Including All Voices in the Classroom
Teaching Lesbian, Gay, and Bisexual Students

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We might expect the classroom—the place on campus reserved for the free and respectful exchange of ideas—to provide an oasis from harassment and intimidation—and, certainly, from violence. Unfortunately, numerous studies of campus climate demonstrate that that is not the case for lesbian, gay, and bisexual students.¹

Thus, how we college teachers address—or fail to address—issues of sexual orientation in and out of our classrooms has a significant impact on the learning environment for all students, especially for those who identify as lesbian, gay, or bisexual. By introducing sexual-orientation topics, supporting related academic inquiry, and creating a welcoming classroom for all students, faculty contribute not only to students’ academic success but also to the development of a positive self-identity.

Conversely, by engaging in homophobic harassment and discriminatory behavior, we professors can perpetuate negative stereotypes, validate the hatred and violence perpetrated against lesbian and gay people, silence voices in our classrooms, and interfere with students’ learning.

In this article, I describe certain characteristics of lesbian, gay, and bisexual students and the needs they have in common with all college students. More important, I recommend strategies and curricular ideas for faculty who want to improve the quality of their teaching for all students with regard to issues of sexual orientation.

Inclusive Voices from the Classroom

Although no label can encompass the range of learning styles and needs of the group it describes, there is evidence that lesbian, gay, and bisexual (LGB) students bring some common experiences to the classroom (Crumacker and Vander-Haege 1987; D’Augelli 1989, 1992; McNaron 1991; Norris 1992; Rhoads 1995; Sanlo 1998; Tierney 1992; Uribe and Harbeck 1992). Understanding some of their experiences and how they might shape a student’s education enables us to influence learning positively.

To gather anecdotal evidence to illustrate how these particular students’ academic and personal lives are influenced by peers and faculty, I sent an electronic message to subscribers of three LGB-related mail lists (NE-Net, the New England Network of LGB Student Organizations; lesac, a list for lesbians and bisexual women in academia; and queer-net, a general LGB list) describing my project and inviting anecdotes—positive or negative—about experiences in college classrooms.

I indicated that I was not conducting a formal study and that I would keep respondents’ identities anonymous in my writing. In this article, I use a few of the thirty-six responses to illustrate the effect of faculty influence on the learning environment for LGB students.

Intimidation, Harassment, and Violence

As has been well documented, lesbian, gay, and bisexual students experience significant negative consequences from being exposed to violence and harassment on campus (D’Augelli and Rose, 1990; Governor’s Commission on Gay and Lesbian Youth 1993; Myers 1993; NGLTF Policy Institute 1993; Norris 1992). The University of Minnesota Select Committee on Lesbian, Gay, and Bisexual Concerns (1993) reported that, in both written testimony and public hearings, they heard moving testimony from undergraduate and graduate students who described the “humiliating and demeaning environment” (15) they experienced both in the classroom and in pursuit of their academic program.

Those students told of occasions when faculty made derogatory jokes, minimized or denied the contributions of LGB people, and denied, made light of, or dismissed as irrelevant the sexual orientation...
of artists, scientists, or historical figures. Furthermore, students reported incidents of professors making overtly hostile or demeaning comments, including some statements implying that violence against LGB people is justified and deserved (University of Minnesota 1993).

Similarly, at Brown University, in Providence, Rhode Island, the Faculty Committee on the Status of Sexual Minorities (Brown University Faculty Committee 1989) reported that 66 percent of LGB students feared harassment or discrimination by classmates; 40 percent feared harassment or discrimination by professors; 60 percent did not feel safe being open about their sexual orientation in class; and 53 percent censored their academic speech, writing, or actions in order to avoid anti-gay harassment or discrimination. Of all students, gay or straight, in the Brown survey, 10.5 percent reported occasionally hearing faculty make negative remarks or jokes that demeaned lesbians, gay men, and/or bisexual people. Moreover, each of the forty gay students interviewed in a study at the Pennsylvania State University reported living in “constant fear” (Rhoods 1995).

I use but two anecdotes to illustrate those experiences, as follows:

While a [nursing] student at ___ Community College I was approached by my clinical instructor in my final semester and was asked: “Why are you a homosexual?”... For several weeks after that encounter, it was like walking on eggshells. I received a copy of my mid-semester evaluation, it contained various references to my homosexuality and the potential problems associated with it, i.e., AIDS, STDs, potential for attraction to patients of the same sex, and the potential for improper sexual conduct. (student of unknown age or gender)

At the time I was a second-year Ph.D. student in clinical psychology here at [a Big Ten] University. The course was Advanced Psychopathology (!) and, until this incident, I was clearly appreciated by the professor because of my experience, familiarity, and ability to discourse within his theoretical framework. . . . Apropos of nothing, the professor made a comment equating homosexuality with pathological narcissism.

