' of his fiancé. Unintended by Patrick, the massage transpires to be an erotic one, with David recalling his 'happy ending' to Patrick and his best friend Stevie when they return to Patrick's apartment. Initially outraged by the mistake, Patrick is calmed down by David's assurances of his love for him, though this does not prevent David from covertly communicating his enjoyment of the happy ending as an aside to Stevie. Soon after this, the wedding itself takes place at Town Hall. Alexis walks David down the aisle in 'a white, floor length gown,' with the local women's a cappella group, the Jazzagals, singing a rendition of Tina Turner's 'The Best.' David's mother, Moira, acts as officiant in a white and gold gown, donning a high liturgical headpiece similar to a papal mitre. Patrick is wearing a conventional black wedding suit, while David is sporting a black suit jacket and bowtie accompanied with a black knee-length skirt, black socks and black boots.

At first glance, 'Happy Ending' appears to veer towards a homonormative conclusion to the series in David and Patrick's wedding day. The stresses and tribulations of wedding preparations dominate the episode as there appears to be a quest to achieve 'the perfect day.' Yet, at each turn, the episode resists and disrupts the teleological formulaic of cis-heteronormative relationships and

ideals of happiness in ways that hold much pedagogical potential for education around gender and sexual diversity. The massage Patrick organises for David is the first, formative marker in the episode's ultimate queering of happiness and time. When Patrick initially finds out about the 'Happy Ending' massage, he appears horrified, but David reassures him of his love for him and Patrick (and the scene) moves quickly and queerly along; a queerness that is buoyed by the lightheartedness of David's enjoyment.

From a queer pedagogical perspective, this scene provides a generative, sideways entry point to the diversity of ways that people 'do' marriage and relationships. The lighter comical performance of David mingles with the initially hurt and confused performance of Patrick, lightly and non-affrontingly fostering questions around the concepts of monogamy and commitment, and their connection to marriage. The wedding ceremony scene is replete too with a conglomerate of motifs and moments that queer the hetero/homonormativity of the 'happy ending' of marriage: David's skirt and suit jacket ensemble, the pop music playing throughout the ceremony, the campy performance of Moira as the celebrant in full papal attire, combined with Alexis 'giving away' David whilst wearing a white wedding dress. Overall, in this scene, all these aspects work together to both deform and transform the heteronormativity/homonormativity of marriage and, at the same time, maintain a serious and meaningful emphasis on love, commitment and happiness. Indeed, there is much queer pedagogical promise in this scene too. Delving into the decisions around all of these aspects has the potential to facilitate discussions around topics such as gender norms and stereotypes; patriarchal power and traditions; religious diversity and cis-heteronormativity and legitimacy. It has the potential to yield discussion too about the mores and patterns of ritual and celebration across contexts, and their relationships with the politics of recognition and legitimacy (Neary 2017). Furthermore, the very function of marriage itself, alongside the role of the state, has the potential to come to the fore in any discussion around this scene.

Moving forward

Over the course of this paper, we have gestured to the capacity of particular comedies to form, deform, and transform conventional representational tropes of queerness. To understand what it might mean to speak of comedies as queer pedagogical forms, we focused on two particular comedies as illustrative examples (*Schitt's Creek* and *Derry Girls*), exploring how comedic qualities like humour, irreverence, irony, slapstick and sarcasm have the effect of curating pedagogical kinds of encounters for audiences that usher in new ways of thinking about and embodying queerness. We see these encounters as formations, rather than forms in a static sense, given the dynamic ways in which these comedies push

back against tropes that tandem around discourses of vulnerability, the closet, and happiness.

As we have suggested, to think of these comedies as pedagogical is not to instrumentalise these forms within a clunky or heavy-handed approach that 'teaches about' queerness and what it is or could be. Returning to Dan Levy's opening observation that *Schitt's Creek* is not about 'teaching people a lesson,' we propose pedagogical strategies that eschew didacticism in favour of pedagogical forms which have the potential to represent queerness in new ways, *thereby* transforming how queer characters and their relationships are understood (Horeck 2021). In other words, to think of these forms as pedagogical is to recognise the potentially unanticipated ways in which these comedies can deform, form, and transform queer representations, allowing alternative representations of queerness to be fostered 'slantwise' (Quinlivan 2018, 87; Ahmed 2006) or 'sideways' (Ivinson and Renold 2013) in ways that are non-affronting but nonetheless potentially generative, and disrupting. While beyond the scope of this paper, we see the disruptiveness of this potential as significant for how we think about not only the representation of queerness itself but also about the more general binary often set up in queer discourse between the normative and the non-normative. From the marriage of David and Patrick to the teenage experiences of Connor and Claire, both comedies (in the affective landscapes they open up) expose the nuanced ways in which the lives of queer characters at once straddle, blur, and transcend the push and pull of assimilation into heteronormativity, on the one hand, and resistance to this on the other (Horeck 2021).

