



# Constant Queering: Practicing Responsible Pedagogy at Syracuse University

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## Introduction

>> We need to make all members of this community, including TAs, aware that LGBT and queer people are members of this community and are in the classrooms whether visible or invisible, or whether they're wanting to be out that day or not. The first thing is making sure that everyone knows that the classrooms and those halls that we walk in, the staff that we talk to, our colleagues, are often members of LGBT practices and communities.

>**Jackie Orr (Sociology)**

When I was presented with the opportunity to author this chapter, I was both honored and humbled by the chance to make a lasting impression on the new cohort of teaching assistants. As a Ph.D. student in Child and Family Studies, I have just been appointed as a TA myself and am anxious to take my place in the classroom this fall. However, I

realize that the university classroom can be a political minefield, especially in courses filled predominantly with first year students, many of whom have experienced privileged lifestyles before coming to Syracuse University and who may hold steadfast, unexamined beliefs about certain members of our diverse student population. Teaching through this barrier of misunderstanding and ignorance is a difficult task indeed. The conscientious instructor must not only teach through students' assumptions and misunderstandings, but also engage in a process of critical self-exploration of her own assumptions and beliefs. It is only through critical self-reflection that we can begin to understand our own limited frames of reference, and work to widen our understanding of and active support for a diverse range of students, staff, and colleagues. This book is intended as a starting point for instructors who are unfamiliar with LGBT issues and heteronormativity by demonstrating some pedagogical strategies used to address heteronormative assumptions and classroom practices.

This essay was compiled from 18 faculty and graduate student instructor interviews conducted by a team of volunteers dedicated to responsible teaching practices. The interviewees represent a wide range of academic disciplines and social locations and were selected based on their reputation for critical and inclusive pedagogy. Our collective hope is that these teachers' work will inspire you, the future professoriate, to acknowledge the reality of LGBT issues on campus and to help Syracuse University continue our mission of valuing diversity and continual personal growth through higher education. As Casey Sprock (College of Law) explains:

You can have your personal belief system, that's fantastic, [but] you are [also] going to respect the University culture that Syracuse wants to create, and that includes acknowledging that there might be LGBT students in your physics class. I understand that you're a high-energy physicist, that's great ... you just need to be aware that there will be students of different colors, and there will be women, and there will be people who have different abilities, and there will be people who are gay and lesbian in your classes.



**Anything that  
doesn't problematize  
heteronormativity  
reinforces it.**

**>Claudia Klaver  
(English)**



Effectively acknowledging this entails recognizing and complicating heteronormative practices in your teaching methods. This essay in particular offers the opportunity for you, as a new TA, to hear from SU faculty who offer advice, suggestions, and examples of dynamic practices for a responsible LGBT pedagogy.

### **What is LGBT Pedagogy anyway?**

There is no one theory of LGBT pedagogy. In fact, many faculty respondents used different terms such as LGBT, Queer, and Feminist to convey the pedagogical ideas and practices that this book promotes. Our interviewees gave their own interpretations of LGBT pedagogy, which reflect a multiplicity of perspectives. The nature of LGBT pedagogy is exemplified by the variety of responses offered below. Here are some samples of how the faculty we interviewed conceptualize LGBT pedagogy:

>> When I think of LGBT pedagogy, I think of intellectual and explicitly activist work that challenges heterosexism individually and institutionally, and most specifically, in the classroom (but beyond, of course). While folks in LGBT communities should be best able to speak to such contradictions, those of us who are straight have a bedrock responsibility to do this important work as well, especially if we want to “walk the walk” and not just “talk the talk” about making this a more humane and safe world.

>**Winston Grady-Willis (African American Studies)**

>> LGBT pedagogy is the incorporation of LGBT issues into teaching. Topics of hate crimes, same-sex relationships, etc. should be discussed in the classroom. If a lecture is going to deal with issues of relationships, they should not just talk about relationships between men and women. These are not the only types of relationships that occur in the world.

>**Jeremy Brunson (Sociology)**

>> [LGBT pedagogy] is a view of the world that always questions heterosexist norms and assumptions. It involves a process of asking questions about difference and how difference and diversity exist in our world and in our students’ lives. It looks at the liminal spaces, those areas where people in various roles fall “betwixt and between” heteronormative assumptions. It is

a critical pedagogy, one that views sexuality from various approaches and critical lenses. It often intersects with other pedagogies of difference and diversity.

>**Paul Butler (The Writing Program)**

>> A lot of courses assume that LGBT pedagogy means just teaching about homophobia, but they don't teach about heteronormativity. And you cannot understand homophobia without understanding heteronormativity. A lot of my students feel that homophobia just means hate, fear, taboo, and they don't understand how they are complicit in keeping the norm of heteronormativity in place. Because they are not homophobic. They don't hate. They don't fear. So unless you also teach them about the norm of heterosexuality then they don't get what the problem is. They don't see the bigger picture.

