

SEX ED ONLINE—THE DEVELOPER'S ENDEAVOR TO CREATE SAFE SPACE

A thesis submitted to the faculty of
San Francisco State University
In partial fulfillment of
the requirements for
the Degree

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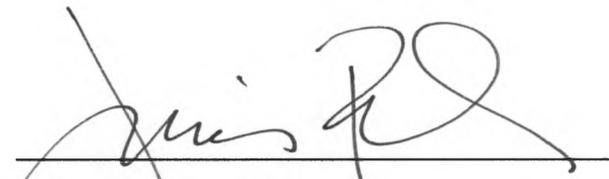
Master of Arts
In
Sexuality Studies

by
Clarissa Herman
San Francisco, California
May 2015

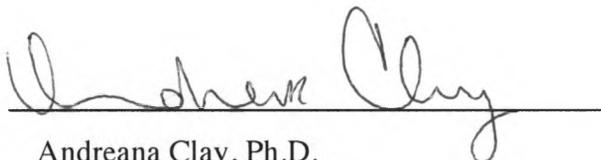
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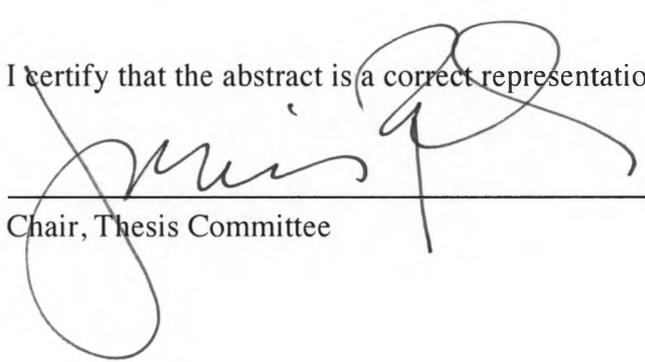
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Sex Ed Online—The Developer’s Endeavor to Create Safe Space

Clarissa Marie Herman
San Francisco, California
2015

Sexuality education websites offer young people a valuable place to learn about sexuality yet funding constraints make this a difficult endeavor. Drawing on interviews with educators and developers from websites providing positive sexuality education, I found that online sexuality educators appreciate the anonymous nature of the Internet and believe their sites offer a safe space for young people to find community. However, inadequate funding often limits these sites. Even when funding is secured, sites remain accountable to funders’ objectives that restrict their capacity. My research suggests that integrating the sexuality education available online and that in the classroom could revolutionize its quality and scope. Furthermore, strengthening research partnerships to evaluate sites’ effectiveness could provide evidence to propel sexuality education toward more comprehensiveness in both online and offline spheres. I close by identifying opportunities to better support websites that encourage young people’s sexual agency, health, and development.

I certify that the abstract is a correct representation of the content of this thesis.



Chair, Thesis Committee

5.18.15

Date

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Firstly, thank you to my 8 participants who gave of their time and energy to talk with me about their work in online sexuality education. You were inspirational in your efforts and I'm so grateful for your participation.

Thank you to my Mom and to my Dad who have so gracefully embraced and supported my work and adventure-seeking tendencies.

Thank you to my sisters, Laura and Emily, for keeping me in check and reminding me why this work is important.

Thanks to my SXS cohort for always being supportive and for usually being on Gchat.

Thank you to Andreana for your encouragement and insightful comments.

There will never be enough thanks to Jessica for your unwavering support and faith in me and in my work. I learned so much more from you than just how to write a thesis and I'll carry these lessons with me far beyond graduation.

Finally, thank you to Dennis, my partner and third reader. Thank you for keeping me in fantasy novels and rich treats, for reading my drafts and providing feedback, and for always allowing me to just be myself. You held my hand and you held me up and I am so thankful for you.

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Sex Ed in the 21st Century

A 15-year-old logs onto the Internet, opens a search engine, and types the word “sex” into the search bar. Now what happens? Maybe they see images and videos of naked people engaging in lewd sexual activities. Perhaps this young person’s parents or teachers have set up a filter on the computer at home and school and so nothing but blocked content comes up. A young person searching “sex” on the Internet typically conjures thoughts of explicit content, pornography, inappropriateness, and danger. Indeed, when I typed “inappropriate” into my desktop thesaurus in search of synonyms, the example sentence provided was: “*children’s access to the Internet may expose them to inappropriate material*” (Oxford University Press, 2008). This understanding of young people on the Internet as risky and indecent is so ubiquitous as to have reached the complimentary thesaurus included on my computer.

However, the Internet has more to offer than pornography and danger; it also provides a unique and valuable place for young people to learn about healthy sexuality. When a young person searches “sex” on the Internet, they might also find a website created by qualified sexuality educators and developed specifically for their age group that offers games, quizzes, and message boards to engage and play with as they explore and learn about sexuality, culture, biology, and identity. Unfortunately, few of these websites exist and they struggle to find support and reach young people. Throughout this paper, I explore sexuality education online and its value, quandaries, and opportunities for future development.

Soon after the advent of the Internet, sexuality educators recognized the opportunity it represented and began sharing sexual health information online; Go Ask

Alice! and Scarleteen, the first sexuality education websites aimed at young people, established themselves as early as 1993 and 1998 (Go Ask Alice!, 2014; Scarleteen/Heather Corinna, 1998-2014). Educators turned to this new media platform to offer sexuality information because young people have long used popular media as a source for information about sexuality (Calzo & Suzuki, 2004). They frequently go online to find advice about sexual health issues because the Internet offers different possibilities than sex education in the classroom (Greenfield, Smahel, & Subrahmanyam, 2006).

Online sexuality education offers more privacy and anonymity than classroom-based sexuality education reliably does (Barak & Fisher, 2001; Kanuga & Rosenfeld, 2004; Keller & La Belle, 2005). The Internet also offers multimedia advantages; sexuality education websites offer videos, games, polls, social forums, chat services, and static content that engage the multi-sense capabilities and attention spans of contemporary adolescents (Barak & Fisher, 2001). Online sex education can also offer individualized instruction: the online learner can find an updated curriculum, work at their own pace and skip or return to topics as desired, and gain access to instructional material at any time from a wide variety of locations and devices (Brown, Hunt, Mello, & Whiteley, 2012; Green, Hamarman, & Mckee, 2012; Keller & La Belle, 2005). Additionally, online sexuality education facilitates social learning and the exchange of ideas by offering forums, message boards, and chatting options (Barak & Fisher, 2001).

Laina Bay-Cheng (2001) found that sexuality education content on the Internet was essentially unregulated, which contrasted the stringent governing of sexuality education in schools. She went on to note, "Not only is the Internet a viable informational

resource for adolescents, but it is also more free to present a wider range of positions and perspectives on adolescent sexuality than school-based resources, which must be approved by various authorities” (Bay-Cheng, 2001, p. 248). Furthermore, young people regularly use the Internet to learn about sex. A Kaiser Family Foundation survey in 2001 found that 44% of online youth have used the Internet to find sexual health information. More recently, the Kaiser Family Foundation (2010) found that 55% of 7th to 12th graders and 62% of 15-to 18-year-olds have ever looked up health information on the Internet. Eight in ten youth (84%) consider sexual issues very important, yet only 22 states and the District of Columbia currently mandate sex education and HIV education (Guttmacher Institute, 2015; Kaiser Family Foundation, 2001). Of those 22, 18 states and the District of Columbia require that information on contraception be provided; 12 require discussion of sexual orientation (Guttmacher Institute, 2015).

