

ABSTINENCE, AFFECT, AND AGENCY:
A RHETORICAL ANALYSIS
OF TEXAS SEXUAL EDUCATION

by

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I. INTRODUCTION

My time as a teen in a Texas sexual education class was rhetorically rich—as a high school student, I felt as though adults were prescribing behaviors and ideals without asking us to engage in the critical thinking that played a significant role in our other classes. However, I did not possess the necessary tools to name, or rename, the arguments presented to me by authoritative adults. When faced with the challenge of selecting the appropriate project for this thesis, I sought to weave together the most personally interesting elements of my coursework: feminism and gender studies, rhetorical theories of emotion, studies of the body, and composition pedagogy. I decided to pursue a rhetorical analysis, and composition-informed revision, of a Texas sexual education curriculum because it is an idea site to consider the ways gender and sexuality, emotions, and implicit arguments influence students’ classroom experiences. As a result, this project applies some of the most salient conversations of rhetoric and composition to sexual education, allowing for a more robust and pedagogically sound curriculum. In return, key conversations surrounding emotions and bodies are reinforced in the field of rhetoric, and composition gains an understanding of the connections between sexuality and literacy that informs our students writing and learning. Sexual education in the United States has no federal regulation, with decisions made on the state and local levels. However, the Social Security Act of 1996 allocated a large sum of money for abstinence-only sex education. This “reform” included an eight-point definition of abstinence-only education and has been reauthorized to remain in effect today. Abstinence-only programs accepting these funds are required to teach that “bearing children out-of-wedlock is likely to have harmful consequences for the child, the child's parents, and society” and

“abstinence from sexual activity is the only certain way to avoid out-of-wedlock pregnancy, sexually transmitted diseases, and other associated health problems,” among other potentially contentious objectives. By attacking sexual activity and childbirth outside of marriage, these mandates reinforce traditional ideas of “family” and exclude or reprimand children and parents who fail to fit in with the nuclear family model. For example, many children are born outside of marriage and may feel ostracized by curricula that heavily focus on traditional family models, affecting their ability to learn critical material.

The ostensibly objective discourse used to impart clearly value-laden ideas makes sexual education a site of rhetorical inquiry into the conflict between science and politics, the modern and the conventional, as well as the role of language in this conflict. Within composition studies, some attention has been given to the ways students’ understanding of bodies and sexuality, their own and others’, influences their ability to learn and participate in the writing classroom. Nevertheless, the health education classroom remains an underrecognized site of intervention for the problems of body and sexuality often seen in the writing classroom. Also, as writing is a tool for self-discovery and learning, the field of composition can identify opportunities for writing assignments in sexual education, which might allow students to subvert oppressive ideas present in other elements of a course. I will explore how these materials function as a value-laden pedagogy and how the transmission of these values depends on particular constructions of sex and the body, with a focus on the following questions:

1. In what ways do the authors of these curricula depend on persuasive definitions? How could this affect students' ability to question and critically engage with the information presented?
2. How might this curriculum shape students' emotional and affective responses to these contextualized discussions of the body and sex? How might these emotional associations affect students' future relationships and sexual encounters?
3. How can composition research and practice suggest revisions for this lesson to increase student agency and learning?

My analysis of this curriculum shows that, under the auspices of educating students and communicating information, *Big Decisions*' first priority is to transmit values and cultural norms. When the opportunity to provide students with information about sexual decisions and healthy precautions could instead be leveraged to push students to abstain, *Big Decisions* chooses abstinence.

Disciplinary Context and Literature Review

My research questions result from the intersections of persuasive definitions, sociological and public health research, as well as the awareness of embodied emotions in rhetoric and composition. Within this literature review, I give a brief background of how sexual education broadly relates to rhetoric and composition, followed by brief analyses of the related literature on persuasive definitions, affect and emotion, and classroom agency. The reality of sexual education in the United States comes into sharp relief after reviewing the efficacy of these mandated learning objectives in helping teens understand bodies or even abstain from sex. In 2015, the CDC reported that “the proportion of teens

who have ever had sex has remained unchanged (at about 47 percent) for a decade; 15 percent of teens in 2013 said they had had four or more sexual partners, the same number as in 2003.” Other statistics make clear that these teens are not necessarily engaging in safe sexual practices. The same article reveals that “[n]early one-quarter of HIV diagnoses and half of all sexually transmitted infections in the United States occur among those under the age of 25.” As early as 2004, scholars note problems with our approach to sexual education and “suggest that a shift in social policy toward comprehensive STD education. . . would be significantly more effective than current intervention models” (Bearman, Moody, and Stovel 81). Despite these data-driven suggestions by scholars and the CDC, abstinence-only sexual education maintains a strong foothold in United States public school health education.

The public debate surrounding sexual education is significantly influenced by the federal government’s stance, as established in the Social Security Act of 1996. However, Connell and Elliott note that “[w]hat is often excluded in these debates the extent to which [sexual education] potentially impacts the social reproduction of homophobia and heterosexism, as well as racism, sexism, and classism” (84). Pedagogical choices are being made against the advice of research and science. I believe that there are numerous factors that give rise to the current sexual education curricula, which include adults in a range of social positions and political backgrounds with agenda-driven ideas about class, race, and age.

To fully understand the context of the sexual education classroom and its curricula, it is important to bear in mind the influence of state and local level influencers. I’ve chosen to focus on sexual education materials in Texas because it is among the states

that do not mandate sexual education on the state level. Additionally, each school's curriculum is a product of the interaction between community values and federal regulation. I plan to examine sexual health instructional materials with a focus on their authors' construction and presentation of information to students.

Various disciplines have stake in the inquiry of sex education in the United States. Sex education is an area of concern for scholars of sociology, public health administration, and education, to name a few. For example, a health education scholar studying three North Carolina schools writes that “[to] understand and remake contemporary sex education, we must examine not only the policies formally governing instruction but also the multiple and competing lessons at work in sex education classrooms” (Fields 5). I would add to her statement that we need also to look at the influences producing those “multiple and competing lessons.” A sociologist writing in 2007, noted “considerably [little] evidence of the effects of teen sexual activity on psychological well-being” (Meier 1812) and responded by investigating connections between teen depression and becoming sexually active.

The field of rhetoric has posed timely questions about the body, sex, health, and education. Deborah Hawhee writes “that rhetoric isn't just a cerebral, conscious process, that it's messy, unpredictable, and that, at some level at least, the body is involved” (157). Building on that same discussion, Karma Chavez concludes that “we cannot nor should we try to reduce actual bodies to abstract conceptualizations of ‘the body’” because doing so “enforces and animates systemic oppressions” (248). The preexisting explorations of bodies, rhetoric, and the role of both in shaping lived experiences are essential in considering how the quality and characteristics of formal sex education can influence

one's understanding of bodies and sexuality, personally and interpersonally. Other scholars, such as Karen Kopelson and Amy Koerber, have explored women's health issues (breastfeeding and breast cancer, specifically) through a rhetorical lens, and these studies should be useful in my analysis of the ways gender affects education materials, pedagogical choices, and audience reception in sexual education classrooms as well as how those pedagogical choices and materials affect understandings of gender.

Theoretical Background - Abstinence Defined

Work on persuasive definitions makes visible the foundation of Big Decisions' argument throughout this lesson. Students are given the illusion of agency or collaboration in creating the definitions of abstinence and sex, and after an individual student or class has agreed to the curriculum's predetermined definitions of these terms, challenging key moves or ideas becomes much more difficult. Analyzing these materials has revealed that defining terms and concepts plays a significant role in the argument of sexual education curricula, which, while also presenting information, seems to have a clear argument. Edward Schiappa notes the function of definitions to represent and further social norms because "definitions 'fix' or 'freeze' language in order to serve as a sort of road map demarcating what words mean. These road maps depict the definer's reality; they function as claims about the way language and the world are" (21). Furthermore, Douglas Walton emphasizes that in depicting the definer's reality, these persuasive redefinitions of every day terms "are very often, in a clever and subtle way, deployed to serve the interest of the definer" (117). Definitions inherently represent an agent's reality and interests, and in the sexual education classroom, the reality of terms

like abstinence, healthy, body, and consent are critical to engaging with the course material and developing adaptive, helpful behaviors.

When curricula developers and instructors normalize definitions that are exclusionary, they may prevent students from accessing information about safe sex, relationships, and their bodies that would lower students' risk of teenage pregnancy and sexually-transmitted infections. Schiappa's work in *Defining Reality: Definitions and the Politics of Meaning* will provide useful a lens and theoretical underpinning to my analysis of the function of definition in the sexual education curricula under review. Relying upon definition arguments also strengthens the affective or emotional characteristics of the sex ed classroom because "the function of a persuasive definition in persuading audience members depends on how they react emotionally to the word being redefined" (Walton 119). Walton's observation about the connection between persuasive definitions and emotion points to the interconnectedness of each of these concepts: definitional arguments, affect and emotion, and agency. Considering questions about each of these within the same project provides unique insight into the experience of sexual education as a whole. Persuasive definitions provide the foundation of *Big Decisions*' argument, which is reinforced through the rhetorical use of emotion within the lesson.

Theoretical Background - Affect and Emotion

Rhetorical considerations of the body enable a rhetor to consider diverse effects of an argument on an audience. By emphasizing the body as an individual and significant experience, I am able to consider the varying reactions, challenges, and benefits that result from the intersection of pedagogical or rhetorical choices and students' unique

identities. Sex, intimate relationships, and bodies are topics and discussions likely to produce affective and emotional responses in students. Therefore, understanding the emotional connotation and affective states created by sexual education curricula and classroom discussions is essential to understanding the goals and effects of those curricula. Failing to consider the emotional aspects of this learning process would lead to a limited view of students' bodily understanding and conception of intimate relationships.