>**Barbara Applebaum (Cultural Foundations of Education)**

>> I think of queer pedagogy as one that is disruptive of normative assumptions, troubles taken-for-granted assumptions, and is critical of binary thinking. Queer pedagogy confounds and confronts knowledge and power, exclusions, and erasures. It shifts the center and makes the familiar strange.

>**Beth Ferri (Teaching & Leadership/Cultural Foundations of Education)**

>> If you had to define [LGBT pedagogy], it would be any pedagogy that challenges heteronormativity. For me there's a pedagogy of student empowerment and involvement creating a "safe" space but also a space where students are willing to be challenged. But even those spaces can be heteronormative if a professor isn't aware of [her] own heteronormative perspectives, just like there can be racial and gender biases if you're not aware of how they're being produced.

>**Claudia Klaver (English)**

>> The way I imagine it is as a pedagogy that respects differences and permits people to name the world they live in. It uses people's naming of the world to say how the world is constructed.

>**Sari Knopp Biklen (Cultural Foundations of Education)**

>> LGBT pedagogy is giving students an opportunity to talk about the values and assumptions that they have and then presenting them with information and data that supports the kind of issues that are really happening with gays, lesbians, transgendered, and bisexual people.

>**Kim Jaffee (Social Work)**

>> It's a way of introducing material to students that allows them to see how the experience of this group of people relates to the subject matter that's being taught. And understanding how that experience may or may not be different than it is for the mainstream.

>**Casey Sprock (College of Law)**

>> To me, [this pedagogy] might entail a few qualities or characteristics, including (a) Constant querying/queerying—a curiosity that is active and that finds spaces to ask questions where there seems to be seamlessness: a deconstructive approach—this questioning must be self-directed as well as outer directed; (b) A thorough examination of the tools of power and dominance at work in the seeming innocence of dominant sexualities/condoned/legal practices/identities; (c) A recognition that ALL sexuality NEVER takes place in a vacuum—it's always contextual, always imbricated with other identities, power matrices, vectors of culture, time place, space, nation: to me, queer pedagogy... must come to terms with how sexuality is intersectional and also historical rather than universal. This is important on two counts: one, to de-universalize/denaturalize the category of queerness or LGBT rather than perpetuate possible imperial/neocolonizing arrogance; (d) A recognition therefore that queer sexuality can be both a site of privilege and oppression BECAUSE it is interwoven with and located within other aspects of power and the self.

>**Vivian May (Women's Studies)**

As you can see from these varied comments, there is a wide range of ways to conceptualize LGBT/Queer pedagogy; however, there are some common elements upon which our informants concur. These include: acknowledging that we often make assumptions that the heterosexual experience is the “normal” experience; identifying

and interrupting these assumptions; providing a supportive space for LGBT students; teaching about LGBT issues, but through a consideration of how these issues are related to heteronormativity, power, race, gender and other social categories; and finally, that this pedagogy is relevant to ALL TAs regardless of their own sexual orientation and regardless of their academic discipline. Before turning to the methods these teachers use in their practices of LGBT pedagogy, let's examine how heteronormativity relates to LGBT pedagogy.

### **Intersections of Heteronormativity and the “Work to be done”**

As Aman Luthra points out in this volume, Syracuse University has made great strides in the interruption of heteronormative ideologies and practices on campus.<sup>1</sup> However, there is still work to be done. The notion of how heteronormativity is constructed and reinforced is not typically addressed in relation to diversity issues on campus or in the classroom. Changing this is an important element of our interviewees' thoughts about LGBT pedagogy. Jackie Orr (Sociology) says,

The notion of social construction which says that things are not natural, that things are made through culture and history and relations of power, is extremely useful for trying to begin to destabilize ... students' notion of sexual identity as natural and normal.

Orr's comment makes clear that recognizing the socially constructed nature of sexuality and gender (along with other social categories) is a powerful and necessary tool in the “work” to interrupt the power of dominant ideologies, including heteronormativity. Interrogating what is typically labeled “normal” and the resultant production of the “abnormal” centrally plays into this effort.