Sex education became available in schools decades before the Internet’s proliferation. Most young people receive some type of sexuality education in school, but curricular content varies widely and rarely provides a comprehensive overview (Berglas, Constantine, & Ozer, 2014). Sex education in the United States vacillates between two available approaches: abstinence-only education stresses the value of avoiding all sexual activity outside the context of a heterosexual, adult marriage, and comprehensive or abstinence-plus education emphasizes reducing risks of pregnancy and disease by encouraging abstinence while also teaching about contraceptives (Berglas et al., 2014). Federal funding for sexuality education has primarily supported abstinence-only education.

State and federal funding first began in the 1970s and 1980s when public concerns over rates of HIV/AIDS and teenage pregnancy increased (SIECUS, 2011). The federal government failed to act on a broader public health commitment to comprehensive sexuality education and instead initiated funding for sex education with the sole purpose of preventing disease and unintended pregnancy. In 1981, during the Reagan Administration, conservative policymakers found a foothold from whence they could begin implementing Christian ideology in schools. With the passing of the Adolescent Family Life Act (AFLA), the federal government began to support and fund abstinence-only and abstinence-only-until-marriage sexuality education programs (Irvine, 2002; SIECUS, 2011). AFLA shifted the focus of sex education from preventing disease and unintended pregnancy to preventing adolescent sex before marriage altogether by institutionalizing evangelical morality (Irvine, 2002). AFLA required that, in order to receive funding, sex education programs ardently oppose abortion, involve religious groups, and prohibit any discussion of topics such as homosexuality, masturbation, and contraception. Funding for abstinence-only education continued to increase throughout the 1980s and 1990s, as did the programs' sophistication and commercial industry (Irvine, 2002). Evidence provided to substantiate these ideology-based programs possessed egregious methodological limitations. Among other failings, evaluation measures often lacked comparison groups and adequate sample sizes (Irvine, 2002, p. 118).

Abstinence-only education continued to proliferate during the Clinton administration with the 1996 passing of Title V of the Social Security Act, also known as "welfare reform." With this legislation came both unprecedented funding levels as well

as a clearer, narrower definition of abstinence education with which federally funded programs had to comply (Fields, 2008). Beginning in 1998, Title V provided \$50 million per year for five years with a mandate that states match every four federal dollars with three state dollars, and by 2000, conservatives acquired an additional \$50 million (Irvine, 2002, p. 191). This groundbreaking funding amount came with several provisions though. Commonly referred to as “A-H,” this 8-point federal definition of abstinence-only education stipulated eligibility conditions for sex education programs. Included in the definition are moralistic ideals, such as that “sexual activity outside the context of marriage is likely to have harmful psychological and physical effects” and that “a mutually faithful monogamous relationship in the context of marriage is the expected standard of human sexual activity” (U.S. Congress, 1996).

After Congress developed and effected the A-H definition of abstinence education, funding amounts increased exponentially, especially during the Bush Administration. To date, more than 1.5 billion dollars have been spent on abstinence-only sexuality education (SIECUS, 2011). Adding insult to injury, the federal government failed to evenhandedly evaluate abstinence-only education programs until 2007 (Tanne, 2009). Before 2007, the effectiveness of abstinence-only education could not be determined because program evaluations did not undergo peer review and suffered numerous other methodological shortcomings (Santelli et al., 2006). When Congress ordered an independent study in 2007, it revealed that abstinence-only sex education does not prevent, much less delay, teenage sexual activity (Tanne, 2009). Even still, funding for abstinence-only sexuality education as defined by A-H continued. Beginning in 2010, the Obama administration created federal funding streams for sexuality education that

include more comprehensive overviews of contraception. However, they remain narrowly focused on reducing harm, rather than striving for what sexuality education could achieve in the lives of young people (Berglas et al., 2014; SIECUS, 2011).

Conversely, online sexuality education—with its interactive and participatory nature, focus on youth, broad content range, and expanded goals—has taken up a rights-based approach to sexuality education. Nancy Berglas, Norman Constantine, and Emily Ozer (2014) interviewed professionals in advocacy, program development, funding, theory, and research in sexuality education. They found four overarching themes that make up a rights-based approach. These include core beliefs and principles: that youth have an inalienable right to access sexuality education; that developing sex education requires expanded goals beyond delaying sexual activity and preventing disease and pregnancy; that sexuality education needs broadened content that includes discussions about gender, sexual orientation, power, race, and agency. Finally, a rights-based sexuality education embraces a youth-centered pedagogy that moves from a didactic model to one that is participatory, interactive, and fosters critical thinking (pp. 65-67).

I explore sexuality education websites from the perspectives of educators and developers who work on them. I focus on websites that emphasize an attitude of young people's sexual agency and employ sex positive messaging. I understand sexual agency as people's ability to make decisions and determine actions about their body and emotions to affect their sexual practice, including whether, when, where, and with whom to engage in a sexual relationship (Bell, 2012, p. 284; Teitelman, 2004). Agency is shaped by context and is something learners do rather than something learners possess—that is, it is behavior rather than property (van Lier, 2008). Sex positivity is the attitude

that all *consensual* sexual activities can be healthy and pleasurable and should be respected as such, free from moral judgment. The websites included in my research exemplify sex positivity and four of the five websites in my sample offer definitions of consent that emphasize three main conditions for consent. First, consent must be freely and actively given without manipulation or coercion; second, it can be withdrawn at any time, and, finally, the consenting person has the full capacity to consent—for example, is not under the influence of alcohol or drugs, is of the legal age of consent, and is not asleep. After determining which sexuality education websites emphasize sexual agency and positivity, I began the recruitment process.

Methods

I conducted qualitative, semi-structured interviews with eight people from five different websites offering sexual health information or sexuality education aimed at young people (ages 13-25). To establish an idea of the world of online sexuality education (my population), I first combed the Internet for websites offering sexuality education and/or sexual health information. I used the search engine Google to find websites by using the following keywords and phrases: sex information, sex education, sexual health information, sexuality, sex info for young people, sex, sexuality education website, LGBT sexuality, online sex education, sexuality education for young people, and sex question. I compiled a non-exhaustive list by choosing U.S.-based and youth-oriented websites that came up repeatedly and within the first 10 pages of the search results. For each website originally included, I read through their content; engaged interactive features; looked at the “about us” sections; and noted the topics covered,

language used, number and type of interactive elements, and what age group the site aimed for.