In their book *Shame and Guilt*, Price and Dearing write that both emotions are “fundamentally tied to our perceptions of self” and subsequently can “have a substantial impact on the dynamics of interpersonal relationships” (52). In the context of intimate relationships, shame can have a negative impact as partners “need to carefully measure, weigh, and assign blame,” and “such chronic efforts at self-protection. . . [escalate] dramatically the level of blame and shame. . . it’s an endless and self-perpetuating cycle” (163). Sexual acts require body closeness, parts of the body normally covered or concealed are left open to evaluation and judgment by one’s partner, and such “embodied experiences are likely to evoke one’s own body attitudes, be they positive or negative” (Schooler and Ward 29). For example, body shame, which is defined as “both negative evaluations of one’s body and an emotional component, a desire to hide oneself and one’s body” may play a significant role in female students’ sexual decision making (Schooler et. al 325). Feeling shame about menstruation or one’s genitals is linked with “decreased sexual experience, increased sexual risk-taking, and reduced sexual satisfaction” (Schooler et. al 325). These findings suggest that “shame, and menstrual and body shame specifically, may play an important role in the larger complex of women’s sexual socialization” (325). Men are not exempt from shame in sexual interactions. Whereas

women are more likely to avoid sexual behavior, social norms for masculine sexuality make it more likely for men to “remain engaged in activity but withdraw emotionally so that they may be distanced from any potential negative evaluations” (Schooler and Ward 29). Emotions and affect, particularly socially-oriented emotions like shame and guilt, play a significant role in health decisions for both men and women. Considering their rhetorical function in the sexual education classroom and materials is therefore invaluable. At its core, the sexual education classroom remains a place designated for learning and, in addition to emotions, students’ agency within the classroom plays a critical role in their health decisions.

Theoretical Background - Agency and the Sex Ed Classroom

Examining agency in the sexual education classroom, including its possessors, functions, and restraints is important when considering the effects of arguments and ideologies on students. In their study of classroom discourse and agency, Helen Rothschild Ewald and David Wallace understand agency as both the ability to interpret events as well as the ability to influence, change, or redirect them within a specific situation” (343). Therefore, students’ ability to respond to and shape the classroom environment are inherently intertwined with their position of agency within the classroom situation. Students’ agency may make the difference between an active student who responds, critiques, or engages with classroom discussions and materials or a passive student who finishes a course with a limited understanding of concepts and ideas. Differences in the agency fostered among students, e.g. which students have more agency than others, might reflect the dominant values presented by the instructor and curriculum,

providing an insight into what social positions are valued within a sexual education classroom.

As a result of the institutions that classrooms are situated within, teachers/instructors begin any classroom situation with more agency than their students. Instructors have been granted the power to influence and interpret events by the institution through large-scale structures, e.g. a recognition of their qualifications to teach shown by their willingness to pay them to do so, and more subtle symbolic decisions, such as designing rooms so that teachers are at the front with students facing (and thereby giving their attention to) the teacher. In addition to this, it is true that in many cases “the agenda for the class session and for the writing assignment clearly has been set by the instructor” (Ewald and Wallace 347). As a result of the imbalance between student and teacher agency within the classroom, it is no surprise that student empowerment and agency must be fostered intentionally since “[t]he act of constructing agency in the classroom. . . entails actively struggling in the complex web. . . [that] informs how teachers and students interpret, negotiate, and manage their. . . sense of position and participation” in classroom discourse (Ewald and Wallace 366). However, when instructor agency is limited by curriculum developers as, in the case of the lesson from *Big Decisions*, their means to foster student agency may be similarly limited.

The sexual education classroom and materials are a rhetorical space in which the disciplinary conversations concerning persuasive definitions, affect and emotion, and student agency intersect. This intersection emphasizes the embodied characteristics of teaching and learning, as well as emotional responses to argument. By analyzing lesson 5 of *Big Decisions* with an understanding of the questions and theories related to these

conversations, fundamental goals of the lesson and its possible effects on students become more visible.

Methodologies

To better understand the rhetorical significance of sexual education in Texas, I will analyze sexual education classroom materials. Sexual education classroom materials are available upon request and analyzing these materials will give me an insight into conceptions of sexual activity and orientation as well as the body, gender, and overall health supported by sexual education in Texas high schools. I have emailed educators from multiple school districts and nonprofit organizations to request their sexual education materials. In return I received a copy of the *Big Decisions* curriculum, created by the Healthy Futures of Texas program based in San Antonio. Textual analysis of classroom materials is critical because they are the only way to examine the classroom experience without being physically present.

Based upon my preliminary rhetorical analysis of *Big Decisions*, I plan to focus on three ways that the curriculum functions to push students to choose abstinence. Those are the rhetorical function of definitions, the autonomy or agency granted to students and instructors of the curriculum, and the manipulation of emotions or affect throughout the materials. To provide one quick example, the sample lesson from *Big Decisions* presents choices to students on a surface level but relies upon the authority of definition to urge, shame, or intimidate them to choose abstinence. As Edward Schiappa argues, argument often is centered upon how we define our terms, which is clearly the case in *Big Decisions* in defining abstinence and sexual activity. While examining these topics, I want to carefully consider the effects of these lessons on their audience: teenagers. Sex is

a charged topic for teenagers, obviously, and the curriculum is aimed at influencing how they understand, feel, and act, all under the auspices of educating them about sexuality. I have requested other curricula used throughout Texas and will review their pedagogical materials in light of the program's stated goals and the rates of STDs and teen pregnancies in Texas as they are made available. Even without those materials, however, *Big Decisions* gives me plenty to work with.

I will inductively analyze provided sexual education materials by reviewing the lesson for rhetorical moves that stand out or seem relevant, using my research questions and theoretical backgrounds as lenses. After initially reviewing curricula and identifying salient information and sections, I will put these materials into conversation with related research and theoretical discussions. The first chapter will consider the ways in which certain terms and their definitions are developed and to what end. To begin the second chapter, I will identify what particular emotions or affects are likely in the context of a given curriculum and its related discussions. Then, I will examine the ways in which these emotions are likely to affect students, as they are the audience in this rhetorical situation. Lastly, I will review the curriculum to better understand who is granted agency, in what contexts, and for what purposes by the lesson under review. After answering these questions through my analysis, I plan to provide suggestions for revision to the ways educators, community members, and instructors conceptualize sexual education curricula and specific interventions from the research and knowledge of composition to enhance students' experience in these classroom situations.

Through this analysis, my research will add to the field of rhetoric a unique exploration of how sexual behaviors, values, and understandings of the body are

influenced through the language and pedagogical work of sexual education curriculum, which targets young people across the country. These behaviors, values, and understandings are enculturated through the particular language and lessons of the curriculum as is it conceived, delivered, and experienced, to cite to the terms of Kathy Yancey. Such enculturation and pedagogical work are the appropriate foci of rhetoric and composition, although sexual education has not yet been focused upon within the field. My analysis of this curriculum also will provide additional connections among rhetoric, health, and education and underscore the importance of considering affect and the body when attending to writing.

II. ABSTINENCE DEFINED

An objective of lesson 5 in the *Big Decisions* curriculum, “Abstinence: Reasons to Wait,” is to “define what is meant by ‘abstinence’” (Realini 124). The first activity, titled “Reasons to Wait” begins by asking students to define the words “sex” and “abstinence” as a class. Facilitators “elicit and reinforce” (130) key points, including the lack of expert consensus in defining “sex” and the variation of definitions among individuals. Analyzing these materials has revealed that persuasively defining abstinence plays a critical role in the argument of this lesson, which, while also presenting information, is communicating significant, value-laden messages. This connection between sexuality and values is not new, and understanding the work of this lesson requires recognition that “sex and sexuality are imbricated in dense social matrixes and often categories of knowledge, which are inevitably tied to categories of power. . . [and] knowledges produced and disseminated about sex and sexuality become the lenses through which we construct our own sense of self, and of our own most ‘private’ desires” (Alexander 41). In his work, “Strategic Maneuvering through Persuasive Definitions,” Zarefsky explains that persuasive definitions are “not an argument about definitions. . . Rather, a persuasive definition is a non-neutral characterization that conveys a positive or negative attitude about something in the course of naming it” (404). This lesson conveys its attitudes about sex and abstinence and clearly defines sexual intercourse as including oral, vaginal, and anal sex between consenting partners. Within this lesson, the persuasive definitions of “abstinence” and “sex” are the foundation for a binary opposition between abstinence (coded as healthy) and sexual activity (coded as unhealthy).

Abstinence and Sex Persuasively Defined

Persuasive definitions are the result of redefining words in an attempt to gain footing in an argument or advance one's opinions and values. While Zarefsky highlights the nature and function of a persuasive definition, Douglas Walton's criteria from "Persuasive Definitions and Public Policy Arguments" are useful in identifying a persuasive definition within the context of an argument or communicative act. Walton's four criteria for persuasive definitions are as follows: 1) The word being defined needs strong emotive connotations; 2) The descriptive meaning of the word is vague and ambiguous enough to be semantically manipulated; 3) The change of meaning by redefinition is not noticed by naïve listeners; 4) The emotive meaning of the word remains unaltered. *Big Decisions* lesson 5 presents a persuasive redefinition of "abstinence" (and to some extent "sex") that meets the four criteria.

The first of Walton's criteria requires that the word being redefined have a strong emotional connotation. "Abstinence" and "sex" both have strong emotive meanings as a result of their entanglement with values and norms. Advocates of abstinence only sexual education are characterized by "[o]utrage, moral indignation, and strategic organizing to take back the United States" (Lesko 285). Sexual education that focuses on abstinence as the key to success or happiness is the foundation for judgment of self- and others' behavior because "[b]y prioritizing sexual self-control, learners become part of the privileged elite. . . [and] maturity, health, and self-confidence. . . are positive outcomes of sexual self-control" (Lesko 287). Additionally, if those practicing sexual self-control belong to the elite within the context of this curriculum, then students who choose to engage in sexual intercourse outside of marriage are devalued and excluded from this

elitism. For students who intend to remain abstinent, their sense of self-worth may become enmeshed with their ability to wait, which may cause problems in their future sexual relationships. Students who are sexually active may feel guilt or shame as a result of their devaluation. However, it is important to note that unlike many abstinence-only curriculum, *Big Decisions* makes a conscious effort to include students who may have experienced sexual trauma by differentiating between consensual sex and assault in their definition: “**sex’ is something both partners agree to.** If someone is coerced or forced, that means it is not sex, but assault or rape which is different” (Realini 130, emphasis in original). To summarize, abstinence and sex are inarguably emotionally charged words; they are both characterized by emotions and likely to produce emotional responses in audiences, meeting Walton’s first criteria for persuasive definitions.