Seeing that none of my classmates were going to respond, I took issue with that equation. The professor asserted it even more strongly. I then said that I am gay and harmful activities. By not acting to interrupt the pattern of victimization, respondents to the Norris survey contributed to the invisibility of gay students, much as the professor in the following anecdote:

Actually, what really bothered me in class is that we were discussing LGB issues and the professor said to read the book. She just didn’t want to talk about it. (female undergraduate at a Catholic liberal arts college)

Even if faculty wish to become more informed about issues of sexual orientation, many institutions make it difficult. In the Oberlin study, 55 percent of heterosexual faculty and staff expressed interest in learning more about sexual minorities’ concerns, history, and culture (Norris 1992). A graduate student told the University of Minnesota Select Committee (1993): “As a teacher, I have received no support or training for dealing with homophobia in the classroom. . . . I have been discouraged from discussing my concerns about this, again through the discomfort and ignorance of my colleagues and faculty. Homophobia should be an issue in training all TAs” (20).

Another student said, “. . . it would also be a good idea to sensitize teachers in all disciplines to the fact that many of their students are not heterosexual. In examples they give in class, or in their assumptions about their students, they should be aware of this” (23).

Neutral or passive faculty stances, of course, do not always lead to negative consequences for lesbian, gay, and bisexual students. Positive experiences can also result from relatively passive stances on the part of college authorities, including faculty. At Brown University, 51 percent of the LGB respondents indicated that their instructors had been knowledgeable about sexual orientation issues, and 53 percent said that faculty were supportive of their academic interest in those issues (Brown Faculty Committee 1989).

Faculty Support Is Important

Although being knowledgeable or supportive does not necessarily imply a great deal of advocacy or action on the part of faculty, it has a positive impact on our LGB students. We can compare the effect of casual faculty behaviors on the student-respondents of the following two examples:

A study at a respected liberal arts college found that, although students and faculty of all sexualities had strong positive attitudes toward their lesbian and gay peers, lesbians and gays were subject to much harassment and violence.
I’m in a Spanish Conversation class here at [an Ivy League university]. The book that we use is written by a professor who I just happen to know is gay. The book has sections on gender issues, as well as a chapter on homosexuality. On the first day of class, several people were commenting negatively on the book. One turned around and asked me what the chapter on “faggots” was doing in the book. Upon hearing criticism of the chapter on homosexuality, the professor quickly added that he did not choose the book, rather that it was chosen by the department. (male undergraduate)

When I was a senior at [a major research university in the South], I was the cochair of our g/l/b group on campus. I had been quoted in the paper on our funding by the university and this was the same time when the university was discussing opening up dorms for overnight visitors of the opposite sex. During my next sociology class, we were discussing intersex visitation and my professor sees me, and asks whether the parents and taxpayers of the state of ___ shouldn’t have some say in whether or not they pay for and therefore enable students to engage in activities they find morally questionable.

It was his way of drawing the two issues together and asking me to speak on them. The tone of the question and his wording served to challenge, not threaten. He was reaching beyond equal treatment in order to pull out what I could offer because of my unique position in the university. It was rare and touching. (female undergraduate)

Increasingly, LGB students are having positive experiences as the result of active support or encouragement from faculty and peers. Academic programs, individual courses, or projects on inclusiveness within existing courses and curricula have a significant impact on all students’ attitudes (Chesler and Zuniga 1991; Crumpacker and Vander Haegen 1987; D’Augelli 1992; Tierney 1992). Campus programs that support openly lesbian, gay, and bisexual faculty members and staff create an environment of acceptance where faculty can serve as role models for all students (Governor’s Commission on Gay and Lesbian Youth 1993), as in this anecdote:

I’m taking a class that is an Interdisciplinary Seminar on Cuba (esp. post-revolution). For our 20-page paper . . . we got to choose our own topic related to the revolution, and I decided to write about Gays under the Revolution. I felt a bit weird going to my professor to ask him about it, but he was really cool about it. He was like,

“Oh, good! I’m writing a book about that!” He told me about several sources, and sharing sources with classmates who are writing about Health in Cuba, or AIDS in Cuba has been very useful and easy to do. (female undergraduate at a small, religiously affiliated college in the Northeast)