Another area of “work to be done” concerns the ways that LGBT issues ARE entering into the curriculum. While several departments administer courses addressing multiculturalism and diversity on campus and throughout society, the focus of these classes tends to emphasize race and ethnicity while comparatively little attention is given to issues that are specifically faced by the LGBT population. Plus, if attended to at all, LGBT issues are typically presented simply as one of many separate facets of “difference” among the population without acknowledgement of the cumulative effect people's sexual and gender identities often have on their entire social experience, or the

ways that sexuality and gender intersect with other identity categories. If there is a disconnect between gender, sexuality, and the rest of a person's identities, this has the potential to minimize and invalidate a person's experience as a complete human being. As Linda Carty (African American Studies) puts it:

To simultaneously deal with the issues of gender, race, class, and sexuality is to recognize that some people experience multiple oppressions simultaneously. So, for example, if you have a woman who is a lesbian, black, and disabled, no one can deny that she would definitely experience more and multiple forms of oppression at the same time. So how can we talk about her without giving legitimacy to all of her? After all, she is never one part of herself without the others.

Carty reminds us that there are complex elements that interconnect in the construction of identity. How we, as instructors in the classroom, address these multifaceted components is likely to impact how our students self-identify as well as how they make sense of other peoples' self-concepts.

As a new TA, you may be wondering how you can begin working to recognize, minimize, and interrupt heteronormative practices in your teaching methods. The first step is to explore your own beliefs about lesbians, gay men, bisexuals, and transgendered people. What do you assume about your LGBT students and others with whom you interact? What do you feel when you think about LGBT people and LGBT issues? Why do you think that is? As Barbara Applebaum (Cultural Foundations of Education) states, "A professor who has not dealt with his or her own heteronormative assumptions... will be prevented from incorporating LGBT pedagogy... It's not a subject you can just teach and not understand yourself."

Holding biases and stereotypes about people whom you perceive as "different" from you are learned behaviors that are rooted in our socio-cultural context. Growth from and interruption of these biases is not a simple process; it involves a lot of critical reflection and intentional questioning. However, if you want to effectively teach diverse populations without subjecting them to your own personal biases, this reflection is required.

Disrupting heteronormativity in the curriculum and acknowledging the existence and effects of multiple oppressions can be a daunting task for TAs, but we have the

responsibility to do so on a daily basis. You have made quite a bit of progress already by picking up this volume and increasing your awareness of LGBT pedagogical issues on campus. In the following sections, our faculty interviewees discuss ways that you can bridge this awareness with concrete teaching practices.

### **Recognizing Privilege and Disrupting Complacency: “Knocking you off your balance”**

Many people are unaware of the many privileges they enjoy as a result of being born into a certain gender, class, race, or ethnic group. The same goes for those people who are straight *and* those who identify themselves as LGBT. As Vivian May (Women’s Studies) observes, “Issues of class privilege and other privileges definitely play out in the classroom dynamic between teacher and student and among students. I think these unnamed power differentials and dynamics also can impact ‘success’ as a teacher.”

Awareness of one’s own social location and access to privilege is essential because you will be engaging with students who differ from you in terms of social categories that are directly related to power in this society, e.g., socioeconomic, racial, ethnic, religious, ability, sexual, age, and so on. Marj DeVault (Sociology) offers this example of “catching herself” using concepts or language that reinforced power and privilege, as opposed to disrupting them:

Very, very early in my teaching, when I was teaching a course called Sociology of Women, a woman stopped me and corrected me, “It sounds like you are really only talking about heterosexuals.” And that surprised me... it also really got me thinking—so one of the things that I have done ever since is to continually try to catch myself.

You must be conscious of where you stand in the greater scheme of things, how your worldview and life experiences may differ radically from those of your students, and how your assumptions about particular cultural practices or populations are formed from your own social location.

At the same time, teachers need to develop a sense of the ways in which students express their social privilege in the classroom (knowingly or not) and be able to call attention to these instances in a manner that generates productive and challenging discussions. “When [students] communicate their privilege without knowing it,” Sari

Knopp Biklen (Cultural Foundations of Education) observes, “you have to address it. In my research methods class, I talk about needing to know your social location before doing research so you know how you’re interpreting the readings and the data.”

Beth Ferri (Teaching and Leadership and Cultural Foundations of Education) addresses privilege as a hindrance to the transformative power of education:

I don’t know if I am ever completely successful with trying to denaturalize privilege, especially when students—especially students occupying the normative center—expect the classroom to be a “safe place.” I don’t necessarily have that expectation. I think education, when it is transformative, always knocks you off balance, which feels anything but safe. Of course, students who do not occupy such places of privilege often do not have the privilege of assuming that the classroom will be a safe place. When teachers and students talk about the classroom as a safe space, I wonder—safe for whom?

Despite these concerns about creating safe space in the classroom, it is an important component of LGBT pedagogy. Linda Alcoff (Philosophy) emphasizes the importance of “making the classroom safe enough for students to express differences in opinion and yet make sure that you are not letting certain kinds of ignorant statements of hatred pass by...it’s like treading a thin line.”