The next of Walton’s criteria states that the semantic meaning of the word should be vague or ambiguous. Some students may enter the class feeling as though they understand what both “sex” and “abstinence” are—what they mean within day-to-day conversation. Students likely conceive of these two terms as opposite pairs, like hot/cold or white/black; cold is absence of heat, black is the absence of light, and abstinence is the absence of sex. This lesson makes use of this connection when defining sex, and then quickly creates distance between the two terms to more actively define abstinence. However, the script for instructors prompts them to remind students during the first activity that, when it comes to sex, “[e]ven the experts don’t have one consistent definition” (Realini 130), which serves to undermine the validity of students’ prior knowledge about the meaning of sex. Their previous understanding of sex is further eroded when instructors draw attention to variants between individuals, moving from the

technical or expert definition to more accessible conversational uses: “different people consider many different activities to be ‘sex’” (Realini 130). Additionally, the facilitator resource for this activity presents definitions of sex from several sources, furthering the ambiguity and lack of consistency. Lesson 5 of the *Big Decisions* curriculum meets Walton’s second criteria for a persuasive definition by creating ambiguity in students’ understanding of the words abstinence and sex by complicating or undermining prior knowledge.

While Walton does not explicitly address this, the third and fourth criteria share a cyclical and mutually reinforcing relationship. The third criteria requires the new definition to go unnoticed by naïve listeners, and the fourth criteria states that the emotive connotation must be unaltered for a persuasive definition to be successful. In at least some cases, it is likely that the preservation of the emotive connotation of the word (criteria 4) in question is what allows persuasive definitions to escape the attention of the naïve listener (criteria 3). Within the context of the sexual education classroom, instructors and facilitators possess most of the social capital, and even when this capital is shared with students, it is because an instructor has chosen to reconfigure the power dynamics in the class, even slightly. In his book, *Defining Reality: Definitions and the Politics of Meaning*, Edward Schiappa notes the importance of adults’ judgement and evaluation of children’s behavior in their socialization and learning processes. Children more easily participate in social interactions after they “gain a shared understanding of the world around them as well as social acceptance by accepting adults’ persuasive efforts to bring their behavior into conformity” (Schiappa 30). Conforming to adults’ persuasive efforts has serious advantages because “[w]hen a language user acquires an

understanding of what a dog *is* that is shared by other members of the discourse community, that language user has added to his or her stock of social knowledge” (29). As a result, students may be motivated to agree with, rather than challenge, the information presented by their instructors (adults with more social knowledge and capital) as a way of maintaining their place in the classroom discourse community. Further, students who struggle to accept definitions presented within the lesson are excluded from this particular form of social capital, preventing them from engaging in the class or its material.

Students, as “naïve listeners,” remain unaware of the subtle shifting in definitions of abstinence and sex as a result of adult instructors’ social capital and the fact that these new definitions evoke similar emotions and affects to students’ previous definitions. When *Big Decisions* defines abstinence as “more than just not having sex. . . abstinence from sex is really a decision and a plan. Abstinence is thinking ahead and making a decision about your limits” (Realini 131), the curriculum is still relying upon the emotional connotations of sexual self-control that many popular definitions employ. Another consequence of this definition is the privileging of students who chose to abstain, creating an elitist group of students within the curriculum by excluding those who have or plan to engage in sexual activity. This lesson creates a situation in which “[Abstinence-only] knowledge orients learners to a ‘sacred’ knowledge, knowledge interwoven with values and morals. . . [and] by prioritizing sexual self control, learners become part of a privileged elite” (Lesko 287). The third and fourth of Walton’s criteria for persuasive definitions, that they go unnoticed by listeners and maintain the original emotive connotations of the word, are met within this lesson and result in significant

obstacles to student learning. This curriculum meets Walton’s remaining requirements for a persuasive definition by capitalizing on instructor’s social capital to allow their new definition to go unnoticed by students and by maintaining the emotional connotations of the word “abstinence.”

Students likely entered the classroom with varied emotional attachments to the word abstinence. Despite this variance in individual emotional attachment, the persuasive definition of abstinence presented in lesson 5 is unlikely to conflict with students’ previous understandings. As the last of Walton’s four criteria, the preservation of the emotional connotations of abstinence and sex within an abstinence-only curriculum is significant as a crucial factor in students’ acceptance of these new definitions. While this lesson addresses the definition of sex, abstinence and its persuasive definition are given the most attention. Furthermore, the information students learn and accept within this course may shape their development and relationships, in either healthy or unhealthy ways, and these persuasive definitions function to code abstinence as always “healthy” and sexual activity as “unhealthy” or “risky.”

Binary Opposition of Abstinence/Health and Sexuality/Risk

Opposition between abstinence/health and sexuality/risk is achieved in explicit and indirect ways throughout this lesson. Early in the instructor materials, activities are deemed as “OK to do or not OK to do” (Realini 125), which eliminates ambiguity or recognizing activities that are OK to do in certain contexts at specific times. This concealed black-and-white thinking combines with more explicit connections between abstinence and health as well as sexuality and risk in an effort “to encourage students to respect and value the decision to abstain” (Realini 127). This objective from lesson 5 also

clarifies a secondary intention of the curriculum: to transmit *values* and morals. The transmission of values here can be more directly seen during an activity in this lesson, wherein instructors are meant to “[g]uide the group to understanding the reasons that are healthy (e.g. not wanting to get HIV or another STI) and those that are probably not strong or healthy (e.g. pressure from friends)” (Realini 127). The black-and-white binary thinking and privileging of values in this lesson shows students being directed towards desires that are not their own.

The lesson consistently aligns abstinence to health and sexuality to risk, which is sometimes done to the detriment of their overall argument. For example, in the student materials “not wanting to get HIV or another STI” is confirmed as a “healthy” reason to abstain, while “pressure from friends” is an “unhealthy” reason to engage in sexual activity. Furthermore, external influences such as “pressure from friends” is an unhealthy reason to have sex because “[s]ex is a personal decision” (Realini 142) but responding to institutional pressures such as religious traditions or parental expectation is labeled as a healthy reason to abstain. Despite explicit reassurances that sexual decisions are personal, the implicit construction of these binaries may prevent students from feeling as though they are free to make decisions and respond to situations independently.

This binary coding of abstinence and health is produced in the instructor’s script for the lesson, and this coding is then passed along to the activities and discussions in which students participate. As a result of sex education’s entanglement with values and norms, as well as Texas’ less-than-impressive teen pregnancy rates (among other statistics), curricula in this field might instead consider creating independent thinkers who can respond to new situations with cognitive flexibility. Author of *Not Under My Roof*:

Parents, Teens, and the Culture of Sex, sociologist Amy Schalet acknowledges the importance of independent thinking and autonomy in teens' sexual decisions. She describes sexual autonomy as "knowing about sexual desire and pleasure, recognizing and articulating sexual wishes and boundaries, and learning to anticipate and prepare for sexual acts" (56). She notes the importance of these skills in navigating sexual experiences, which leads to teens refraining from sex and greater efficacy in condom usage. Despite the benefits of engaging teens in critical and reflexive thinking, *Big Decisions*, and many other sexual education curricula choose to reinforce cultural norms and traditions.

In her article, "Assembling a health[y] subject: risky and shameful pedagogies in health education" Deana Leahy suggests that "school-based health education is in fact a deeply political and troubling enterprise" (172), which points to the possibility of value transmission overthrowing the independent thinking in the case of sexual and health education. The turn from diverse, analytical thinking toward unquestioning acceptance is a troubling one. Fishman and McCarthy acknowledge the dangers of pedagogies that fail to encourage independent thinking, warning that "students who are. . . left to feel comfortable in a 'finished' world will not develop. . . the ability to respond to the inevitable uncertainties and fluctuations in real life" (345). *Big Decisions* frames its definition of abstinence around the concept of a 'plan,' but ignores the uncertainties and fluctuations students face in the application and practice of this definition. Instead of affirming multiple points of view and allowing for difference among students, in many respects, the *Big Decisions* lesson 5 reinforces institutional control through the persuasive definitions and binary oppositions of abstinence, health, sexuality, and risk.

There are other instances in which the lesson appears to be deconstructing the abstinence/health sexuality/risk binary, but a closer examination of the function of such instances reveals that they often reinforce, rather than deconstruct. The facilitator script and instructions suggest a binary deconstruction with the addition of the category “May be Abstinent, May Still Want to Avoid.” The inclusion of a third category would typically signal the blurring of boundary lines. However, all of the activities under this category are cast in a negative light. Activities such as “being alone together” are theoretically acknowledged as abstinent but meant to be practically avoided. *Big Decisions* recognizes that these activities represent “kind of a ‘gray area’ or things that might be classified as abstinence but that a person still doesn’t want to do” (Realini 134). Explicitly addressing what students may consider a ‘gray area’ shows the anticipation of student behavior and a response intended to align that behavior with the curricular norms. Rhetorically, this move depends on the earlier persuasive definition of abstinence as a decision and a plan and enables the lesson to discourage students from engaging in activities that are “too personal and intimate” (Realini 135). The exclusion of these activities in students’ relationships is predicated upon the lesson’s persuasive definition of abstinence because “the plan might mean not doing some other things, even if they are not technically sex” (Realini 135). Had this lesson given students the opportunity to define for themselves what the benefits and consequences of abstinence, sex, and intimacy or vulnerability have in human relationships, *Big Decisions* would be encouraging cognitive flexibility with the potential to serve students across contexts. Neglecting to develop teens’ understanding of healthy relationships is a missed opportunity to ensure their future health behaviors because “[g]ood romantic

relationships build positive sexual health outcomes” (Schalet 56). Schalet recommends that adults “validate adolescents’ need for intimacy and assist them in building egalitarian and nourishing romantic relationships suited to their life stage” (56). Instead of taking an open approach, *Big Decisions* enforces predetermined answers to the critical questions surrounding sexuality and intimacy, which is achieved by overtly acknowledging “personal decisions” involved with sex within a rhetorical structure or framework that devalues and undermines the decisions to engage in sexual activities.