This review led me to identify websites that met four key criteria: (1) targeted young people ages 13 to 25; (2) possessed interactive aspects (for example, quizzes, games, polls, and forums); (3) offered agentic and sex-positive messages; and (4) provided information beyond pregnancy, contraception, and sexually transmitted infections by including topics such as sexual and gender identity, relationships, and politics. I also tried to choose sites with high traffic ratings using Alexa which provide website analytic details such as how many visitors and how they navigate pages.

I then began recruitment. Website details are offered in the table below. I derived the information from participants during interviews and their respective websites.

Table 1
Websites

<u>Details</u>	<u>Site A</u>	<u>Site B</u>	<u>Site C</u>	<u>Site D</u>	<u>Site E</u>
Year Founded	1998	1999	2007	1996	1997
U.S. Traffic Rating	44,296	107,766	1,598 (parent site)	5,608	57,644
Funding Sources	Individual donors	Institutional giving foundations, large donors	Staffed by students for course credit	Multiple foundations and donors (nat'l level)	Private foundations, government contracts
Target Audience	Young people between 15 and 25 years old	Teens 13 to 19 years old in the United States	College-age people (approx. 18 to 22 years old)	Heterosexual women 18 to 29 years old (entire site). African American and Latino/a youth (interactive tools)	Young adults 17 to 24 years old. Youth of disproportionate risk, i.e., youth of color, youth living in poverty, etc.

I conducted five interviews with eight participants (one site included three educators). The following table illustrates participant details gathered from information provided during interviews and on their website's staff page.

Table 2

Participants

<u>Pseudonym</u>	<u>Casey</u>	<u>Jamie</u>	<u>Taylor</u>	<u>Sidney</u>	<u>Pat</u>
Race and Gender	White woman	White man	3 White women	White woman	White woman
Role at Website	Founder and content developer	Social media and content developer	Content developers and editors	Online education	Education and training

All of my participants were white, seven out of eight were women, and they ranged in age from early-twenties to mid-fifties. I specifically sought content developers and educators for my research. The interviews lasted between 56 and 135 minutes with four of five lasting around an hour; all were video- or audio-recorded. The interview guide was semi-structured: I was flexible with my questions; pursued topics that participants raised; and allowed participants to continue streams of thought rather than interrupting them (Esterberg, 2002, pp. 87-89).¹

I relied heavily on Virginia Braun and Victoria Clarke's (2006) six-phase process of thematic analysis. I familiarized myself with each interview by transcribing it, reading through the transcript, and taking analytic notes. I then coded for interactivity; funding and support; best practices; user agency; site attitudes and philosophies; descriptions of their website and the Internet as sex education platforms; anonymity; community; accessibility; and classroom-based sex education. My semantic approach means I identified themes based on what participants explicitly stated. I then went back a third

¹ See Appendix A for interview guide.

time to write more detailed analytic notes and ideas about the emerging themes of anonymity, community, and struggles with funding.

Drawing on these data, I argue in the following pages that sex education websites provide a valuable place for young people to learn about sexuality but that insufficient funding restrains their capacity. I first explore the anonymous nature of the Internet that allows more freedom to explore sexuality issues on sex education sites and facilitates disclosure. I then turn to sex education websites providing a place for young people to connect with one another and build community and addressing lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer (LGBTQ) users. I next discuss how, despite their value, sexuality education websites face dire funding circumstances that limit their capacity.

In closing, I identify collaborative opportunities. Integrating the sexuality education available online and that in the classroom could revolutionize sex education by emphasizing a hybrid, rights-based approach and transformative pedagogy. Creating partnerships between public health researchers and online sexuality educators for conducting participatory evaluation could provide broadened evidence for funding hybrid sexuality education that encourages holistic development of young people's sexuality.

Understanding Sexuality Education on the Internet

Based on my analytical findings, in the following pages I discuss how educators respond to a culture of sexual shame by allowing anonymity on their sexuality education websites increases their users' comfort and sense of agency. I also consider online community as a site of safety and support, which is potentially advantageous for LGBTQ young people. Finally, I explore the ways inadequate funding of sexuality education

websites restricts developers and educators in their work to provide young people valuable sexuality education.

The Space Afforded by Anonymity

The Internet's anonymous nature offers a key advantage. Many people feel more comfortable talking about sensitive information on the Internet rather than face-to-face. For young people struggling with issues of sexual and gender identity, acknowledging vulnerable and personal details about themselves can produce a sense of relief and release (Cooper, 1998; Joinson, 2001b; Peter, Schouten, & Valkenburg, 2007; Peter & Valkenburg, 2007, 2009, 2010). This comfort facilitates disclosure and agency as young people navigate sexuality and test risk online.

Anonymity appeals to young people: one study found that one in three adolescents prefer to communicate online rather than in-person about topics such as sex, love, and other potential sites of shame (Peter & Valkenburg, 2007). Online communication allows people more control over avoiding or confronting the expectations and judgments of others because anonymity shields young people from the ignominy of discussing sex and facilitates disclosure of intimate topics (Cooper, 1998; Joinson, 2001b; Pedersen, 1997; Peter & Valkenburg, 2009). Anonymity also emboldens young people by fostering a freedom that facilitates both disclosure and spur-of-the-moment, uninhibited emotional reactions (Joinson, 2001a).

In school-based sex education, teachers routinely respond to the threat of shame by encouraging hypothetical and anonymous questions that serve to both protect students from embarrassment and harassment while also suggesting that sexuality and talking about sex are shameful (Fields, 2008, p. 82). While a sense of safety facilitates comfort

when disclosing and learning about sexuality online, insulating young people from danger is not necessarily best either. Sonia Livingstone (2013) reminds educators that a world without risk is undesirable; young people must learn to navigate risk and repercussions alongside pleasure and rewards (p. 24). Online risk comes in multiple forms, including trolls who participate in online interactions for the sole purpose of causing disruption and/or triggering or exacerbating conflict for their own amusement (Hardaker, 2010, p. 237). Trolls sometimes enter sites' community spaces and cause trouble by offering unsolicited advice, harassing users, or adopting a false identity to interact with young people. In an anonymous online space, people tend to worry less about social consequences, and this emboldens trolls.

While harassment and impulsivity can generate negative outcomes, confronting both external and internal risk and learning from experience can allow young people to more carefully express their ideas online (Tiene, 2000). The Internet's asynchronous and anonymous nature provides young people with an enhanced amount of control over how they present their identities, and that permits youth to explore multiple aspects of their selves and experience autonomy (Maczewski, 2002; Peter & Valkenburg, 2009, 2010). Anonymity encourages self-expression, which can lead young people to better understand themselves and feel more confident. Mechthild Maczewski's interviews with youth showed that the control they experience in online environments enabled participants to feel more powerful, respected, and accepted with their identities, interests, and interactions (2002). This sense of control and agency is a key factor in the way sexuality education websites are designed and operate.