Barbara Applebaum (Cultural Foundations of Education) helps her students recognize the privilege held by those in the mainstream through a classroom exercise in which she asks her students to recap their weekend activities with their loved ones for 10-15 minutes. After a short debriefing, she reminds them that not everyone can speak so freely about their loved ones. Many heterosexual students do not realize what a privilege it is for them to be able to openly express their affection for their loved ones, such as walking hand-in-hand down the street or sharing a simple kiss.

Claudia Klaver (English) throws her students off balance by first making it known that she has a daughter before coming out as a lesbian at some point in the semester. Jackie Orr (Sociology) uses the interesting technique of referring to both heterosexuals and LGBT people as “us,” a method that makes her own sexuality ambiguous. “I talk to TAs who want to know what it means,” she observes, “...they don’t necessarily hear when I say ‘we’ when I talk about heterosexuals.”

Methods like these are employed by many faculty members to directly challenge students' ignorance and stereotyping that "usually stem from the belief that they do not know anyone who is queer. It is important to recognize this type of naivety. It is this type of naivety that makes it more important to address these issues" (Jeremy Brunson, Sociology). Lauren Eastwood (Sociology) cites an example of this naivety during a classroom discussion in which a student assumed that gay people are not contributing to population growth because they don't have babies. Eastwood interrupted the misconception and assumptions of heteronormativity by pointing out that gay people might not biologically have babies with their partners, but they can and do have and raise children.



**You have to make the (classroom) safe enough for students to express differences in opinion and yet make sure that you are not letting certain kinds of ignorant statements of hatred pass by. In that way students start to see a particular teacher as someone with a vested interest in a matter such as sexuality.**

**>Linda Alcoff (Philosophy)**



### **How is LGBT Pedagogy Relevant to My Discipline?**

It may seem that LGBT issues can be discarded by some disciplines as irrelevant to their content. However, as Ahoura Afshar argues in this volume, the relevance of LGBT issues exists in every classroom, for every discipline, and for every instructor at Syracuse University.<sup>2</sup> This is due, in part, to the ways that heteronormativity operates, but also due to the responsibility we all have as instructional staff at Syracuse University.

Our faculty respondents do agree that LGBT issues are most easily engaged in the social sciences and humanities, and that these issues are more difficult to envision as "relevant" to other disciplines, especially the "hard" sciences or "technical" disciplines. Linda Carty (African American Studies) reminds us, "The literature has shown that in higher education, particularly in the natural sciences, issues of race, gender, sexuality and difference are not adequately addressed." This finding reflects a problem with the

way that the content of these disciplines remains unchallenged, not that issues and ideologies pertaining to social differences are irrelevant. In treating LGBT issues as simply a matter of subject content in the curriculum, we fail to adequately take into consideration the deeper issue of heteronormativity, which is ever present in all disciplines and in every classroom.

As Beth Ferri (Teaching and Leadership and Cultural Foundations of Education) asserts, “I can’t think of a discipline that does not deal with difference, binaries, or normative assumptions. Classrooms are inherently political spaces—who speaks, who listens, whose worldview is taken as universal and natural? Whose knowledge counts and who counts as a knower? These are all reflective of power.” In this sense, LGBT issues are relevant to all disciplines, because of the inherent heteronormativity that prevails in most socio-cultural contexts.

Paul Butler (Writing Program) points out that the sciences are prone to viewing “societal institutions and practices through a heteronormative lens” without considering examples that include LGBT persons. Butler goes on to argue, “Most instructors feel they don’t have the knowledge or ability [to do so]. They may feel it’s important, but they don’t have the resources or examples of creative ways in which it has been brought into other courses.” Linda Alcoff (Philosophy) adds, “What is interesting is that students are often inclined and committed to issues of equality and fairness but they have not had an opportunity to do any systematic thinking about heterosexism and homophobia.” In addition, Vivian May (Women’s Studies) asserts:

Classrooms are not free of dominant social paradigms or power dynamics—they are sites of nation building and normalizing. And, although many of us struggle against these imperatives in our work, we are still working within sets of assumptions about education as a neutral, liberal democratic endeavor but not necessarily as the practice of freedom and overtly politicized space of unthinking/rethinking hegemony.

May argues that all disciplines do touch upon sexuality issues at some point, listing such disparate fields as economics, history, law, policy studies, art, athletics, and religion. Lauren Eastwood (Sociology) offers an interesting example of institutionalized heteronormativity in the natural sciences contained within a physics textbook. Within the text, an illustration depicts “attraction of molecules” in terms of a plus/minus binary.

The illustration shows a picture of a woman under the plus sign and a picture of a man under the minus symbol. The next frame depicts “contraction” and shows two men as the minus/minus relationship of contraction, the opposite of attraction. Here, the assumption of heterosexuality illustrates this physics concept, while also reinforcing heteronormative understandings of the world.