Students in a class following lesson 5 of *Big Decisions* receive the message that abstinence is healthy and sexuality is unhealthy, which may have a range of implications for students’ abilities to achieve healthy goals and engage in course content. In her ethnographic study of three Australian schools, Leahy observed that “[a] significant proportion of in-class time was designated to ensuring that students understood they were ‘at risk’” (175). In one classroom, serving this goal—that students recognize themselves as ‘at risk’—clearly overrules the value of student contributions. A brainstorming activity about the risks involved in attending parties began with a student who suggested that perhaps there was no risk involved in partying. However, “[t]he imperative to establish risk meant that. . . certain responses. . . were dismissed,” which lead the instructor to “[pose] the question again looking for other responses” (176). The student who made the dismissed contribution disengaged completely from the rest of the lesson, “pulled a face, shook her head, and opened up her school diary and started doodling” (176). Similar to *Big Decisions* commitment to abstinence/health and sexuality/risk, this instructor’s focus on risk lead to a student missing what could be valuable information. Instructors like the one in this Australian classroom, or those leading the *Big Decisions* “Decisions to Wait”

lesson, pose what seem to be open-ended questions with “correct” answers in mind, answers that align with their values and objectives, and tend to dismiss those student contributions that fail to directly support those values. The goal of promoting values and norms not only encourages instructors to dismiss student responses to activities as incorrect; this goal also leads the curriculum to label such patterns of thinking as “healthy” that can lead to negative emotional responses in students, such as guilt and fear.

III. (A)FFECTIVE ABSTINENCE

Studies within rhetoric and composition have addressed emotion and the embodied experience, but little attention has been given in addressing these issues together in the context of sexuality development and education. In a work that traces the history of emotion and rhetoric from Aristotle, James Kastely writes, “For an argument to work rhetorically, it must engage an audience in such a way that they are moved to act. . . and to do this, it must speak to their ethical and emotional investment in a particular situation” (224). *Big Decisions* is constructed as an argument concerning behavioral norms and values, an argument that makes rhetorical use of emotion in an attempt to persuade their audience to act. Kastely further suggests connections between emotions and rhetoric as a result of the connection between our convictions and emotion: “our deepest convictions are not simply or primarily products of logical thought. Rather, they arise out of our having lived particular lives and are inescapably tied to those lives” (223). Our convictions, emotions, and lives are intertwined, and each of these are unequivocally linked to the body.

Our particular lives are lived in particular bodies, wherein we experience emotions. Surveying feminist rhetorical criticism, Karma Chavez explains that “the abstract body on which rhetorical studies is based, is in reality, an actual body, that of particular white men” (244) and that “at its heart, the abstract body and actual bodies are about power: who and which bodies matter, become material” (245). In this study of the *Big Decisions* curriculum, rhetorical studies concerning bodies, power, and emotion inform my approach to understanding potential goals and effects of this lesson. When analyzing the *Big Decisions* curriculum, I found that the presence of guilt, body shame,

and fear, and the absence of pleasure, desire, or confidence create an emotional environment that may negatively impact students' learning and future relationships. In the following sections, I will explore the functions and possible effects of guilt and shame, as well as fear, turning toward opportunities for more positive emotional opportunities (e.g. pleasure, desire, confidence) when appropriate.

Within this chapter, I will consider the following research questions:

1. What are the likely emotional or affective responses to these contextualized discussions of the body and sex?
2. How might these emotional associations affect students' future relationships and sexual encounters?

Sex, intimate relationships, and bodies are topics and discussions likely to produce affective and emotional responses in students. Emotions and affects produced within the classroom play an important role in students' ability to learn and engage with the material. Therefore, understanding the emotional connotation and affective states created by sexual education curricula and classroom discussions is essential to understanding the effects of those curricula. Failing to consider the emotional aspects of this learning process would lead to a limited view of students' bodily understanding and conception of intimate relationships. In their book *Shame and Guilt*, Price and Dearing write that both emotions are "fundamentally tied to our perceptions of self" and subsequently can "have a substantial impact on the dynamics of interpersonal relationships" (52). In the context of intimate relationships, shame can have a negative impact as partners "need to carefully measure, weigh, and assign blame," and "such chronic efforts at self-protection. . . [escalate] dramatically the level of blame and shame.

. . it's an endless and self-perpetuating cycle" (163). In a classroom where shame and guilt are associated with sexuality, it may be easier for students to fall into these destructive relationship patterns. Furthermore, if the goal of sexual or health education is "to support young people's sexual subjectivity, autonomy and competence to protect their sexual health and well-being" (Hirst 427), emotions are likely to be a critical site of analysis when working with sexual education curricula.

Sexual acts require body closeness, parts of the body normally covered or concealed are left open to evaluation and judgment by one's partner, and such "embodied experiences are likely to evoke one's own body attitudes, be they positive or negative" (Schooler and Ward 29). Connections between emotion and sexuality seem to play a considerable role in sex ed classrooms, especially through creating and reproducing gender norms. For example, body shame, which is defined as "both negative evaluations of one's body and an emotional component, a desire to hide oneself and one's body" may play a significant role in female students' sexual decision making (Schooler et. al 325). Feeling shame about menstruation or one's genitals is linked with "decreased sexual experience, increased sexual risk-taking, and reduced sexual satisfaction" (Schooler et. al 325). These findings suggest that "shame, and menstrual and body shame specifically, may play an important role in the larger complex of women's sexual socialization" (325). Not only are women experiencing the intersections of shame and their sexual socialization, they are often excluded from feelings of desire or pleasure. Who is allowed to feel pleasure or desire becomes political when it is understood "that gendered constructs position females with less rights to pleasure than men in many contexts, including the classroom" (Hirst 428). This feminine alienation from desire has serious

educational and public health consequences. Sex and emotions are both embodied experiences and ignoring the relationship between sexual and emotional experiences and education leaves uncovered the effects of the curriculum on individual students.

Men are not exempt from shame in sexual interactions, either. Emotions and affect, particularly socially-oriented emotions like shame and guilt, play a significant role in health decisions for both men and women. Whereas women are more likely to avoid sexual behavior, social norms for masculine sexuality make it more likely for men to “remain engaged in activity but withdraw emotionally so that they may be distanced from any potential negative evaluations” (Schooler and Ward 29). Men, and adolescent boys, are likely to experience pressure to perform, sexually. This performance pressure leads them to be more likely to engage in sexual activity, but to distance themselves from the associated emotional responses. In the broader context of their romantic and sexual relationships, the self-protective response to emotionally withdraw may prevent them from engaging in meaningful relationships and making responsible decisions. Analyzing the role of emotions in sexuality and applying that analysis to sexual education curricula can lead to a healthier learning environment for all students. In her article, “It’s Got to be about Enjoying Yourself: Young People, Sexual Pleasure, and Sex and Relationships Education,” Julia Hirst found “[sexuality and relationship education] that privileges the importance of pleasure for females and males in intimate partnerships makes an unequivocal challenge to the stereotype of the unromantic pleasure-seeking man” (430). Reinforcing everyone’s right to pleasure and desire, e.g. positive emotions, can result in challenging masculine and feminine stereotypes. Therefore, considering the rhetorical

function of emotion in sexual education classroom and materials is invaluable to solving issues of inequality within the sexual education classroom as well as sexual relationships.

Within lesson 5 of *Big Decisions*, the intersections of emotion and power lead to the necessary consideration of ethics. In “Emotions, Ethics, and Rhetorical Action,” Laura Micciche uncovers the emotional undercurrents within composition studies and outlines “two examples that demonstrate ethics and emotion as intertwined motives in the context of professional discourse” (164). During her discussion, she defends the place of emotions within the field of rhetoric and rhetorical analyses as “the exclusion of emotion positions reason as the grounds of rhetorical action, ultimately failing to acknowledge the complex claims and desires necessary to incite and achieve action” (164). Since “composition teachers are often expected to care about their students in ways that other teachers are not,” our field is further positioned to enhance the efficacy of sexual education and students’ experiences of it. Additionally, Micciche strengthens Kastely’s connection between emotion and rhetoric: “Emotion is crucial to how people form judgments about what constitutes appropriate action or inaction. . . consequently, emotion is central to rhetorical action” (169). Micciche finds that the inclusion of emotion in rhetoric enriches the field because “asserting the place of emotion in persuasion, in the formation of judgments, and in motives for civic discourse, we see a much more dynamic picture of the realms of rhetoric” (169). Emotions, power, and rhetoric are closely linked together and often call into question the ethics of action or inaction within a particular context.

In sexual education curricula “[m]aturity, healthy, self-confidence, and freedom are used interchangeably as positive outcomes of sexual self-control” while engaging in

sexual activity is often “portrayed as leading to confusion, guilt, doubt, fear, self-hatred, or unhealthy consequences” (Lesko 287). Sexual self-control, or abstinence, is coded within *Big Decisions* as the only available healthy behavior, and this conception of abstinence is not without its emotional consequences for students. Furthermore, “[o]ne of the recurring features throughout health education pedagogical assemblages is the presence of and recruitment of affect, by both teachers and students as they educate and are educated” and in some cases “shame, regret, and embarrassment [are] considered the most potent risks” of sex outside of marriage (Leahy 178). Emotion and affect is pervasive within the sexual education classroom, influencing both teachers and students. Particularly salient within abstinence-only until marriage discourses are the effects of shame or embarrassment for those who engage in premarital sex. As discussed in the previous chapter, *Big Decisions* aligns sexuality as unhealthy and abstinence as healthy, but this curriculum also uses emotional connections, such as shame, guilt, and fear to transmit and reinforce values and norms in their efforts to produce abstinent teens.