Anonymity—Agency and Anxiety

Sexuality education websites rest on an agentic framework: educators encourage users to navigate and choose which sexuality issues they most want to learn about. Casey, who founded and still writes content for her site, explained,

We don't tell them what to read first or which section to read or what order to read them in, right? We trust their interest and thankfully again, with the Internet, we have things interlinked and we can have things tagged so it's kind of very easy to get on a theme and then follow that theme in the way that you naturally would without somebody else deciding it for you.

Educators believe anonymity facilitates agency by allowing young people to feel comfortable in their curiosities about sex and that anonymity on their sites encourages young people to feel safe and protected from identification and judgment. Anonymity creates a sense of privacy, and Taylor—whose site focuses on college-age peer education—surmised these feelings cultivate security:

If you're in your own private setting on the computer looking up whatever you're curious about, you're more likely to . . . have questions and not be afraid to look into them as opposed to having to ask whatever teacher is teaching you and worrying about being judged by whoever is around you, so I think it's a lot easier to look for what you want and to really dive in and you don't have to be shy. . . . Being able to do things from the comfort of your home and be curious about it right then and there, it's nice.

Developers understand that their users experience anxiety around learning and talking about sexuality, which stems from a culture of sexual shame.

Educators feel that young people harbor fear that peers and adults will find out about their interest in sexuality. Casey explained the importance of providing a venue that responds to this shame:

With sexuality information, I think there's a weird thing where as part of people kind of soaking in the shame of the culture in it—part of that that's not so bad, or rather the shame that isn't negative—the kind of want it to be secret information, right, like and in a fun way, in a good way, in a way that felt like a good kind of kept secret that's a little, you know, a little naughty—for lack of a better term.

Responding to a culture of shame, sex education site developers strive to provide anonymity and, by doing so, to cultivate a safe feeling and allow their users to explore sexuality honestly while simultaneously pursuing excitement and pleasure. Jamie works on social media and content at his site that adamantly employs sex-positive messaging, “Because quite frankly, there is no place for fear or shame in sexuality education.” Casey affirmed that she regards young people's fear of identification as a primary source of anxiety and that anonymity mitigates this unease, “That's how safe it can be. Right? All of the things that adolescents are worried about, people knowing what they're asking, people sharing information with their parents, [online] they don't have to worry about any of that.”

However, Pat, who directs education and training at her site, explained, “People often feel emboldened by the anonymity of the web, it allows them to say things they might not have otherwise said, for better and worse, in an in-person format.” Anonymity lowers inhibitions, which can rouse trolls. Casey's site has had a problem with this:

We've got pranksters, you know, we have trolls, we have to deal with people who think it's funny to say that they're pregnant when they're not. We've had people come in and pretend to be rape victims, we've had people come in, and the big thing, fun thing to pretend—and when we always do the IP it's always a middle-aged man because of course it is—is to pretend that you are a victim of incest.²

And again, it's not like these things wouldn't happen in person, but they'd sure be a lot easier to figure out right off the bat in person.

Anonymity facilitates trolling which can be troublesome or even risky but online educators also acknowledge that the Internet provides a useful place for young people to test out new aspects of their identities and play with risk. Casey supported this by describing a paper she recently read:

The thesis was that limiting, limited ways of being online and sharing vulnerable things is a good place for teenagers to test risk of not being anonymous and it's like in a safe place and [they] learn better and I'm like 'YES!' . . . I'm like, 'We do that. We didn't do that on purpose, it's just how it happened.'

Developers and educators believe that the Internet provides a space for their users to anonymously and privately learn about sex, overcome shameful feelings, navigate risk, and develop their identities. Furthermore, educators feel that their sexuality education websites facilitate agency in their users. Discussing how his site trusts young people with sexual health information, Jamie insisted,

You can't do this top-down approach when it comes to sex ed if you wanna have the response that we want young people to have, which is to delay sex until [they

² An IP address is a unique string of numbers that identifies discrete computers attached to the Internet (Oxford University Press, 2005).

are] later in life, [you want them to] use condoms when they have sex, be respectful of their partners and whatnot. You really need to give young people an opportunity to make those decisions for themselves.

Online sexuality educators felt drawn to the Internet as a platform with fewer restrictions and greater opportunities. Jamie pronounced it ideal:

When it comes to providing sex ed online, it gives us that opportunity to create what sex ed should be if it were an ideal world where you didn't have to worry about local politics, [and] communities and different values and interpretations of what sexuality should or should not be or include. People who are LGBTQ, where is their experience reflected in sex ed? [Our site] is the place where you can go regardless of who you are and who you love and regardless of your values.

While the federally mandated comprehensive sexuality education only requires discussing disease and pregnancy prevention, online sex education goes further by including topics such as queer sexuality, masturbation, consent, and communication. Educators turn to the Internet as an exemplary space for providing sexuality education because they feel their content encounters fewer restrictions and that young people need a safe and anonymous space to learn about sex.

By adopting a rights-based approach to sexuality education, Pat's site tries to, as she explained, "change the public discourse from fear and shame-based and a problem to be contained, to something beautiful, normal, healthy, that we think young people should be respected around." Online sexuality educators seek to empower young people by acknowledging their right to sexuality information and pleasure. By offering young people a positive and comprehensive view of sexuality that includes both risk and

pleasure, educators foster a sense of sexual agency that better prepares young people to navigate the world as sexual subjects (Fields, 2008). Educators believe young people seek a place to explore sex that feels safe and the ability to choose among a vast array of sexuality topics on these websites cultivates feelings of control and agency. Developers understand anonymity and agency facilitate connections between users in their community spaces.

The Real World: Online Community

Much of the research about online communities differentiates online communities from “real world” communities by referring to them as “virtual” (Blanchard, Boughton, & Welbourne, 2010; Bock, Butler, Kim, & Koh, 2007; Gupta & Kim, 2004; Li, 2004). However, social engagement and the exchange of information and support increasingly happen in online spaces, and dismissing online communities as artificial and inherently dissimilar from “real world” communities belies their genuine value (Blanchard & Markus, 2002; Gulia & Wellman, 1999; Muller, 2011). Because geographic and spatial limitations do not constrain online communities, they attract a more diverse group of users, reflecting broader social characteristics such as social class, sexual and gender identity, and ethnicity (Anderson, 2004; Driskell & Lyon, 2002; Gulia & Wellman, 1999). Furthermore, qualitative research with young people suggests online communities provide a place for the exploration and development of personal identities (McMillan & Morrison, 2006).

This particular kind of anonymous community space may provide a particularly consequential opportunity for queer youth to connect with one another. The Internet offers a space to evade the parental gaze and many young people use online community

to work through upsetting friendships and disputes with parents and teachers (Davies, 2006, p. 219). A study with LGBTQ youth showed that young people who cannot disclose about their lives offline often invest in online relationships that alleviate feelings of isolation and social rejection, thereby improving self-acceptance and esteem (Bigelow, DeHaan, Kuper, Magee, & Mustanski, 2013). Educators and researchers believe that, for queer youth, finding an online community with other LGBTQ young people is vital to their health and quality of life (Bigelow et al., 2013). Studying an online community of queer young people, Susan Driver (2006) found community members turned to this space to resist normative identities and—together with other queers—play, learn, and explore their individuality. Moreover, identity development within community space encourages young people's agency (Davies, 2006). Sexuality education websites provide forums and chat and messaging services because educators strongly supported young people practicing agency by using their websites to find and build community.