As Eastwood’s example demonstrates, heteronormativity can innocently appear in any textbook, and TAs need to be able to recognize this and to interrupt it as often as possible. When TAs can recognize heteronormativity, interrogate it, and teach against it, our students, in turn, can learn to recognize and interrupt it. As TAs, we have the ability to incorporate the ideas and examples from this volume into our pedagogical methods. In the following section of this essay, our interviewees discuss examples of their own pedagogical practices.

### **Best Practices in LGBT pedagogy**

As alluded to in some of the examples above, one of the most effective ways to begin interrupting heteronormative assumptions in the classroom is to critically analyze the examples used in class discussion for their relation to heteronormative ideologies.

### **Using examples to interrupt heteronormativity**

Heteronormativity on campus is often reinforced through such innocuous practices as using male-female examples and analogies in instructional examples. For TAs, tailoring our classroom examples to include LGBT concepts is one of the easiest and most effective ways we can disrupt heteronormativity and show that we recognize and support LGBT relationships. Casey Sprock (College of Law) designs his classroom examples to include same-sex partners in business and law (not necessarily in romantic relationships) to illustrate people of the same sex “working toward the same goal and building something together.” He also uses examples of same-sex couples rather than the heterosexual married couples most often used to illustrate course concepts.

In a similar way, Kim Jaffee (Social Work) relates an example from her classes on social work and domestic violence:

Many times domestic violence, as opposed to intimate partner violence, makes an assumption that it is a married couple, a man and a wife, in a marital relationship or heterosexual marital relationship and so I move to using the

terminology of “intimate partner violence.” This method allows me to talk about studies which use the hetero terminology but in fact I reinterpret that in order to create a climate that is open to relationships of all kinds.

Jaffee uses opportunities like these to critically interpret the assumptions in the literature and debunk the myths that relationships are always heterosexual.

In mathematics, word problems provide many opportunities for reinterpreting the classroom example to interrupt heteronormativity. For example, a reframing of a standard word problem might read: “Bill and Tom bought a car for \$23,000 and financed it for 7.5% over 3 years. Figure out the monthly payments they will have to make.” Even though you’re not explicitly discussing same-sex relationships, you are letting students know that you’re comfortable with the fact that people other than heterosexuals do things together and have relationships. This is an important concept to convey to students who may not be accustomed to that idea.

Jeremy Brunson (Sociology) provides the following example for a marketing class. In discussions about supply and demand, you can easily talk about the marketability of gay and lesbian characters on prime time television. Here, a focus on LGBT people as a marketing niche works effectively as part of the larger discussion of marketing issues. Without having to state a political position, or “deal with LGBT issues,” you affirm the reality of gay people in the marketplace and also affirm the presence of and support for LGBT people in your classroom.

For an African American Studies class, Linda Carty suggests that discussions about important figures such as feminist activist Audre Lorde, poet and novelist James Baldwin,



**I have been forever changed as a teacher whose first job was in the Bible Belt. I had to develop a kind of “coyote” pedagogy to bring things in from the side door (to avoid student resistance). I don’t think this is less political, but it is different and in other contexts may not be recognized as a queering/political strategy...**

**>Vivian May (Women’s Studies)**



or civil rights activist Bayard Rustin, should include some discussion of their sexual orientation as integral to their personal and political struggle. In this way, you reinforce the point that one's intersectional identities are important to understanding political and social movements as well as one's creative practice.

### **Challenging Assumptions**

A second pedagogical practice involves challenging the assumptions that you hear from your students. The contributors to this volume are committed to the belief that an important component of responsible pedagogy is attention to students' critical thinking skills. This involves challenging unfounded and inflammatory statements and assumptions as they arise in the classroom. As Jackie Orr (Sociology) points out, "increasingly, the students who are embodying or saying things that I think are sexist, heterosexist, racist, or homophobic [are] doing it with a kind of hegemonic confidence that I find incredibly disturbing and does make me think, as an educator... what I want to do in my classroom is promote unlearning." Leading a critical and thoughtful classroom discussion in order to help your students (and you) unlearn these unfounded biases and oppressive assumptions, without having it devolve into a mindless recitation of dogmatic rhetoric, is a crucial teaching skill that develops with practice. Karen Hall (English) offers this example:

Think of a moment when you knew something and your mother didn't and it was embarrassing for you. Whether you were at a football game and your mother didn't understand what a linebacker did, or whether you were in a math tournament and she didn't understand what calculus was. There is something, some illiteracy that your mother has, [that has] made you feel embarrassed. So that even if my students are strongly from the center of social power and norms, then I'll use that experience and help them then connect out from it... So I start from what they do know and I respect it and invite them to bring it into the room in a critical way so that they start to be reflective of their subject position.