Shame and Guilt

Shame and guilt are distinct emotions that share some similarities. Guilt is related to a specific event or “a focus on some specific behavior, [and] the guilt experience is likely to involve internal, specific, and fairly unstable attributions” (Tangney and Dearing 53). In contrast, “shame involves a focus on the global self, which is presumably relatively enduring” (Tangney and Dearing 53). Both guilt and shame play a significant role in transmitting values in *Big Decisions*, and when specific instances that cause guilt (e.g. engaging in sexual activity) become behavioral patterns (e.g. being sexually active), students are likely to experience guilt, shame, or a mixture of both. While the two are not

interchangeable, the mingling that occurs within this context creates numerous intersections between guilt and shame. Scholars have noted the prosocial benefits of guilt but warn against assuming that shame can be positive. Guilt can have a positive effect on relationships “as a factor that strengthens social bonds by eliciting symbolic affirmation of caring and commitment; it is also a mechanism for alleviating imbalances or inequities in emotional distress within the relationship and for exerting influence over others” (Baumeister, Stillwell, and Heatherton 243). However, shame “is not an emotion that leads people to responsibly own up to their failures, mistakes, or transgressions and make things right” (Tangney and Dearing 180). While in certain instances, guilt can lead to positive outcomes, enmeshing guilt or shame with sexuality education may produce affective associations that hinder healthy relationships. Within the *Big Decisions* lesson 5, shame or guilt as a result of lost reputation, familial or religious guilt, and body shame appear during activities and discussions about abstinence and sex.

In their article, “Guilt: An Interpersonal Approach,” Baumeister, Stillwell, and Heatherton “propose two sources [for guilt]: empathic arousal and anxiety over social exclusion” (246). This anxiety over social exclusion often appears in sexual education in the form of maintaining or protecting one’s social reputation. The two sources of guilt “are important, powerful sources of affect and motivation in close, communal relationships” (Baumeister, Stillwell, and Heatherton 246). In activity 5.1, “Reasons to Wait and Reasons to Have Sex” *Big Decisions* labels protecting one’s reputation as a healthy reason to abstain, further explaining that “[s]ome people may not want to be known as someone who has had sex, or someone who will have sex. Sometimes gossip and rumors can hurt people’s feelings” (Realini 145). The explanation provided raises a

few questions, among them: Why would someone not want to “be known as someone who has had sex,” unless sex were something to feel guilty about? Why would they not want to be known as “someone who will have sex,” unless being sexually active was shameful? While this rhetorical move to shade sex as guilty or shameful may be serving the goal of creating abstinent teens, engaging in sexuality is part of healthy adult identity and relationships, which receives little or no attention by *Big Decisions*.

Shame or guilt as a result of damaged reputation appear again in activity 5.3. In “What about Sexting?” instructors are prompted to tell students that “[i]t is important for young people to know that sexting is serious. . . It can have serious consequences for someone who sends or receives it, including involvement of the police, suspension from school, and a permanent record” (Realini 136). Early in the activity, as evidenced here, students are cautioned against sexting for fear of lost reputation and sanctions from larger social structures. Later, instructors are meant to “encourage” reasons for not sexting, including “to avoid embarrassment” or “because of shyness” (137). While it is true that “[t]o be encouraging is often thought of as generous” the guiding of students in this activity serves another purpose: “to encourage can also be forceful. Being encouraged can be a way of being directed towards somebody else’s wants” (Ahmed 12). Lesson 5 of *Big Decisions* engages in forceful encouragement when reinforcing reasons to abstain from sex or, in this example, sexting. Sexting, apparently, can, and is even likely to, lead to a damaged reputation among peers as well as authority figures. Guilt’s emotional roots “lie in human relatedness, that is, in the human capacity to feel the suffering and distress of others and in the basic fear of alienating actual or potential relationship partners” (Baumeister, Stillwell, and Heatherton 246). As such, when instructors rely upon guilt to

make their points or transmit values, they are, perhaps falsely, calling upon a fear of alienation. The effects of this emotional manipulation are undetermined but unlikely to be healthy or positive.

Sexual education does not occur in a vacuum; many if not all students participating in this curriculum belong to communities of parents and guardians and possibly religious institutions. Both parents and religions are influences on adolescents' sexual development and attitudes, which *Big Decisions* capitalizes upon to persuade teens to choose abstinence. This transmission of values falls in line with what most “parents believe. . . is their primary responsibility: to convey normative-rather than informative-messages about sex” (Regnerus Kindle location 837). *Big Decisions* uses adolescents' relationships with parents or guardians implicitly by reminding them that not wanting to “disappoint their parents/guardians” is a healthy reason to abstain, especially when “their parents' values are important to them too” (Realini 145). More explicitly, for homework, students engage their parents in a discussion centered around the question: “What do you think about abstinence (not having sex) for young people my age?” This question prompts adult respondents to position themselves as outside of the experience of adolescence—to judge based upon the norms they want to transmit to their own children. This may be particularly salient in religious families because “when devoutly religious parents say they are talking regularly with their adolescents about sex and birth control, it means they are talking with them about morality rather than sharing information” (Regnerus Kindle Locations 923-924). Parental values, however perceived or communicated, are used within lesson 5 of *Big Decisions* to promote abstinence above healthy relationships or sexuality.

As a social institution, religion plays a significant role in family and private life and is related to higher incidences of sexual guilt. In his work, *Forbidden Fruit: Sex & Religion in the Lives of American Teenagers*, Mark Regnerus found that “[e]vangelicals are most likely to say that having sex would lead to losing the respect of their partner and very likely to anticipate considerable sexual guilt and their mother's wrath” (Regnerus Kindle Location 1426). *Big Decisions* refers to secondary abstinence principles, often associated with religious abstinence pledges, and overall religious norms to further push students toward abstinence. During the discussion preceding activity 5.1, instructors are prompted to tell students, “Yes, indeed, people who have had sex can choose abstinence. This is true no matter what gender you are; whether you are young or old; or whether you have been pregnant, or caused a pregnancy, or not. A person does not have to be a ‘virgin’ to choose abstinence” (Realini 130). This particular wording alludes to the abstinence pledge movement which “is quick to remind both its fans and its critics that it is about abstinence. . . since a significant number of youths may have already lost their virginity before deciding that abstaining from sex until marriage is a good idea” (Regnerus Kindle Locations 1386-1388). Non-virgins who choose to take an abstinence pledge are known as secondary abstainers, “for whom the pledge is meant to help absolve them of guilt and provide them with a sense of sexual ‘restoration’ in a spiritual and perhaps psychological sense” (Regnerus Kindle Locations 1388-1389). While *Big Decisions* is technically a secular curriculum, the lesson alludes to and reinforces religious ideals when such ideals promote abstinence, e.g. borrowing language from abstinence pledges or even broader behavioral norms.

Big Decisions uses religious behavioral norms more explicitly when mentioning masturbation. Instructors are only to bring up the topic of masturbation if a student asks a question, and even then it is to “give a brief definition. . . and acknowledge that this can be a controversial topic” (Realini 128). Despite that the curriculum acknowledges that “masturbation is something that many people do. It does not have risks of pregnancy or of STIs, and it does not cause health problems” this is quickly undercut by the reminder that “some families, and some religions, do not approve of masturbation” (128). Informative communication would have stopped at the reduced risk associated with masturbation. However, *Big Decision*’s focus on abstinence and norms lead them to condemn masturbation, a practice that may have benefits to students’ understanding their own bodies and lowering their risk of STIs.

Another significant instance of shame and guilt within this curriculum is body shame. While body shame, and shame more generally, affects the sexuality of all students, students with marginalized gender and sexual identities may be unequally impacted by the effects of shame. At the intersection of shame and sexuality we find that, “shame exerts some of its most tragic consequences—wrenching apart loving relationships, marginalizing individuals in ‘sexual minorities,’ and fueling the spread of AIDS and other STDs” (Tangney and Dearing 170). Body shame is defined as “both negative evaluations of one’s body and an emotional component, a desire to hide oneself and one’s body” (Schooler et. al 325). However, despite the negative consequences of mixing shame and sexuality, *Big Decisions* marks body shame as a healthy reason to abstain from sexual activity. A student who chooses to abstain because they “[d]on’t want to show their body” (Realini 144) is reassured that this choice and its reasoning are

unproblematic. The lesson goes on to say that “[s]ome people may not feel comfortable showing their body to another person, or letting another person touch them. Most are able to develop close relationships at a time that is appropriate for them” (144). While puberty is a time when one’s body changes, sometimes drastically, and this may create discomfort in one’s body, the unquestioning acceptance of body shame as a reason to avoid sexual activity can negatively impact students.

As a well-researched example of shame and marginalized gender identities, women who experience body shame are at risk for a host of undesired consequences. Developing sexuality is a critical stage in psychological development, which poses a host of challenges, including understanding knowledge about one’s body, “advocating for [one’s] protection and. . . pleasure, and maintaining a positive sense of one’s body during sex with an intimate partner” (Curtin et. al 56). Introducing shame into these hurdles makes the task of achieving sexual health all the more difficult, especially because “a key aspect of sexual health for women is comfort with their bodies during sex, or sexual embodiment” (Curtin et. al 51). Culturally prevalent conceptions of women and femininity are intricately linked with the objectification of the female body, which “estrang[e] women from their own sense of self and sexuality and mak[e] it difficult for them to negotiate safe and pleasurable sexual encounters” (Curtin et. al 49). These prevalent ideologies reinforce distance between the self and the body, increasing opportunities for shame, leading to “lower levels of sexual pleasure and arousability, sexual assertiveness. . . and condom-use self-efficacy, and higher levels of sexual avoidance, ambivalence in sexual decision making and sexual risk taking” (51). As a sexual education curriculum, *Big Decisions* claims to be focused on helping teens achieve

sexual health, but by refusing to engage students in discussions of body shame and instead reinforcing this as a healthy reason, this curriculum may be putting students, especially female students, at a disadvantage when achieving a critical developmental milestone. While shame, and particularly body shame, is a barrier to sexual health and pleasure, the rhetorical reinforcement of fear within this curriculum is an equally significant obstacle to students' sexual health.