Community Online—Safety and Support

The developers I spoke with felt passionately about providing a safe and supportive place for young people to connect with one another, as well as with educators. Jamie affirmed sexuality education websites offer “a safe space where young people can come with all of their questions.” Several times, educators modified their descriptions of their site's community with a concept of “safety.” Jamie contended adults presiding over his site's community spaces made them safe: “We have forums where young people can ask questions and forums are moderated, and it's a safe space.” Although educators moderating online community spaces prevent trolls from gaining a foothold in the forum, developers also create safety by allowing anonymity, providing information on an

expansive array of sexuality issues, and offering support to their users. Casey asserted users appreciate her site because

This is the place where they go because they've figured out that they can get a kind of information that no one else wants to give them *and* they have a safe community with people who are nice and also wanna be supportive of them.

Casey's site offers one interactive feature with the primary purpose of providing support, "Chat is more for support rather than information. That's usually our users [that] just need some kind of ongoing emotional support . . . [they] just need somebody to listen." Online sexuality educators provide anonymity and emotional support for young people who lack access to sexuality information.

Educators believe young people improve their overall health and self-confidence through sharing information, support, and details about themselves and through actively seeking connections with others. Jamie described the agentic sexuality their site encourages:

Out of these very personal experiences, young people find that they're not the only ones who are going through them, that these are actually experiences that a lot of young people go through and they do have something to say about it and [our site is] that platform for them to share their voice.

Educators feel that young people building relationships in community spaces on their sites cultivates agency. Additionally, users' experiences online can offer offline benefits. Jamie also believes agency and community foster healthy decision-making:

When we trust young people with sexual health information and we provide them with . . . honest comprehensive sex ed, they're much more likely to make healthy

decisions and they're much more likely to talk with their peers about that and have really healthy conversations.

Educators regard youth as capable, trustworthy, and as having a right to sexuality information, which allows them to better equip young people to make decisions and empowers them to teach their peers. Developers believe sexual agency encourages young people to seek out their websites' community spaces to connect with open-minded peers and to find support.

Sex education websites provide young people the freedom to learn about sexuality but educators felt their presence and regulation makes the community safer. Without an educator moderating the space, outsiders could jeopardize young people's safety. On Casey's site,

We've definitely had some older adults come in to our community spaces that I think they were trying to be supportive in their way but it wasn't. There was either a lot of preachiness about what they should or shouldn't be doing or what they should or shouldn't be concerned about and a lot of projecting, like the older dudes, we finally had to be like, 'Please don't do this.' They would go into some thread where some teenage girl was talking about how she didn't feel good about her breasts and they'd go on about how they're sure her breasts are beautiful. I'm like, 'This is not helpful.' . . . I'm sure it was kind of like in a concerned troll kind of way and a white guy kind of like 'I'm the adult! I will save them from their painful adolescence and sexual confusion with my wonderful sentence!'

While sex education websites offer community for all their users, educators believe they provide a valuable space for LGBTQ young people. In developing content

on his site, Jamie strives for inclusivity because, he explained, “[In the classroom] who’s addressed in sexuality education? A lot of times, people who are LGBTQ, where is their experience reflected in sex ed?” The online sex educators I interviewed feel that LGBTQ young people require a unique space because their experiences are unique from heterosexual youth. Pat’s website has created a sister site specifically for LGBTQ young people because

It just became really clear that they needed their own space with their own issues prioritized, not always being an add-on or woven into something else but just really being the focal point of materials and resources, an approach that’s tailored just for their needs.

Educators’ understandings of the distinct challenges LGBTQ young people face motivate them to prioritize queer youth on their websites. This extends to their development of community spaces.

Sidney, who works in online education and content development at a website paired with clinical services, is exploring virtual support groups:

They [LGBTQ youth] could find other kids who live in like 200-person towns where they are really the only gay kid out there, or at least they feel that way, they can actually find community, they can be connected with a moderator, a facilitator, a therapist maybe.

Pat, a woman whose site encourages activism, felt excited about these opportunities:

“The potential is just unbelievable, anything from helping LGBTQ youth who feel alone and isolated and feeling like they’re the only one realize that there are many other people like them and that there’s lots of support and love.” Young people with non-normative

sexual or gender identities may not feel comfortable expressing their thoughts and feelings or disclosing about their personal lives to most people in their offline worlds (Driver, 2006). Developers believe anonymity and the lack of physical presence in online communities means queer youth may not confront so much public censure or social rejection and may find support in the form of a sympathetic peer or a caring adult.

Educators asserted online community matters most for LGBTQ young people because they feel isolated in their physical worlds where heterocentric assumptions pervade all aspects of life and lead alienated and disenfranchised LGBTQ young people to seek community online (Bigelow et al., 2013; Driver, 2006). Whether this is in fact the experience of their youth users remains unclear. Educators' beliefs that LGBTQ young people require online spaces and experiences set apart from their heterosexual users prompts developers to create space and content specifically for queer youth. However, without research, they cannot know if this understanding stems from LGBTQ young people themselves, or solely from educators' perceptions of their needs.

Sidney's site plans to use focus groups to begin this process:

We're at the very beginning to create [digital] tools for LGBTQ teens; you may have realized those [existing] tools are intended for heterosexual teens. Our first step is to do formative research and that is focus groups; we go out to teens, depending on our funding, it may just be a commune sample, we might hire a firm, etcetera, but we go out, we talk to teens about what's of concern to them now, what would be feasible, just sort of get a good handle and hear their voices. And several of us usually participate and listen in on those.

Sidney description of her site's prioritizing of heterosexual young people and their research with LGBTQ young people as "depending on funding" speaks to a larger issue sexuality education websites contend with: inadequate funding. Interviewees made clear many of their goals for their respective sites, but my interviews also suggest that sexuality education websites are largely accountable to funders' objectives and expectations. Often, sexuality education websites receive funding from large-scale governmental and institutional contracts that prioritize certain sexuality issues over others—for example, pregnancy prevention over pleasure and heterosexuality over queerness. The nature of the funding source informed the sites' content, and an overall lack of funding severely restricted the sites' capacities.

Institutionalizing Morality

For more than twenty years, federal funding for sexuality education in the United States has overwhelmingly supported abstinence-only education and contributed to an antagonistic milieu for advocates of comprehensive sex education. Public health and medical associations, alongside organizations like the Sexuality Education and Information Council of the United States (SIECUS), strongly recommend a more comprehensive approach to sexuality education. However, sociopolitical obstacles have made it difficult for comprehensive sex education to receive significant federal support (Bay-Cheng, 2003).