Hall's assignment offers students a way to begin to look at their (unconscious) assumptions, but in a non-threatening way that invites them to become self reflective and self-critical.

It is important to remember not to be reactive, lest we denigrate our students and lose their attention completely. As Claudia Klaver (English) puts it, “I don’t call the comments ‘homophobic’ or ‘racist’ because to do that is to call the student that. ... I try to ‘complicate’ it. Nobody really says anything explicitly racist or homophobic, but they do make assumptions.” When students make comments that reflect their ignorance on these matters, Paul Butler (Writing Program) suggests:

I ask students to examine what’s at the root of some of their responses and beliefs. I also allow the students in the class to monitor some of the responses. I find that students usually handle these kinds of comments with a great deal of sophistication and complexity. I think it’s important to address these comments and probe deeply, yet I must say that in general the number of these comments is minimal. I think it’s important to establish a classroom environment in which conflict can be addressed openly.

Butler’s suggestions are echoed in a wide range of responses from faculty about their own efforts to provide constructive and transformative learning environments. What are some of these teachers’ approaches to the challenge of managing an effective classroom discussion while also promoting critical examination of inflammatory and offensive remarks?

>> I encourage students to bring out these differences because they are there. Don’t say it outside of class and not say it in class. I know that they come to classes like mine with certain inherited assumptions and I want them to be aware of those. I encourage them to challenge the authors, challenge the professor, and challenge each other. All they have to do is substantiate their challenge with legitimate sources. They must show that they have read and understood the course materials and that they found other sources that refuted these. With this openness and encouragement I don’t have problems of resistance merely for the sake of resistance. Students learn that oftentimes their common sense knowledge of the world is inaccurate and needs revising. I would welcome the most reactionary students...because I know that I will transform their thinking.

>**Linda Carty (African American Studies)**

- >> I try to nip all kinds of phobic comments in the bud: challenge them and point out their inappropriate nature for my classroom or any class, for that matter. Offer counterarguments, turn questions around, use humor.  
>**Vivian May (Women's Studies)**
- >> When students make comments that deny their privilege, it is the responsibility of instructors to expose such contradictions in a constructive way. This often means engaging in class discussions that allow other students to “check” such comments before those of us at the rostrum open our mouths. Another thing that helps is honesty. I tell students time and time again that my own homophobia as a young Black man was the key reason why I became estranged from one of the best friends I ever had growing up.  
>**Winston Grady-Willis (African American Studies)**
- >> The instructor has to model appropriate classroom discourse. I make sure that I do not make arguments that are abusive or targeted at any student. And I encourage my students to do the same thing. Second, the instructor has to maintain some control over the discussion. This is often tricky for new teachers (or TAs). You have to strike a balance in which students feel free to express their views, but within the bounds of appropriateness. You don't want a class that is silent, and you don't want a class that is totally out of control. And you need to anticipate when the class is veering toward a hostile direction so that you can prevent that from happening. The point is to elicit responses, and yet maintain decorum. In other words, I am in favor of maintaining a structured environment of dialogue and discussion.  
>**Thomas Keck (Political Science)**
- >> In my class there is Zero Indifference. If someone comes up with a homophobic, racist, or sexist remark, we stop everything and whether there is silence, we challenge it and try to deconstruct it. ...I'll tell them to come see me after class unless I think it's helpful for the whole class. But one problem I have in my classroom, and it's always a challenge, is very religious people that say [homosexuality is] a sin. Because I am an Orthodox Jew, they are actually in shock when I don't accept that as an answer. One of the things I

have done in class is I say, “You go home tonight and you tell me honestly, think in the heart of your hearts how much you actually believe it’s a sin, that being gay is a sin, and how much you actually fear and can’t deal with it because it threatens your sexuality and then come back to me next week and we’ll talk about it again.” Because a lot of them hide behind the religious rationalization. A lot of fear that they don’t want to face and when they face that we can talk.

**>Barbara Applebaum (Cultural Foundations of Education)**

>> There is often a muted reaction whenever there is a discussion of heterosexism and homophobia in class. . . . this silence indicates discomfort. I try a technique in which the students don’t have to come out and take a stand one way or another. I ask them: “What are the major arguments against homosexuality?” And slowly, they would start to talk about these things without claiming that they have these views themselves. Sometimes, just to get them started, I also lay out the major arguments and then ask them if I have missed out on something. That way they can point out what they think or have heard without taking on the personal culpability of being homophobic.

**>Linda Alcoff (Philosophy)**

>> I have, occasionally, had students express problematic comments in class and in online class discussions. I typically confront such comments and say why I think they could be offensive. Sometimes students do not realize that they have said something that could be hurtful and appreciate having the opportunity to discuss it. Others feel ashamed although this is not my intent. And still others think that I am just being “PC” and deny that what they said is problematic. My goal is simply to have students question their taken-for-granted assumptions and to be critical of thinking that their reality is shared or universal.