Invisible Outsiders

Another part of the picture is that of LGB students who bring their experience of developing an identity as “the other.” Whether or not they are open about their sexual orientation, or have had a positive or negative experience on campus, they bring the quality of their “exceptionality” (D’Augelli 1992). D’Augelli asserts that LGB people are provoked by their socialization patterns, life experiences, and family histories into achieving high developmental statuses. He further asserts that that exceptionality brings with it a general sense of difference and a heightened awareness of self vis-à-vis others and that the choice of hiding or disclosing a generally stigmatized minority sexual orientation demands considerable ego strength, another aspect of “exceptionality.”

Although I am cautious in drawing parallels between issues of race and issues of sexual orientation, D’Augelli’s (1992) “exceptionality” model is analogous to Patricia Hill Collins’s (1991) notion of the “outsider within.” As people who are kept at the margins of the academy, lesbian and gay students have a unique perspective from which to view their environments. They are in it, but not wholly of it.

Unlike the African American women to whom Hill Collins refers, however, LGB people can choose to hide their identity. The decision to “pass” as heterosexual, though, carries its own costs (D’Augelli 1992; Edwards, Meyers, and Toy 1993; Sloane 1993). In either case— openly LGB or passing—students remain “outsiders within,” a perspective of both isolation and insight, as demonstrated in the final anecdote:

My work has always been on representations of female sexuality, and coming out put a confusing spin on that for me—not personally, I was more or less fine, pretty euphoric, actually but academically because I was having trouble identifying my positionality. I couldn’t really position myself as a heterosexual woman analyzing sexuality because I wasn’t anymore. It seemed presumptuous to adopt a lesbian position when I had been out for about thirty minutes, and never having identified as bisexual that didn’t seem like a possibility. For me, it was a genuine scholarly problem because I think that it is critical to be self-reflexive about the position(s) from which one does scholarship. (female professor at a small, private urban university in the South)

Paradoxically, the more “out” a student is on campus, the more likely he or she will both be to encounter anti-gay attitudes and to find support from other students and faculty (D’Augelli 1989, 1992; Norris 1992). Tierney (1992) summarizes the situation on campus by quoting a University of Oregon report and a UCLA study stating that “the university environment is neither consistently safe for, nor tolerant of, nor academically inclusive of lesbians, gay men, or bisexuals,” and that those students are “significantly more likely than their heterosexual counterparts to have experienced problems associated with harassment, discrimination, and loneliness” (43).

On the other hand, college provides the first opportunity for many students to explore their lesbian, gay, or bisexual identity (D’Augelli 1992), and many students report positive experiences with peers and faculty (Brown Faculty Committee 1989; Norris 1992).

Lesbian, Gay, and Bisexual Students as Learners

No evidence currently exists to support the idea that LGB students learn differently from their heterosexual peers. Assuming that the former learn in the same ways that their classmates do, four pillars of learning theory—involvement, emotion, motivation, and construction of meaning—remain critical elements in the teaching environment. What is different for LGB students are the realities of victimization on campus and some of the life experiences that they bring into the learning environment.

Involvement

The degree of a student’s involvement in academic and extracurricular activities can easily be influenced by an atmosphere of intolerance—or of support—for sexual orientation issues. According to Astin (1993), a teacher is competing with
other academic subjects, extracurricular activities, work, home or residence life, relationships, and overall psychological development for a finite amount of student time and energy. LGB students are required by the possibility of harassment that they face every day to spend time and energy above and beyond that required of their heterosexual peers (Massachusetts Governor’s Commission 1993; University of Minnesota Select Committee 1993). Relevant to Astin’s thesis, that extra time and energy are of need but doubts about his ability will be far less involved.

If, as McMillan and Forsyth (1991) propose, motivation for learning breaks down into the basic components of needs and expectations, the realities of LGB students’ lives do affect their motivation to learn. D’Augelli (1992), the Massachusetts Governor’s Commission (1993), Tierney (1992), and the University of Minnesota Select Committee (1993), as well as the anecdotes collected from students, illuminate some of the ways that needs to the classroom, they also bring a variety of expectations. McMillan and Forsyth (1991) identify four factors within the category of expectations: self-efficacy, previous experience, success of others, and feedback. Particular challenges LGB students may face are a lack of positive role models and a history of rejection or even violence from parents, teachers, and other authority figures (Sloane 1993; Uribe and Harbeck 1992). Those drawbacks could be a serious impairment and lead to an overall sense of inability or alienation.