Recently, as concerns over effectiveness intensified after rigorous evaluation, the Obama administration reconsidered funding abstinence-only sexuality education. Beginning in 2010, President Obama and Congress cut funding for abstinence-only education by two-thirds and allocated \$190 million for two new initiatives: the

President's Teen Pregnancy Prevention Initiative (TPPI) and the Personal Responsibility Education Program (PREP) (SIECUS, 2011). Based on evidence rather than ideology, these measures approach sexuality education less conservatively and with more innovation. TPPI-funded programs must provide medically- and scientifically-accurate education, while PREP requires programs to include information about both abstinence *and* contraceptive methods for preventing pregnancy and STIs, in addition to teaching about responsible and healthy decision-making (SIECUS, 2011). The initiatives also include funding sections specifically for research, technical assistance, and program evaluation; reaching under-served youth populations; and developing original and innovative strategies (SIECUS, 2011).

While TPPI and PREP unarguably advance sex education, they still focus narrowly on pregnancy and STI prevention, thereby missing an opportunity to support a comprehensive model of sexuality education that promotes youth agency, development, and holistic health (SIECUS, 2011). Insufficient funding and constricted curricular expectations leave sexuality educators dedicated to a comprehensive model with limited options, and this extends into the online sphere. Online sex educators emphasized a lack of funding limiting their potential—their site's resources and the quality and quantity of their work.

Sex Ed Funding—Conditionally Insufficient

Insufficient funding restricts sites' capacity for vital yet quotidian elements such as content development, site redesign, and evaluation. Sidney's site recently completed development of several interactive educational tools, but, during the planning stages, she again had to prioritize certain issues over others. Top priorities became choosing a

contraceptive method and how to use it accurately and consistently; saying “no” to sexual advances and offers of drugs or alcohol; and planning for the future. Sidney conceded a hierarchy of concerns: “We put on the back burner, which is unfortunately still on the back burner, focusing on healthy relationships with potentially a focus on gender roles and gender norms.” While priorities are inevitable, this educational ranking of contraception and saying “no” over healthy relationships and gender roles reflects the narrow curricular issues receiving institutional funding and moves away from a holistic and rights-based approach.

Websites lacking sufficient funding must choose wisely where and how to expend their limited resources. When I asked Pat if her site avoided any particular topics, she admitted that funding often leads those decisions:

There’s a great, *huge* need for really sex-positive materials for students with special needs [and] that is a topic [we] would be delighted to take on . . . but it just hasn’t been one that they’ve received funding to do or had a staff member who had expertise and drive to go after that funding. So it’s not a hesitancy around the topic or the population, it’s just literally prioritizing your approach.

I asked Pat directly if funding informed her site’s content, and she conceded that this does indeed happen:

Sometimes it does. Yeah. Unfortunately, just to be realistic, sometimes a funder comes to you and has some sparkly big idea that they’re convinced will change the world or solve a problem, and then in order to keep in good graces of this funder, you pursue that idea. Hopefully you don’t vehemently oppose the idea,

but it might not be what was number one on your strategic plan. But yeah, sometimes that does happen.

Pat continued by clarifying that, although her site's funders influence their content, "effective organizations are much better skilled at helping to educate funders about what programmatic perspective would be most important." While educating funders may help developers retain some sense of agency, funders still possess consequential authority.

Institutional funders with valuable reputations may fear supporting comprehensive sexuality education because it could reflect unfavorably upon them. Many sexuality topics still reside on the fringes of acceptability and by offering endorsement, a funder also touts their approval. Casey asserted that big corporations like Trojan have considered funding her site through advertisement but ultimately shied away:

They've had me in their think tank, I know that they would never ask because one of the [other] things that's a problem is if a corporation or something supports something like this, then what it is apparently saying—it's not really saying this, this has nothing to do with anything—it "approves of teenage sex."

Anxiety about indicating radicalism spilled over from the funding source to websites with tenuous funding. Sidney's organization, whose site has considerably higher traffic than Casey's, even expressed hesitation around proclaiming sex positivity: "Certainly sex-positivity, I mean we, you know, we're [site D], we can't go out there and be like, 'Sex is cool, everybody should do it!' Um, but we're not shaming." Trepidation governs how funders choose and manage their projects and ultimately restricts sexuality educators.

Certain aspects taking precedence over others extended beyond subject matter to delivery methods as well; as a fairly resource-intensive endeavor, interactive features can

be difficult to fund. While Sidney remained committed to struggling to develop interactive tools for her website, Pat's site has very few interactive aspects. Pat acknowledged her dissatisfaction with her website's design:

Everyone really gets that it's very didactic and text-heavy and one-directional and that there's great interest and actually some draft projects to make it much more interactive. . . . There's definitely recognition that what we have right now is very limited and a great interest across all the programs to do a lot more than what we've currently been doing.

Unfortunately, redesigning the site and including interactive aspects remain unattainable without additional funding. Pat admitted, "There's been interest to redesign the site, but I think that it's been such an overwhelmingly huge task and a funding amount that people have felt better spent in other places." Pat insisted her site acknowledges the problem and plans to include more interactive features: "[They] have developed a game to try to help educate young men who have sex with men about ways to communicate for safer sex . . . they're seeking funding to scale up the beta version of the game." Pat is limited in any efforts to make their site more engaging to users, and she attributes this to uninformed funders:

I think the lag in development of [interactive features is about] convincing funders that that is an educationally sound investment; a lot of them wanna sink their money into a curriculum . . . and don't necessarily see some of the limitations of that approach. . . . [We] gotta bring those funders along.

Pat puts a positive spin on funders' substantial influence on her site's content, but educators' lack of authority over their websites constrains their capacity and thereby limits the types of content young people can access.

Divided We Fall

Up until five years ago, sexuality education programs in the United States, based on conservative and Christian ideology, prioritized chastity over information and morality over education. Preferring to keep young people uninformed, abstinence-only sexuality education ultimately proved ineffective in the pursuit of sexual health and well-being (Berglas et al., 2014; Schalet et al., 2014). While the Obama administration significantly cut funding for abstinence-only education, remnants of conservatism remain in place in federal funding.

When funders arrive to inform and regulate sexuality education, their agenda may not include curricula that strive to break down hierarchies, encourage participatory learning environments, and deploy education as transformative (hooks, 1989). Since funding for sex education began in the 1960s and '70s, decisions about funding have been made with the primary intention of preventing disease and pregnancy. Mourning the lost potential of sexuality education, Jessica Fields wrote in 2008, "Sex education exists only because the situation with youth is so dire as to require it, and not because of a commitment to what sex education might positively accomplish" (p. 13). Most recently, increased funding for more comprehensive sexuality education expanded the possibility for positive pedagogy, but a hierarchy of issues remains—preventing teenage pregnancy and STIs remain top priority. From a rights-based perspective, young people deserve also to learn about consent, gender roles, and healthy communication strategies.

Positive sexuality educators remain dedicated to cultivating a sense of agency in their students/users despite funding provisions. Pat's site models their approach after European comprehensive sexuality education and believes strongly in young people's right to sexuality information. Pat emphasized,

[We] believe that young people have the *right* to this information and that we [educators] should not get in the way of them realizing that right. And then . . . all of the culture should respect that sexuality is a normal and healthy part of adolescent development . . . that's really what motivates many of our programs to try to just change the public discourse from fear and shame-based and a problem to be contained, to something beautiful, normal, healthy, that we think young people should be respected around.