**>Beth Ferri (Teaching & Leadership/Cultural Foundations of Education)**

>> To address when students are seemingly caught in their own stereotyping, one of the things that I’ve done is to have students analyze something outside of class—they see a film or go to a presentation in light of the class material.

I call it a “stretch exercise” where they are supposed to look at how this might be applicable to the outside world. Lo and behold! They find themselves doing something that critiques heteronormativity through that process.

**>Lauren Eastwood (Sociology)**

>> The main thing I do when people say really racist, sexist, or homophobic things is not have a really big reaction. ...this is weird because it’s like creating a safe space for homophobia, but I’m not really talking about a safe space. I’m trying to create a space where interesting conversation can happen, not really stupid, boring, prefabricated conversation. And so, I remain calm and respond with a question, and I always respond from the position of a sociologist.

**>Jackie Orr (Sociology)**

>> What I would normally do to intervene is to ask questions. You know, open-ended questions to get the student to start to talk and then rely on the rest of the class and the readings to support whatever position I felt the need to take. And if the student becomes belligerent, to say, “Well, I feel like you’re crossing the line and we’re not having an intellectual discussion and we need to stop.” And then, of course, the thing is to not...let them push your buttons. Because at that point...it’s a power game.

**>Karen Hall (English)**

It is important to keep in mind that not all student resistance is due to bigotry or homophobia. There are many psychological, sociological, and environmental factors affecting the development of all your students, LGBT and straight. Sometimes the ignorance or opposition might be resistance for its own sake, or maybe, for the student, it is an exercise in debate, intellectual discussion, and questioning authority. As Karen Hall (English) observes:

Who knows what’s triggered this person? Maybe it’s homophobia...the most important thing for me in dealing with the “problem student” is to really remind myself that I do not know what the problem is. If I assume it’s sexuality or my sexuality, I am making myself far more important than I probably am.

Don't be quick to judge the student as a bigot, but always be ready to engage all students in challenging and critical intellectual examinations of inaccurate assumptions and beliefs. Never let inflammatory comments "slip by."

### Being a Visible LGBT Ally

Being an ally to both LGBT and straight students can interrupt heteronormativity in powerful and complex ways. The first step is understanding what an ally actually is.<sup>3</sup> Lauren Eastwood (Sociology) defines an LGBT "ally" as "someone who could be gay or could not but either way you're supportive of these issues." One of the easiest ways



**I think one thing that keeps instructors from handling things is fear - because they imagine these issues in stark binaries or stark contrasts in perspectives. The more you know about these issues, the more ways you have in addressing the issues and how they connect with your subject matter, the less fearful people are.**

**>Sari Knopp Biklen (Cultural Foundations of Education)**



to demonstrate your status as an LGBT ally is by displaying the "Safe Space" sticker, which you see prominently placed on many faculty members' doors. However, this is merely a symbolic gesture that must be backed up with action, when you are ready to do so.

Several faculty argue that you need to let people know you are an ally "by word and example" (Casey Sprock) and through the language you use (Jeremy Brunson). Others more explicitly include LGBT issues in their curriculum. Sari Knopp Biklen (Cultural Foundations of Education) routinely assigns texts by gay and lesbian authors, includes sexuality as a significant identity marker in her teachings, supports the work of her LGBT students, and regularly raises heteronormativity in her classes as an issue for consideration.

Vivian May (Women's Studies) advocates participating in conversations about relevant LGBT issues with your students, communicating with your students via e-mail, bringing up LGBT topics and questions in class, offering extra credit for examining LGBT issues, and sometimes discussing one's own life experiences. Paul

Butler (Writing Program) displays his alliance by refusing to hide his own sexual orientation from his students. He not only makes it known that he is gay, but he also brings up issues in the classroom that relate to the LGBT community. He reports that his students tend to respond to his openness by sharing relevant examples from their own lives.

Sometimes dramatic scenes play out before your eyes and it is up to you, the instructor, to handle the situation with compassion and wisdom. Winston Grady-Willis (African American Studies) relates a powerful classroom experience that indisputably named his identity as an LGBT ally:

Two years ago a White student (who I later found out was gay) asked a straight-to-the-point question during a discussion about the lynching of Blacks in the apartheid South. “Do you consider the murder of Matthew Shepherd to be a lynching?” Everyone’s eyes focused on him, and then on me, when I responded. “Absolutely,” I said. “Matthew Shepherd was the victim of a lynching, just like James Byrd.” The answer was a simple one for me. Both men were the victims of group murder and torture by individuals who considered themselves inherently superior, and yet, who felt threatened by their respective victims in the most intimate ways. ...Everyone knew where I stood.