Fear and Desire

As socially constructed emotions, fear and desire shape our motivations and interactions, leading us to respond to specific situations by moving towards objects of desire or away from objects of fear. Emotions like guilt and shame or fear and desire in particular are constructed within the body *and* a social context. Alice Brand brought the issue of emotions as socially constructed to composition scholars' attention, warning that if "composition studies continues to embrace the social construction of writing. . . then it needs to study all its component parts. And that includes emotion" (395). In her book, *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*, Sara Ahmed explains the experience of fear with particular attention to the body. As fear sets in, the body responds, and "the feeling of fear presses us into. . . [the] future as an intense bodily experience in the present. One sweats, one's heart races, one's whole body becomes a space of unpleasant intensity, an impression that overwhelms us and pushes us back with the force of its negation" (Ahmed 65). Fear is a powerful emotion that reminds us we are embodied subjects, which can also motivate us to avoid danger, as one scholar notes, "[f]ear is the felt urge to avoid anticipated pain" (Nicol 16). Ahmed and Nicol both point to the ways in which fear blurs the boundaries of time: it is evoked by the present, concerned with the future, and

informed by past experiences: fear “is triggered by the perception that a particular kind of relation will engender pain. Fear is both anticipatory and a form of remembering” (Nicol 16). By calling upon students’ past and future experiences within the present situation of the classroom, students’ identities are further intertwined with their engagement with sexuality both in education and practice. Desire can have a similar effect on the experience of time, as it is an “anticipation of pleasure that is also a relation of pursuit to unrealized pleasure. Desire is the felt urge to seek anticipated pleasure” as well as “both anticipatory and a form of remembering” (Nicol 16). Anticipation, as well as the urge to move (toward the object of desire, away from the object of fear), links fear and desire together. My analysis of fear and desire within this curriculum reveals that, in an effort to promote abstinence, *Big Decisions* reinforces students’ fear of risk and pain as a result of sex, while ignoring the desire or pleasure that is often a meaningful part of sexual relationships.

In composition studies, we know that fear or anxiety in the writing process can lead students to have “less awareness of audience or organization [and use] fewer essay planning strategies,” both of which are linked to less developed writers and writing (Reigstad 70). Composition studies attends to the student experience of fear and anxiety within the classroom in such a way that positions us to productively evaluate the rhetorical workings of fear within other subject-area classrooms. While audience and organization may not be as salient to sexual education or encounters, planning and communicating still have a significant place in the sexual health of students, particularly concerning sexual self-efficacy, e.g. “engaging in behaviors aimed at preventing unwanted pregnancy and sexually transmitted infections” (Curtin et. al 49). If it is true

that within basic writing “[fear] of errors, unfamiliarity with the composing process, and a lack of voice may explain why the highly anxious basic writer fails” (Reigstad 69), then we may be able to analyze and understand how fear of errors or risk might inform the experiences of the adolescent in sexual education, activities, and relationships.

Inciting fear surrounding the risks of sexual engagement is a major part of *Big Decisions* move to forcefully encourage students to abstain. One of the first healthy reasons introduced to abstain is “[t]o avoid risks” (Realini 144). While it is true that in theory abstinence “is the most effective way to prevent pregnancy and HIV and other STIs” (Realini 144), the excessive attention given to sexual risk within this lesson may unnecessarily heighten students fear of sex. Immediately following the reason to avoid risk are separate entries that also call on students’ fears, or even inspire them to consider fearful outcomes that would not have occurred to them otherwise. Despite having mentioned STIs and pregnancy in the original risk entry, each is given their own separate entry. While risk is effectively covered already, *Big Decisions* reinforces this as well as the emotional fear response.

Another critique I have concerning *Big Decisions*’ use of fear as a motivator comes from the recognition that not all students, or bodies, will experience fear in the same way, and this inequitable distribution of fear may further reinforce problematic gender or sexuality norms. Especially since “fear is felt differently by different bodies. . . . [and] fear could be viewed as a ‘reasonable response’ to vulnerability, whereby vulnerability itself would be perceived as an inherent quality or characteristic of some bodies” (Ahmed 68). For example, when it comes to the risk of pregnancy associated with sex, female students may be more emotionally aroused as a result of this

vulnerability, which in itself “involves a particular kind of bodily relation to the world, in which openness itself is read as a site of potential danger, and as demanding evasive action” (Ahmed 68). Exploring how different bodies, and therefore students, are affected by this use of fear helps one recognize the “inequalities in power, gender and material circumstances [that] is of utmost importance in education and communication on pleasure and contraceptive practices” (Hirst 428). The relationship between inequality and fear deny certain students access to power and pleasure, which may prevent marginalized students from achieving sexual health.

The erasure of pleasure and desire becomes even more clear when *Big Decisions* cites that being “afraid it [sex] will hurt” is a healthy, strong reason to abstain from sex. While fear lies under the surface during discussions of risk, it moves to the forefront as fear of pain. With the emphasis of fear comes greater concerns about inequality and ethics. In the accompanying comment for this entry, *Big Decisions* notes that “Some people have discomfort the first time they have vaginal or anal sex” (Realini 144). The fact that the students who will experience this particular sort of pain, more often than not, are women and gay males is left unacknowledged. By doing this, culturally prescribed norms for women and other marginalized students are reinforced. For example, “[women] are increasingly taught that their needs and desires are secondary to others’, and the internalization of these ideologies come at a cost to young women’s well-being” (Curtin et. al 49). Inciting fear of pain is another way to teach women that their desires should be secondary to fear. The possibility that female students desire sex or anticipate pleasure within sexual encounters is overshadowed by the curriculum’s reinforcement of fear and pain. The student who may be sex-positive within this lesson could instead hear

that they *should* be afraid. This entry reinforces that sex for these groups is likely to be unpleasant, even painful, and thus encourages them to avoid sexual activity all together. While the comment here does inform students that the “pain is usually not severe or long-lasting” but not without first foregrounding that they “may have some bleeding from stretching or tearing of the hymen” (144). Within the context of this lesson, it becomes apparent that “the language of fear involves the intensification of threats, which works to create a distinction between those who are ‘under threat’ and those who threaten” (Ahmed 72). Whether intentional or not, the emphasis on fear and absence of desire within this lesson strengthens certain students’ position as those under threat and others’ position as those who threaten.

A reconstruction of this lesson that avoids fear and makes more room for desire and pleasure could, instead, challenge the troublesome co-occurrences of threat and sexual activity and lead to students engaging in healthier sexual practices. For example, in “It’s Got to be about Enjoying Yourself: Young People, Sexual Pleasure, and Sex and Relationships Education,” Julia Hirst warns that “[r]eported barriers to pleasure [are cited] as the main factor in the non-use of condoms” and recommends that “successful condom strategies should stress pleasure as well as protection, rather than the more usual focus on the risks to health of sex without condoms” (427). While re-introducing pleasure has benefits for marginalized students, even those who experience relative privilege are negatively impacted by the power dynamic that establishes some as “under threat” and others as those who “threaten.” A pleasure-focused curriculum transitions these rhetorical positions from unequal experiences of threat and danger to a mutually beneficial pursuit of pleasure. Masculine stereotypes, as well as feminine stereotypes, can be challenged in

“[sexuality and relationship education] that privileges the importance of pleasure for females and males in intimate partnerships” as such education “makes an unequivocal challenge to the stereotype of the unromantic pleasure-seeking man” (Hirst 430). Instead of creating a space that “can deter young women from acknowledging sexual desire because it feels safer to adopt a passive demeanour and avoid speaking openly about desires and sexual satisfaction” (Hirst 429), discourse concerning pleasure within the sexual education classroom may allow “young people. . . to feel vindicated in declining pressure to take part in sexual acts or related activities they are not comfortable with, might not enjoy, regret or evoke anxiety” (Hirst 430). If the curriculum’s goal is “to help you [students] stay healthy and reach your goals and dreams” (*Big Decisions*, Key Messages), considering the consequences of over-emphasizing fear and risk is imperative to actually supporting the healthy development of the target audience.

Conclusion

The engagement between composition, rhetoric, and sexual education on an affective or emotional level clearly brings to light weaknesses within a sexual education curriculum and begins to make suggestions for improvement. Shame and guilt function to threaten students with social exclusion or loss of reputation if or when they decide to engage in sexual activities, and fear replaces desire resulting in inequalities and reducing the probability that students will take precautionary measures to protect themselves from the negative consequences of unplanned or undesired sex. Instead, turning to a discourse of pleasure could increase students’ healthy sexual practices and relationships, benefiting both marginalized and privileged groups within the current fear-based dynamic.

However, this cross-disciplinary work can also remind compositionists and rhetoricians of the importance of emotion in our own work, redirecting our attention to pathos and students' embodied experiences. Jonathan Alexander writes that "the call to articulate and tell the story of your desires and thus your identity, has linked a sense of one's sexuality with a sense of one's identity—so much so that the two are at times hardly distinguishable" (42). Alexander's attention to desire and identity, as well as sharing the narrative of one's desire, is an excellent illustration of what sexuality and sexuality education can bring to the composition classroom, a topic which I plan to explore further in the concluding chapter of this thesis.

IV. STUDENT ACTIVITIES – A COMPOSITIONIST’S REVISION

Within this section, I use composition practices and theory to revise the Big Decisions lesson to enhance student agency and provide more opportunities for sex to be seen as a healthy part of relationship development by avoiding the fear, guilt, and shame present within the original text in favor of a more pleasure-focused discussion. I will be addressing the following research question: How can composition research and practice suggest revisions for this lesson to increase student agency and learning?