Developers of sexuality education websites trust young people—their users—and wish for them a holistic learning process that promotes agency. Like Jamie, Casey insisted the best results emerge when educators trust young people:

If you were to try and write the best sex ed curriculum on Earth that was really inclusive and really holistic and really did have all of the vital information in it, that's what they [young people] are asking for, they don't actually need adults to determine that for them.

Educators show their trust in young people by offering them access to a broad range of sexuality content and anonymous community spaces for connecting with their peers.

Funding for the websites I studied varied, but across the board all struggle to fund evaluation. Jamie seemed resigned about his site's indigence:

We would love to do the formal evaluation of [their site] and ask some of those question, [but] evaluation is a very expensive process, so you know, all of those future types of evaluation would be contingent on continued support and funding. Lamenting the all-too realistic inability to evaluate hard-earned interactive tools, Sidney said,

If there was an ideal world and all of the money, the next step would be to evaluate them and to see do teens who use these tools, are they more likely to have the outcomes we intended than the teens who don't use them?

Even sites like Pat's, which she described as part of "an organization that gets so many grants because of the high quality of work that we do," cannot manage to evaluate their work. Pat described the heartrending decisions to make on how to allot funding:

I would say there's definitely a desire to do more of that [evaluation and analytics], and do it more robustly, but I think it's a balance for many of our staff who just see the real crisis around young people and some of the situations they find themselves trying to survive and so do you take some of the money that could be spent on programming for those young people and put it into evaluation? Or do you sink it all into programming 'cause you can't look one more young person in the eye and say 'we don't have space for you'?

Difficult situations like this arise as sites make judgment calls about improving the website or serving their users. Limited funding might also prevent sites from seeking partnerships. Continuously struggling for funding, these websites lack enough leverage to make demands for better conditions. Although few comprehensive sexuality education websites currently operate, they vie with one another for the same meager funding

sources. Circumstances are such that if one website pushes back, funders can simply shift their attention to another site.

United We Stand

Acknowledging that sexuality educators meet obstacles at every turn, I endeavored to think creatively about how developers and educators might increase support for their efforts toward providing holistic online sexuality education.

Strengthening partnerships might create collaborative opportunities. Were the sites to further cultivate close relationships with each other, offline sex educators, and research institutions, they might gather leverage to further develop their websites and sexuality education as a whole. I maintain that it is likely these efforts have or would encounter resistance; I encourage them nonetheless.

Transformative Hybrid Pedagogies

Hybrid courses that combine classroom settings with online features might greatly increase the pedagogical scope of a program. The Internet can provide uninhibited access to a prodigious amount of multimedia information while still providing the guidance and skills facilitated in teacher-student relationships (Chenoweth, Murday, & Ushida, 2006; Schofield, 2006). Pat insisted, “The Web is a complement to school-based education . . . revolutionizing sex ed online would be really exciting, although I think there’s always gonna be a role to play for an in-person component as well.” Attempting to increase support for hybrid courses might allow sexuality education to incorporate valuable elements of both on- and offline sex education, such as expanded resources and curricular approaches.

Educators like Pat firmly believe in a rights-based approach to sexuality education: “Young people have the right to [sexuality] information and [educators] have a role to play in elevating youth to demand their right to sexual health information and services.” A rights-based framework recognizes that sexual health should strive for a state of well-being rather than merely an absence of undesired outcomes and should include understandings of pleasure, individual expression, and broader human rights and responsibilities (Aggleton & Campbell, 2000). Furthermore, this approach understands that young people need, and are entitled to, sexual and reproductive health information, regardless if they have reached legal adulthood (Haberland & Rogow, 2015, p. 520). Young people deserve holistic sexuality education taught in a sex-positive and agentic manner, and a participatory pedagogical approach can help achieve this.

Participatory learning focuses on social transformation that restructures systems of power, and hybrid pedagogy is well suited for disrupting prevailing power relationships, such as that between teacher and student (Auerbach, 1993; Freire, 1970; Meyers, 2010). Hybrid pedagogies challenge power hierarchies while increasing learners’ sense of agency and autonomy. Students in hybrid courses routinely experience a more equal distribution of power between teachers and students and an increased sense of collaboration among students (Chenowith, Murday, & Ushida, 2006). With power redistributed in sexuality education, young people may feel more capable of making demands for positive sexual health information and employing agency to make healthy decisions. Adding an online community space for students to have discussions outside the classroom encourages more informal interactions: young people feel more comfortable disclosing about sensitive topics anonymously, and this sense of intimacy and community

facilitates reflection and open discussions about attitudes, sociological constructs (e.g., virginity), and effecting social change (Cooper, 1998; Meyers, 2010). Sexuality education that includes online and offline components also increases agency and autonomy. Such instruction allows students to engage with a wider variety of interactive tools and media while maintaining valuable face-to-face interactions that strengthen community and a commitment to learning and producing knowledge (Barnacle & Dall'Alba, 2005; Coomey & Stephenson, 2001; Tisdell et al., 2004).

Online educators recognize the value of integrating online sexuality education with classroom education in part because integration gives students access to supplemental, often vital, resources online. Sidney described challenges of online-only education and benefits of integration:

Sex ed happens in a space that's mandatory[,] and so one of the challenges in the digital space is that ultimately if you're gonna create something and you don't have the connection to the in-person, like there's a classroom, you're there, the teacher expects you to show up and then she's like, "Oh here's this cool thing you can do too for homework" and it's digital, those kids are more likely to do it. So the integration, that's actually a benefit. The challenge is if you don't have that integration or it's hard to come by.

Casey reported struggling with access as well: "An online limitation is when we see that there's somebody who needs a lot of support but if they only come once, we don't get another shot, we're not back in that same school the next day or week." Schools offer a pragmatic and effective means to reach young people with sexual health information that online sexuality education platforms cannot rival.

Federal support for abstinence-only education combined with conservative values sometimes impede online and offline sex educators working together. Jamie recounted, “We’ve done trainings in schools where our trainers have gone in and they try to pull up our site in a classroom for training the teachers and it’s blocked.” Casey has also encountered difficulties with school administration and does not want online sexuality education to fall under schools’ jurisdictions: “Because I work in an international medium, I’m not a mandatory reporter. I don’t have to obtain parental permission for sex ed. And really, the nature is those are the laws they made for schools and didn’t for us.” Online sexuality educators appreciate the Internet as a platform with fewer restrictions but bemoan their lack of access to young people. Increasingly seeking hybrid opportunities might mitigate this situation. However, to allow for online and offline sexuality education integration, funding practices still need to change.