Furthermore, reflecting on comedies as queer pedagogical forms draws attention to how the *embodied* and the *affective* can act as alternative entry points into exploring so-called 'difficult' or 'controversial' social issues in classroom contexts, cutting across the tendency to position critical pedagogical work only within the realm of the cognitive, expressed (for instance) through liberal models of argumentation or debate. Indeed, as several scholars of affect in education note, attuning to affect and affective failure has the potential to deterritorialise affective flows around potentially explosive topics, releasing such topics into new avenues of possibility (Quinlivan 2018; Renold 2018; Hickey-Moody 2013). From the irreverence of David to the sarcastic wit of Claire, comedies stage encounters for audiences that foster other ways of feeling and relating, enabling social issues (for example, queerness) to be accessed differently in classroom spaces, beyond the streamlining effects of typical culturally mediated representations. These other ways of feeling and relating can be accessed through such factors as the physicality of laughter, the heightened emotionality of comedic tension, the subtle glance at a classmate as they too laugh alongside you, the unexpected joys students can experience seeing their otherwise 'serious' teacher 'letting go' of their 'seriousness' for a while, and so on. All of these dimensions come together to deform, form, and transform typical representational tropes,

troubling their limits, and in this way fostering other ways for queerness to be encountered and understood. In this sense, our turn to comedies sheds light on the affective complexities of pedagogy itself, and of the representations that both shape, and are shaped by, these same complexities. To paraphrase David, comedies can bring into relief other ways of being and relating in the world, enabling us to 'laugh ourselves out of the closet' and, in this way, foster other (transformed) forms and imaginaries to live by and embody. This, we contend, is at the heart of what it means to situate comedies as queer pedagogical forms.

Note

1. [1] Dan Levy, who plays David, has parodied the It Gets Better Campaign, in a sketch he featured in as the host of the late night comedy show, Saturday Night Live. See https://www.thepinknews.com/2021/02/08/dan-levy-bowen-yang-punkie-johnson-kate-mckinnon-snl-it-gets-better/.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

ORCID

Seán Henry http://orcid.org/0000-0001-8873-0726

References

Ahmed, Sara. 2006. *Queer Phenomenology*. Durham: Duke University Press.
Ahmed, Sara. 2008. "Sociable Happiness." *Emotion, Space and Society* 1 (1): 10–13. doi:10.1016/j.emospa.2008.07.003.
Ahmed, Sara. 2010. *The Promise of Happiness*. Durham: Duke University Press.
Bergdahl, Lovisa, and Elisabet Langmann. 2018. "Time for Values: Responding Educationally to the Call from the Past." *Studies in Philosophy and Education* 37 (4): 367–382. doi:10.1007/s11217-017-9591-2.
Birchmore, Ansley, and Heather Hensman Kettrey. 2022. "Exploring the Boundaries of the Parasocial Contact Hypothesis: An Experimental Analysis of the Effects of the "Bury Your gays" Media Trope on Homophobic and Sexist Attitudes." *Feminist Media Studies* 22 (6): 1311–1327. doi:10.1080/14680777.2021.1887919.
Butler, Judith. 1997. "Critically Queer." In *Playing with Fire: Queer Politics, Queer Theories*, edited by Shane Phelan, 152–165. New York: Routledge.
Coulter, Colin. 2022. ""What is This, the Seventies?" Spectres of the Past (And the Future) in Recent Northern Irish Television." *Television & New Media* 23 (4): 422–437. doi:10.1177/1527476420985826.
Duggan, Lisa. 2002. "The New Homonormativity: The Sexual Politics of Neoliberalism." In *Materializing Democracy: Toward a Revitalized Cultural Politics*, edited by Russ Catronova and Dana D. Nelson, 175–194. Durham: Duke University Press.

Freeman, Elizabeth. 2010. *Time Binds: Queer Temporalities, Queer Histories*. Durham: Duke University Press.

Halberstam, Judith. 2005. *In a Queer Time and Place*. New York: New York University Press.

Halberstam, Jack, and Joëlle Rouleau. 2021. "The Futures of Queer Televisions." *Jump Cut* 60.