Deconstructing Persuasive Definitions and Binary Oppositions

Each activity within lesson 5 contributes to students accepting the argument presented within the lesson, particularly elements concerning the definition of abstinence and its coding as the only available healthy behavior. However, activities 5.1, 5.2, and 5.5 pose the most compelling implications for students. Activity 5.1 “Reasons to Wait” asks students to contribute to definitions of abstinence and sex and establishes the accepted persuasive definition. Activity 5.2 ““Is This Abstinence?”” elaborates upon the persuasive definition of abstinence and its practical applications to students’ choices and behaviors. Finally, the closure of the lesson, 5.5 “My Ideas about Abstinence,” uses writing to encourage students to internalize the argument of *Big Decisions*’ persuasive definition of abstinence. Drawing on composition studies, I suggest opportunities for students to become more active participants in the classroom, and revisions that are more likely to encourage healthy relationships and sexual decisions, as informed by sociology and composition research.

Much of the following critique of *Big Decisions* lesson 5 and my own suggested revisions rely upon the notion of student agency within the classroom as critical to

learning as well as the possible role of writing in enabling individual agency. Researchers and theorists agree that there are "certain features and strategies... [that] characterize successful learning," contending that "successful learning is also connective and selective... [as well as] active, engaged, and personal (Emig 124). If effective learning is active, engaged, and personal, then students' sense of agency within the classroom may be a key factor to their ability to learn. Fishman and McCarthy argue that "unless students themselves own the problems and actively explore them, solutions lack significance" (346). To help students actively explore problems and find solutions with significance, classrooms must support agency, especially when "agency [is] understood as both the ability to interpret events as well as the ability to influence, change, or redirect them within a specific situation" (Ewald and Wallace 343). Students must be active participants in the classroom to perform the interpretation and redirection of events inherent in agency, which in turn enables them to learn successfully.

In addition to student agency, writing is a critical tool for learning "because writing as process-and-product possesses a cluster of attributes that correspond uniquely to certain powerful learning strategies" (Emig 122). Furthermore, writing allows students a personal space to discover and understand their own beliefs and opinions because "[w]riting permits us to keep our words in private or to revise them before showing them to anyone else" (Elbow 291). When learning and engagement with course material are the goals, writing is a meaningful tool in enabling student agency that should not be ignored. The abstinence-only until marriage paradigm created in *Big Decisions* is one that "gives us only limited tools to conceptualize and promote positive adolescent sexual development and relationships" (Schalet 55). Sociologist Amy Schalet argues that,

instead, sexuality education should “allow youth to explore sexuality in a gradual, intentional, and pleasurable fashion” (55), which would, in turn, enable them to gain more sexual autonomy. Both composition research into the nature of learning and writing, as well as sociological research on sexual development note the benefits of student agency in the classroom. However, lesson 5 of Big Decisions values its persuasive definitions of abstinence and sex and the transmission of values over student agency, as is evident through the student activities within the lesson.

The class opener for lesson 5, “Reasons to Wait,” establishes the persuasive definitions of sex and abstinence, which are returned to throughout the class session. During this activity, “students first list the reasons to wait and the reasons to have sex and then evaluate how healthy and strong these reasons are” (Realini 127). This activity is meant to create a space for an honest and open conversation about engaging in sexual activity, but the prescribed categorization of activities as healthy or unhealthy leaves little room for students to engage with these decisions as independent thinkers. Instead, this activity more closely follows a banking model of teaching and learning; students are meant to look to the instructor and course materials for answers to which decisions are right for them. The facilitator resource for this activity lists anticipated reasons to wait and reasons to have sex from students, labels each reason as healthy or unhealthy, and then provides a justification for that activity’s label. These justifications, however, function to serve the aim of students valuing abstinence rather than encouraging them to conduct independent analysis on the costs and benefits of each decision. For example, as a reason to have sex, “for pleasure” is labeled only as a *possible* healthy, strong reason because “sexual desire can be one part of a healthy decision. But pleasure, all by itself,

may not be the best reason” (Realini 142). In contrast, not wanting to disappoint one’s parents is a decidedly healthy and strong reason despite the acknowledgement that “[i]f the only reason to do something (or not to do something) is. . . [parent approval] that may not be as strong a reason” (145). Both of these examples are ambiguous. Either could be, or could not be, a healthy reason to abstain or engage in sexual activity. However, *Big Decisions* does not label both as “maybe” healthy reasons. Their focus on transmitting values and norms overrides the pedagogical decision to capture students’ interest and critical thinking in favor of promoting abstinence. In their study of classroom agency, Ewald and Wallace note that certain assignments “may actually discourage structures that would allow for multiple truths and stances” (364), and this activity in *Big Decisions* is such that limits the possibility of multiple truths or stances among students. Common practices in composition classrooms might allow students to more openly explore these decisions for themselves.

There are many benefits to beginning a class session with a short writing activity and discussion. Quick writes draw students into the day’s topic for discussion and help them independently develop their thoughts and opinions, without the influence of instructors or peers. As an example of low-stakes writing, quick writes seek “not so much to produce excellent pieces of writing as to get students to think, learn, and understand more of the course material” (Elbow 289). Furthermore, these activities can lower the barrier for entering a follow-up conversation. For instructors an added benefit of low-stakes writing comes from the ability to see “the interactions between [students’] thinking about course material and their thinking about other realms of their life, between their thinking and feeling” (Elbow 292). The combined effect of students grappling

independently with their thoughts and a lowered barrier for entry is a more meaningful and educational lesson. Instead of beginning this class session by asking students what “good” or “bad” reasons to have sex or abstain are, I suggest the following questions as samples for an alternative writing activity:

1. What are some questions one might consider before engaging in sexual activity?
How can you know you’re “ready”?
2. What does sex add to a relationship? How might it complicate things?
3. Name a few warning signs or red flags to look out for before engaging in sexual activity.
4. What are the benefits and challenges faced by teens and young adults in choosing abstinence? When do you personally believe abstinence is the right choice?

These questions are meant to help students think about the surrounding contexts, relationships, and consequences of sexual activity and abstinence as an alternative.

Instructors could lead students in a collaborative discussion about consent, alcohol abuse, condom usage, and healthy communication between sexual partners. The focus on increasing agency within this activity has also involved “admitting that teachers have the power to celebrate or repress students’ divergent interpretations” (Ewald and Wallace 359). Students will have unique answers to each of these questions, and small group discussion combined with a class review or summary provide valuable opportunities for instructors to respond with non-judgmental feedback; in short, the assignment is structured to enable a celebration of diverse responses, as opposed to enforcing adherence to norms. This quick write activity is a step in the direction of allowing students the autonomy to make important decisions for themselves and empowering them to consider

the benefits and consequences of their decisions—a valuable life and relationship skill. The next activity prompts instructors to tell students to “imagine” that they’ve “thought carefully about relationships and sex” (133), but I would suggest that creating a space in which they actually have thought carefully about these issues, as opposed to imagining it, would be more beneficial for students.

Activity 5.2 asks students in small groups to consider a list of activities on small cards and sort them “into ‘OK’ and ‘NOT OK’ categories. . . as applying to the situation in which a person has chosen abstinence—and decided not to have sex” (Realini 128). The premises of this activity ask students to position themselves as someone who has chosen abstinence and then to further consider the effects of this decision and by doing so inevitably reduces students’ sexual autonomy. Contrary to *Big Decisions*’ recognition that many sexual decisions are personal, students are asked to discuss these activities publicly, in small groups with peers they may or may not know well enough to be comfortable. Students are directed to consider questions that further externalize the discussion. These questions are written not as personal questions for students to consider about their own future decisions, but as questions focusing on a vague subject who has already made their choice: “Which activities are OK to do for someone who wants to be abstinent, and not have sex?” (Realini 133). Answering this question requires students to think about someone else, which also publicizes sexual decision-making. If each student is to decide what is okay for someone (read, anyone) who has chosen abstinence, then they are also positioned to evaluate others’ behavior. The language and structure of activity 5.2 denies the explicitly stated personal nature of sexual decisions, and, as a result, such decisions become open to outside influence and scrutiny.

While simply replacing "someone" with "you" in the central question is a step in the right direction, further revision to this activity could enable students to consider critical questions about sexuality and ask for guidance as needed. One of the stated purposes of activity 5.2 is to help students “think ahead of what activities are OK for [them] to do, and which are not OK” (Realini 133). Determining which activities a person is comfortable with before the occasion arises may help them with clearly communicating consent and maintaining healthy boundaries. I suggest the following revision with the goals of enhancing student understanding of the non-binary nature of relationships and sexual decisions, reinforcing ideas of consent, identifying healthy precautions, and developing communication skills between partners:

1. Students will spend 5-10 minutes considering the following prompt independently (the list mentioned below refers to the original *Big Decisions* activity list):
 - a. “Imagine you are going on a date with someone you respect and are attracted to. The evening’s activities go well, and you are invited to join them at home for a movie. You know that being alone together is a reality and that you may desire to engage in sexual activities together. Review the following list of activities and consider which you would be comfortable with, which you may be comfortable with under certain circumstances, and which activities you are not comfortable consenting to.”
2. Students will spend 10 minutes with a partner discussing why someone might feel comfortable with certain activities but not others.
3. After a class review and discussion of the previous activity, partners will spend 10-15 minutes role-playing a conversation between romantic or sexual partners communicating their predetermined boundaries.

The proposed revisions ask students to consider these questions for themselves, reinforcing the personal nature of sexuality. Conversations between classroom partners will reveal that each person approaches these decisions differently and that this difference is acceptable and healthy. The questions above also do not assume or make decisions for students. Instead, they are prompted to approach the situation and their own decisions with a critical lens. Lastly, my proposed revision not only helps students determine their sexual boundaries, but also provides them with the opportunity to practice communicating their own boundaries and listening to those of others. Communication about sexual limits is often missing in the sexual education classroom, and it is an invaluable skill in maintaining healthy relationships and boundaries.