Nevertheless, it is vital to note that lesbian and gay people who come to college also bring a number of experiences that may contribute to firm expectations of success. The Massachusetts Governor’s Commission on Gay and Lesbian Youth (1993) reported that a survey of over 2,000 people found that 45 percent of males and 25 percent of females were harassed or attacked in high school or junior high school because they were perceived to be lesbian or gay. Thus, the LGB students who do come to college generally have already surmounted more obstacles than their heterosexual peers—certainly different ones. They have learned to persevere, and they bring with them the knowledge that they can succeed.

Working with Emotions

We are all well aware that students’ emotions, for better or worse, are important in the learning process. Brookfield (1990) recommends that teachers pay attention to the emotionality of the learning situation and work with, rather than against, students’ emotions. He finds that students describe their learning experiences with many emotions, including surprise, excitement, pride, anger, embarrassment, anxiety, and grief.

Tiberius and Billson (1991) summarize a number of studies dealing with the emotionality of the student-teacher relationship. They find that mutual respect and commitment to goals, willingness to negotiate and to understand one another, and a sense of security within the process are critical to the student-teacher alliance.

A number of anecdotes from my e-mail survey illustrate how vital students’ emotions are. Students describe feeling “utterly humiliated, wanting to cry” or, con-
versely, experiencing a teacher’s support as “touching.” One student reports on the “intimidation factor” of being exposed as LGB in class and being “really nervous and scared” about approaching an instructor to discuss a paper topic. She later recalls the TA’s attitude toward her as “encouraging” and supportive.

Another student was pleasantly surprised by a professor’s response to an LGB paper topic because he had been unsure “of [his] professor’s feelings about homosexuality.” He then relates in upbeat terms the professor’s enthusiastic response. The emotions revealed in these accounts relate primarily to experiences in class with professors.

Tiberius and Billson (1991) discuss students’ need for a sense of security within the educational process. But, of course, the harassment or violence to which LGB students are often subjected presents a serious challenge to their feeling secure. Unfortunately, the Brown (1989), University of Minnesota (1993), and Oberlin (Norris 1992) studies show that LGB students do not see the classroom as a refuge from their chronic fear of being victimized.

Although fear of failure may motivate some students to focus on working hard (McKeachie 1994; McMillan and Forsyth 1991), fear of being exposed, ridiculed, or harassed is more likely to interfere with their learning. Miller (1994) advocated creating classrooms where conflict among different viewpoints becomes central to the teaching-learning process, but he warned against establishing “an environment that is relentlessly threatening, where not feeling safe comes to mean the same thing as feeling terrified” (396).

Fear is not the only negative emotion that LGB students might experience in the classroom. Dismayed by the absence of lesbian and gay experiences or curricula, students report that anger and frustration interfere with their learning (Crumpacker and Vander Haegen 1987). A few of the accounts reveal that sense of anxiety and alienation—as well as students’ relief when faculty or peers were supportive of their work.

Brookfield (1990) writes of the potential for students to experience a sense of grief as they discover that ideas they held as certainties are, in fact, relative, shifting, and culturally specific (46). For many people, realizing an LGB identity means letting go of the perceived certainties of heterosexuality and grieving that loss.

Construction of Meaning

Learning theory has positive news for teachers about helping gay and lesbian students connect with material and make meaning of new information. Construction of meaning consists of two basic elements: unlearning false theories and paradigms and learning new ones, which are often more complex. Most models of cognitive growth focus on how the learner takes in new information and either fits it into existing paradigms or comes to reject old paradigms and create new mental structures in their place.

We professors have many opportunities to capitalize on the unique experiences and insights that students amass as they come to understand themselves and live their lives as lesbian, gay, or bisexual people. We are also in a position to affect the lives of these students and their peers—all of our students—by helping them unlearn incorrect assumptions and prejudices about various sexual orientations.

For many students, going to college represents the first opportunity to discover their true sexual orientation and the implications of identifying as lesbian, gay, or bisexual (D’Augelli 1992; Sloane 1993). In some cases, discouragement may be passive or unintended on the part of the teacher, but in other cases it may be the result of the teacher’s open disrespect for LGB people and/or lesbian and gay studies. In either case, the teacher is missing or denying an opportunity for the student to make connections and to learn.