Hickey-Moody, Anna. 2013. "Affect as Method: Feelings, Aesthetics and Affective Pedagogy." In *Deleuze and Research Methodologies*, edited by Rebecca Coleman, 79–95. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.

Horeck, Tanya. 2021. "Better Worlds: Queer Pedagogy and Utopia in Sex Education and Schitt's Creek." *Jump Cut* 60.

Ivinson, Gabrielle, and Emma Renold. 2013. "Valleys' Girls: Re-Theorising Bodies and Agency in a Semi-Rural Post-Industrial Locale." *Gender and Education* 25 (6): 704–721. doi:10.1080/09540253.2013.827372.

Kopelson, Karen. 2002. "Dis/Integrating the Gay/Queer Binary: Reconstructed Identity Politics for a Performative Pedagogy." *College English* 65 (1): 17–35. doi:10.2307/3250728.

Long, Maggie. 2021. "Derry Girls and Containment: Conflict-Related and Transgenerational Trauma in Northern Ireland." *Journal of Psychosocial Studies* 14 (1): 3–17. doi:10.1332/147867321X16104825689759.

Mayo, Cris. 2010. "Incongruity and Provisional Safety: Thinking Through Humor." *Studies in Philosophy and Education* 29 (6): 509–521. doi:10.1007/s11217-010-9195-6.

Mayo, Cris. 2014. "Humorous Relations: Attentiveness, Pleasure and Risk." *Educational Philosophy and Theory* 46 (2): 175–186. doi:10.1080/00131857.2012.721731.

McLaren, Peter. 1999. *Schooling as a Ritual Performance: Toward a Political Economy of Educational Symbols and Gestures*. Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield.

Muñoz, José Esteban. 2019. *Cruising Utopia*. New York: New York University Press.

Neary, Aoife. 2017. "Lesbian, Gay and Bisexual teachers' Ambivalent Relations with Parents and Students While Entering into a Civil Partnership." *Irish Educational Studies* 36 (1): 57–72.

Pailer, Gaby. 2009. "Introduction." In *Gender and Laughter: Comic Affirmation and Subversion in Traditional and Modern Media*, edited by Gaby Pailer, Andreas Böhn, Ulrich Scheck, and Stefan Horlacher, 7–14. New York: Rodopi.

Quinlivan, Kathleen. 2018. *Exploring Contemporary Issues in Sexuality Education with Young People: Theories in Practice*. London: Springer.

Rasmussen, Mary Lou. 2004. "The Problem of Coming Out." *Theory into Practice* 43 (2): 144–150. doi:10.1207/s15430421tip4302_8.

Renold, Emma. 2018. "'Feel What I feel': Making da(r)ta with Teen Girls for Creative Activisms on How Sexual Violence Matters." *Journal of Gender Studies* 27 (1): 37–55. doi:10.1080/09589236.2017.1296352.

Stengel, Barbara S. 2014. "After the Laughter." *Educational Philosophy and Theory* 46 (2): 200–211. doi:10.1080/00131857.2012.721729.

Todd, Sharon. 2023. *The Touch of the Present: Educational Encounters, Aesthetics, and the Politics of the Senses*. New York: State University of New York Press.

Todd, Jennings, and Ian K MacGillivray. 2007. "Coming Out and the New Victim Narrative." *Journal of Curriculum and Pedagogy* 4 (2): 54–58. doi:10.1080/15505170.2007.10411644.

Vlieghe, Joris. 2014. "Laughter as Immanent Life-Affirmation: Reconsidering the Educational Value of Laughter Through a Bakhtinian Lens." *Educational Philosophy and Theory* 46 (2): 148–161. doi:10.1080/00131857.2012.721733.

Vlieghe, Joris, Maarten Simons, and Jan Masschelein. 2010. "The Educational Meaning of Communal Laughter: On the Experience of Corporeal Democracy." *Educational Theory* 60 (6): 719–734. doi:10.1111/j.1741-5446.2010.00386.x.

Waggoner, Erin B. 2018. "Bury Your Gays and Social Media Fan Response: Television, LGBTQ Representation, and Communitarian Ethics." *Journal of Homosexuality* 65 (13): 1877–1891. doi:10.1080/00918369.2017.1391015.

Zembylas, Michalinos. 2018. "Holocaust Laughter and Edgar Hilsenrath's the Nazi and the Barber: Towards a Critical Pedagogy of Laughter and Humor in Holocaust Education." *Studies in Philosophy and Education* 37 (3): 301–313. doi:10.1007/s11217-018-9599-2.