Activity 5.5, “My Ideas about Abstinence,” encourages students to internalize the argument of the lesson through writing, which, again, privileges abstinence over critical thinking and autonomy. “My Ideas about Abstinence” consists of a confidential worksheet that asks students to respond confidentially to three surface-level questions. Responses to these questions are likely to be short, fill-in-the blank answers. For example, the third question, “If I wanted to abstain from sex, one situation I would want to avoid is:” (Realini 148), is easily answered by copying in a behavior from an earlier class activity with little thought of the consequences or context of the behavior. Lesson closure activities are valuable opportunities to check in with students and identify areas of confusion among the class. The current version of this activity fails to meet this goal by posing such shallow questions, which may lead to students ending the class session with inaccuracies or misconceptions. In effort to address this pedagogical gap, I suggest an alternative activity that requires students to reflect on what they have and have

not learned. During the revised activity, students will spend 10 minutes writing one question they have about each of the following:

1. Ways to communicate boundaries
2. Healthy precautions before, during, or after sex
3. The benefits and challenges of choosing abstinence
4. Determining if abstinence is the right choice

These revisions address key objectives of the lesson, including increasing condom usage, understanding decisions involving sex and abstinence, and focusing on abstinence as a prevention plan for STIs and pregnancy. However, in contrast to the original activity, more neutral language creates the opportunity for students be autonomous and make decisions for themselves. Furthermore, this activity requires more cognitive effort than the simple recall questions from the original. Instructors can easily use student responses to this activity to kick off their next class session and transition into the following lesson, increasing the cohesion of the curriculum.

Erasing Fear and Emphasizing Pleasure

As mentioned in the chapter, “(A)ffective Abstinence,” the *Big Decisions* curriculum creates or reinforces students’ existing feelings of shame, guilt, and fear to promote abstinence as the best option. These negative emotions act as a barrier between students and important personal decisions and information about sexuality and relationships. To best address this issue within the lesson, I will suggest revisions for activity 5.1, “Reasons to Wait and Reasons to Have Sex.” I focus my attentions on this activity because this is where I see *Big Decisions* most obviously engaging students’ emotions. Revising this activity so that students are asked to critically analyze cultural narratives

about sex and sexuality will reduce the likelihood of negative affective responses (as compared to the original activity) and leave room for discussions about pleasure and desire.

Two of the most emotionally charged reasons to abstain are “Afraid it will hurt” (Realini 144) and “Don’t want to hurt their ‘reputation’” (145). Each of these reasons is strongly related to cultural narratives about sex, e.g. women should expect their first time to be painful and that those who engage in sexual activity have done something shameful and harmed their reputation. Replacing the original “Reasons to Wait and Reasons to Have Sex” activity with a cultural interrogation would allow students to become more active participants in the classroom and lessen the opportunity for guilt and fear. Additionally, narratives provide distance from the students as individuals and the topics being discussed, which might make it less intimidating for them to contribute to class discussions.

Using the two cultural narratives mentioned above (women should expect their first time to be painful and that those who engage in sexual activity have done something shameful and harmed their reputation) as models for this activity, instructors begin by writing the keywords of the narrative on the board and displaying a slide with a set of questions to guide them through *interrogating* this popular conception. The cultural narratives concerning pain and losing one’s virginity as well as the loss of reputation after sex are particularly important to counter. As discussed in the earlier chapter, students who believe that sex is likely to be painful and can lead to shame or regret are at a higher risk for negative health outcomes. Therefore, addressing these two narratives as examples early in the lesson will ensure that two critical narratives are countered within the class

session while providing useful models for students to follow. If time permits, instructors and students can collaborate to create additional interrogation questions. Below are examples of questions that might be useful:

1. Where have you heard this cultural narrative/myth before? Is this a credible source?
2. Does this myth apply to everyone or only a few people? Why?
3. What consequences might this myth have for individuals who find it valid?
4. Can you find a valid source that supports this cultural myth? Include a quote and an explanation (in your own words) of how the source you've found connects to this narrative.

After the class modeled the first two cultural narratives, instructors ask students to contribute a few cultural narratives about sex/sexuality from their experience to the list on the board. Then, students will be instructed to select two of the cultural narratives from the class list and write their responses to the list of interrogation questions. For younger students, it could be fun to use a detective theme for this activity, encouraging them to interview or interrogate the cultural norms around them. After students have had time to formulate their responses to these questions about their chosen cultural narratives, instructors can number each student 1 or 2 to partner them for discussion and sharing their findings. This pair-and-share format works best if instructors circulate the classroom and check-in with students, asking probing questions and providing validation when appropriate. The original activity from the *Big Decisions* curriculum privileges fear, guilt, and shame whenever these emotions further persuade students to choose abstinence. However, through addressing cultural narratives that underpin these emotions with

certain bodies and sexuality, my revisions reduce the presence of these negative emotional responses, leaving room for an open dialogue surrounding the possibilities of pleasure and desire within students' sexual relationships.

V. CONCLUSION

Viewing the text of *Big Decisions* through the practices and theories of composition and rhetoric reveals a curriculum that often avoids educating students in favor of transmitting values, mainly the value of abstinence until marriage. The tendency of rhetoric and composition to develop theories focused on understanding and considering audience, in addition to rhetoric's attention to language and composition's student-centered pedagogies, create a foundation for understanding how *Big Decisions* may be functioning for its purported primary audience, students, or perhaps instead managing the goals and interests of competing audiences including politicians, administrators, teachers, parents, and students.

My analysis of emotions within *Big Decisions* connects rhetoric and sexuality education by examining the role of shame and guilt as well as fear and desire, and the ways in which different students may respond differently to the emotional underpinnings of this lesson. Rhetorical attention to language points to what is, as well as what is not, present within this lesson. For example, as discussed in the previous chapter, fear is present in the form of over-attention to risk while desire is absent. Furthermore, rhetorical studies attempts to analyze and make sense of the ways in which language is situated within, and reproduces or challenges, systems of power. Attention to power structures within this lesson allows for an analysis considering the ways different students, and bodies, may experience this lesson and subsequent discussions as a result of their varying identities, such as women and gay men being more vulnerable to the fear of pain associated with sex. As a result of this connection between identity, emotion, and sexual education the sexual education classroom can be a critical site for the reproduction or

challenging of power structures. Issues of power and identity combined with careful attention to language make rhetorical theory a helpful tool in evaluating and analyzing sexual education.

The power of persuasive definitions enables this lesson to encourage naive listeners to accept a definition of abstinence that undermines their autonomy in decision making. As students accept abstinence as “a decision and a plan,” the language of this lesson codes abstinence as the only healthy behavior and forces individual students into deciding to abstain and developing a plan in line with this decision—with little or no room for flexibility. This lesson implicitly and explicitly tells students who stray from abstinence they are at risk for a host of negative consequence; however, encroaching on student autonomy, particularly within the context of sexuality, increases the likelihood of a host of undesired outcomes, including reduced sexual health.

In practice, the rigidity of this lesson leads instructors to ask open-ended questions with a limited number of “correct” answers. The idea of student-centered classrooms in composition pedagogy is another valuable addition to an interdisciplinary bridge between composition and sexual education, which lead me to consider student agency and autonomy as discussed in the earlier section “Student Activities—A Compositionist’s Revision.” In this section, I revise the questions asked in the original Big Decisions lesson with the goal of introducing flexibility and increasing student agency. Composition is dedicated to increasing student opportunities for learning, and this stance further uncovers the ways in which *Big Decisions* favors norms and values as opposed to choices that may be more educationally beneficial for students inside and outside of the classroom.

While composition and rhetoric can enrich the field of sexual education, I also believe that the relationship between these fields is mutually beneficial. Emphasizing issues of bodies, sexuality, and difference are significant contributions from sexual education to composition and rhetoric. These ideas have been considered in several works from the fields of composition and rhetoric, including Hawhee's *Moving Bodies: Kenneth Burke at the Edges of Language*, Scott's *Risky Rhetoric: Aids and the Cultural Practices of HIV Testing*, and others. However, Jonathan Alexander's book *Literacy, Sexuality, and Pedagogy: Theory and Practice for Composition Studies* best demonstrates the worth of this particular cross-disciplinary engagement.

Within *Literacy, Sexuality, and Pedagogy*, sexuality and literacy reinforce one another: as one develops literacy practices, one is better able to name and describe one's sexual experiences and vice versa. Alexander demonstrates how "an individual's emergences into sexual and literate self-awareness are often tied together in complex ways" (36). This connection between literacies and self-awareness reinforces the place of the body and sexuality in the composition classroom as instructors foster students' multimodal literacy development. Alexander also draws attention to the ways "discourses of sex and sexuality—often competing discourses about what is 'normal,' 'natural,' 'right,' or 'fair,'—comprise significant portions of our day-to-day social lives. . . [and] form a significant secondary discourse through which intimately personal and profoundly public issues are seen, understood, debated, and critiqued" (61). Rhetoric and composition often come together in the first-year composition course to engage students with issues of power through language, and sexuality and sexuality education are situated to encourage such conversations. Sexuality in the composition classroom may help

students understand the influences of power and privilege as they come to realize that “access to sexual literacy is not always equal, particularly as it is frequently a locus of social control” (62). The unequal access to sexual literacy can be seen in students’ lived experiences as a result of sexual illiteracy, which “positions people in comparably disempowered positions—particularly in terms of their ability to name their own bodies, their experiences, their relationships” (63). As compositionist scholars and teachers seek to ground their classroom practices in tangible experiences and cultural practices, sexual literacy (or lack thereof) provides a useful backdrop for discussions and assignments. As rhetoricians continue to analyze the connections between language, power, sexuality, and bodies, they may find value in the unique ways these topics converge in sexual education as well as its related documents and practices.

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