In 2005, Nicole Haberland and Deborah Rogow advocated for a social studies approach to sexuality education. Instruction that rested on a sociologically-minded and gender-sensitive foundation would allow students to first understand gender in a social context and facilitate their later learning about explicitly sexual topics (p. 338-341). Haberland and Rogow point to the value of critical participatory and transformative pedagogy and a broadening of comprehensive sex education—which sexuality education websites strive for (Haberland, 2015; Rogow & Haberland, 2015). In later years, these public health researchers developed the *It’s All One* curriculum, which employs a human-rights framework, and found that sexuality and reproductive health education programs that integrated participatory discussions around gender and power significantly reduced unwanted pregnancies and STIs (Haberland, 2015; International Sexuality and HIV

Curriculum Working Group, 2010). This work shows that a participatory, rights-based, and holistic approach to sexuality education offers tangible evidence to motivate funders. Because public health initiatives operate within an evidence-based framework *and* can inform federal funding, the opportunity exists for sexuality and public health educators and researchers to strengthen partnerships to improve sexuality education for young people.

Participating in Change

Developers know their sites offer a valuable place for young people to anonymously explore a wide range of sexuality information and find community. By seeking opportunities to incorporate their valuable elements into the classroom, they might broaden their scope and serve as an ambitious model of what sexuality education can achieve. However, sites often lack funding to evaluate their effectiveness and reach. Strengthening partnerships with research institutions might serve both the research agenda and sexuality educators' efforts to scale up their websites and curricula because evaluation produces evidence that motivates funders' initiatives. Next steps could involve exploring how to operationalize understandings of more nuanced sexuality concepts such as gender and economic inequity and sexual orientation because evidence for comprehensive sexuality education is still narrowly defined in terms of pregnancy and disease prevention (Schalet et al., 2014).

Sex education from a transformative standpoint must also acknowledge societal inequalities and social contexts. As Pat makes clear,

It's much, much bigger than comprehensive sex education . . . it's around racism and sexism and all this kind of stuff . . . as I went from workshop to workshop, the

young people were saying you know, 'I can't even spend my time focusing on education 'cause I'm worried about survival'.

A participatory perspective of young people's sexuality portrays their lived experiences of inequality and struggle and advocates for their rights to desire, pleasure, queer identity, and agency (Auerbach, 1993; Fine & McClelland, 2006; Schalet et al., 2014). In striving to create evidence for funding participatory pedagogy, researchers and educators might seek to engage participatory evaluation methods.

Participatory evaluation (PE) methodology relies on key stakeholders—in this case sexuality educators and learners—to actively participate in evaluative processes (Burke, 1998; Tandon, 1988). Rather than an objective and disinterested evaluative model, PE calls for researchers and stakeholders to share power and collectively conduct evaluation and generate knowledge; it is an educational experience as much as an evaluation (Burke, 1998; Tandon, 1988). This model can most authentically examine sexuality education websites and future hybrid models because it creates the sense of community and agency that sex education sites value and strive for. The PE process encourages acknowledgement of the evaluation's political nature and explicitly strives to increase capacity, especially evaluative capacity, with which sexuality education websites struggle (Burke, 1998).

A participatory model offers researchers and educators the opportunity to explore sexuality education content as well as evaluate its effectiveness. Considering the value and capabilities of sex education websites, research might focus on how young people respond to these sites, strategies for classroom integration, and effects on outcomes. Haberland and Rogow (2015) advocate for evaluation that considers multiple outcomes

such as social, biological, and health—a more holistic and participatory picture of young people’s sexuality can only become clear with holistic and participatory evaluation. Both small and large-scale philanthropic funding institutions have begun supporting participatory research in health fields (Minkler, Blackwell, Thompson, & Tamir, 2003). Such efforts can offset what Michelle Fine and Sara McClelland (2008) call “embedded science”: the practice of interested parties, like the federal government, funding evaluation that legitimates, rather than interrogates, their policies. PE can counteract this by distributing power among researchers and participants and striving for a critical sexuality science that approaches with a rights-based framework (Fine & McClelland, 2008).

Uniting sexuality education websites with researchers promises to increase the sites’ capacity and further enhance their most valuable aspects while offering online sex educators the same benefits they offer to young people. Evaluative research might allow for the interrogation of sites’ effectiveness without compromising their fundamental anonymity because researchers understand how to work intimately within an anonymity protocol. Participatory evaluation in particular could foster community among educators and researchers working together to promote young people’s sexual agency, health, and development. These collaborative relationships might broaden the scope of evidence for funders and make strides toward a holistic and rights-based approach to sexuality education.

Achieving Agency

Transformative hybrid pedagogies and participatory methods of evaluation offer opportunities for sexuality education websites to increase their capacity and reach. Sex

education websites provide a valuable venue for young people to explore holistic sexuality information and strive to offer positive messaging that encourages young people to develop sexual agency. Such endeavors deserve support and opportunities for growth. Sexuality is a fundamental aspect of health; yet conservative funding and cultural shame restrain educators from encouraging young people to become sexually agentic.

Educators, researchers, and powerful institutions need to come together to support a shifting of perspectives of how we view young people on the Internet. If a rights-based and holistic approach to sexuality education were supported and funded, adults might no longer fear what young people might find on the Internet. Because if a young person online happened to stumble across pornography or explicit content, it would be all right because they had participated in an education that encouraged their sexual agency and they were able to make discerning decisions about how viewing that content affected their sexual choices. We could allow young people—in fact, teach them—how to find pleasure in sex, communicate with their partners about desire, and make their own decisions about their own lives. Adults could acknowledge that young people have an inalienable right, even though they may not be 18, to information and education about sexuality.

Transformative learning cultivates agency in young people, increases their capacity for developing healthy sexuality, and empowers them to effect social change. The world is rife with inequalities and indifference. Sexuality education funders, researchers, and on-and-offline educators have a responsibility to future generations to take up these issues by encouraging participatory teaching and evaluation that broaden the scope and evidence base for sex education. Sex education can only reach its full

potential by fully engaging a range of expertise into powerful partnerships that seek to achieve a common goal of holistic and agentic sexuality education.

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Appendix A

Interview Guide

- 1) Tell me about your work in sexuality education (i.e. are you an educator, a curriculum designer, etc.)?
- 2) What led you to providing sexual health information online?
- 3) Does your site attempt to reach a specific population of youth?
 - a) Tell me more about the type of people you hope to help with your site.
 - b) How do you assess their needs and/or desires in sexual health information?
- 4) Who developed/develops the online format?
- 5) What principles guide(d) their/your work?
- 6) What approach does your site take to interactive sexuality education?
- 7) How do you/your team develop your site's content?
- 8) How do you/your team choose which topics to include? Are there any topics you/your team purposefully avoid?
- 9) What do you think are the special benefits and opportunities in online sexuality education?
- 10) What the special challenges or limitations?
- 11) Do you have a sense of how many visitors your site gets each week? Which pages are especially popular?
- 12) How do you/your team evaluate the effectiveness of your work?
- 13) What do you think about using a module format for online sex ed.? For example, a Rosetta Stone style interactive formula focusing on sexual health and sexuality.
 - a) What do you think would be effective about this format?
 - b) What do you think could be some problems?