Studying lesbian and gay topics provides a connection to an authentic self for LGB students and an outlet to explore their status as the “outsider within” (Hill Collins 1991). In some important ways, these students interpret their academic surroundings differently from their heterosexual peers (Mac an Ghaill 1991). As they come to see themselves as healthy, accepted, and productive, however, they can challenge and unlearn negative messages that they may have internalized about LGB people (D’Augelli 1992; Massachusetts Governor’s Commission 1993; Uribe and Harbeck 1992). Having already challenged the standard heterosexual paradigm, these students are not strangers to the process of reformulating information into new structures.

Moreover, an LGB identity provides students with a unique perspective on examining information. They may be empowered—for the first time—to build personal connections to material, validating Angelo’s (1993) principle that “information organized in personally meaningful ways is more likely to be retained, learned, and used” (6). Several
students in my study were able to connect with course material by pursuing LGB topics that were important to them: gays in the Cuban Revolution, anti-gay violence as domestic terrorism, the treatment of gays and lesbians in the pre-Stonewall era, and equal rights for gays and lesbians. The 1969 riot at the Stonewall Inn in New York City, when gay, lesbian and transgender patrons defied police harassment, is commonly seen as the birth of the modern movement for civil rights based on sexual orientation and gender identity.

Making Changes for Inclusive Teaching

Of course, some LGB students and others bring to the campus misinformation and false assumptions that work against their understanding issues of sexual orientation. But we professors can confront those incorrect assumptions and lead students to alter their internal models. In so doing, teachers open up the possibility not only of pointing LGB students on the path toward self-acceptance, but also of reducing the homophobic harassment that they face from uninformed and prejudiced peers or even faculty members.

As Angelo (1993) points out, it is often more difficult to unlearn what is already known than to learn new information. Unfortunately, that may be especially true when students are deeply invested in maintaining their current beliefs about themselves or others. Because important LGB issues are ignored, demeaned, or glossed over in virtually all secondary and most college courses (see McNaron 1991), knowledgeable faculty can open windows of intellectual possibilities for all students.

Knowing that we are in a position of power, what can we do differently to teach and empower all of our students? The intersection of learning theory and the reality of LGB students’ lives highlights ways to reduce victimization and use sexual orientation issues to increase learning for everyone. Fortunately, pedagogical and curricular changes for inclusive teaching are already taking place in a few colleges and universities. My purpose is to give both guidelines and potential resources for changes on other campuses (see sidebar on p. 133).

Changes in Curricula

A number of curricular initiatives exist to guide faculty who are ready to make changes. Chesler and Zuniga (1991) present a model for introducing a unit on homophobia in a sociology class. More broadly, Crumpacker and Vander Haegen (1987) discuss examples of including lesbian, gay, and bisexual issues in their sociology, history, American studies, and women’s studies classes. D’Augelli (1992) describes his unique approach to teaching a course on lesbian/gay development at Pennsylvania State University. Skelton (1997) reviews her experience teaching sexuality issues in a course on social and cultural geography. Myers (1993) writes about her experience teaching an undergraduate lesbian studies course, and Grossman (1990) discusses LGB issues in leisure and recreation studies.

Writing courses are a fertile area for including LGB issues. Personal narratives provide a way to bring silenced lives into the academy (Tierney 1993) and to include ignored voices in the story (Fontaine and Hunter 1993). Further, Sanlo (1998) presents an extensive resource for faculty and administrators in higher education: ideas for institutional or individual change may also be drawn from the multicultural teaching literature (see Myers 1993). Finally, as illustrated by the anecdotes, students themselves have valuable ideas about how LGB issues might be brought into the classroom.

Conclusion

Through our teaching, service, and scholarship, we can improve the climate for lesbian, gay, and bisexual students in our classrooms and on campus. Faculty concerned with student involvement, the power of emotion, and motivation need to understand why and how to interrupt patterns of victimization, as well as how to use the “outsider within” perspective and exceptionality of LGB students to enhance learning.

We need also to be aware of the ways in which our passive collusion with harassers affects the learning environment. We must examine our own attitudes for conscious and unconscious biases. By stopping anti-gay victimization and by supporting LGB students’ learning goals, we college teachers have the power to enrich the academy by naming the unnamed realities, making audible the silent voices, and making visible these invisible outsiders.

NOTE

1. For a description of these studies, see Rankin’s chapter, “The Campus Climate Report: Assessment and Intervention” in R. Sanlo, op cit. Several of the seventy-nine known studies of the LGB campus climate can be accessed through a Web site maintained by the National Consortium of LGBT Campus Resource Center Directors (http://www.uic.edu/orgs/lgbt).

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