Barbara Applebaum (Cultural Foundations of Education) adds this wisdom about students who come out to her privately.

I speak out in class so at least they know I’m an advocate. People have come out to me in journals, but I know they don’t want to come out to the classroom, and that’s perfectly fine. I understand that. I can’t make the classroom a safe place for them no matter how much I try...I hope that it makes them at least feel safe with me.

Being an ally demands that you take some risks, yes, but more importantly that you attempt to make your classroom as safe as possible for all students.

A related issue regarding being an ally concerns recognizing and respecting the intersections of identity categories in your students and yourself. Linda Carty (African

American Studies) noted earlier that you cannot begin to understand the experiences of a person until you consider all aspects of that person's identity. This identity includes the person's sexuality, age, gender, ability, race, ethnicity, and socioeconomic status, among other categories. These traits and social locations combine to create a unique individual who is more than the sum of her parts, or merely a patchwork of non-intersecting components. We all have intersecting identities and related experiences that are useful when we're relating to other people. Here are some ways in which SU faculty acknowledge these intersections and use them to enhance their teaching methods:

- >> As a below-the-knee amputee who wears a prosthesis, I have had to come to terms with the fact that I, especially when younger, passed as able-bodied. The issue of passing is central to the lives of many in the LGBT community, too, of course, as well as for those in other contexts (e.g. some very light-complexioned Blacks in the US, some Jews in Europe and here in the US). So perhaps, too, from my own personal experiences as a Black male who is also heterosexual and disabled, alliances have been drawn.  
>**Winston Grady-Willis (African American Studies)**
- >> We have intersecting identities. I had a guy who wrote to me in his journal, "you know as a gay person I never realized that I could be oppressive to somebody else because I am white." And it was the perfect moment to show... I am oppressed because I am a woman but that doesn't mean I can't be dominant because I'm white... These intersections are what sometimes prevent us from seeing some of the ways in which we contribute to oppression.  
>**Barbara Applebaum (Cultural Foundations of Education)**
- >> All these categories must be understood to intersect with other issues of difference, social inequality, and power. This means however that sometimes students don't recognize anything "queer" going on, or they feel that everything is "queer" or "raced" but not enough about "women." ... Student locations factor in a lot as does the professor's.  
>**Vivian May (Women's Studies)**

Finding similarities and making connections with other people aids the instructor in making genuine connections with students and creating inclusive and relevant examples in the classroom. This is an integral part of making it known to your students that you are a LGBT ally. Aside from being an ally, you may be wondering if it is necessary to be gay to best cultivate LGBT pedagogy, or if you need to have a specific theoretical background, such as feminist theory, to do this work. We asked our faculty informants for their perspective on these issues.

### **Do you need to be LGBT to practice this pedagogy?**

Linda Carty (African American Studies) argues that one does not have to be gay.

That's like saying that only black people can talk about racism because they are so often victimized by it. But we must remember that the perpetrators of racism are responsible for its maintenance... We all have a responsibility to address these issues where and when necessary.

Barbara Applebaum (Cultural Foundations of Education) concurs:

I definitely don't think you have to [be LGBT] and I think sometimes when you have predominantly heterosexual students it's better not to be. It's better to be "het." Then they don't use that line, "Well, you have an agenda so I can dismiss what you're saying."

Applebaum underscores a major theme of this volume: we all have a responsibility to engage LGBT pedagogy, regardless of our sexual orientation. Vivian May (Women's Studies) adds:

I really hate the idea of limiting who can "do" LGBT pedagogy based on identity, discipline, etc. I feel that plays into the dominant logics that have helped to maintain marginalization for all kinds of people.

May argues that limiting LGBT pedagogy to those who are LGBT is problematic for the very work to be done. Jeremy Brunson (Sociology), however, points out that his particular position sometimes becomes central to the examples he uses:

As a gay man who is in a position of authority, I have often found it difficult to merge my responsibility to educate with making students feel comfortable in the classroom. A lot of my examples in class are from personal experience or are very close to me. I often have to remind myself that coming out might not be the best way to get my point across. Although I do have it in the back of my mind, I will say that I have never remained closeted out of this concern. There are times, that I have “outed” myself while making a point and felt completely comfortable with my decision.

For Brunson, being gay makes it easier to do this work. For Barbara Applebaum, however, identifying as heterosexual enables her to incorporate LGBT pedagogy more effectively in her classrooms. Clearly, these faculty feel that anyone who is committed to responsible teaching, regardless of sexual orientation, can be effective practitioners of LGBT pedagogy.

### **Do you need to be a feminist to do this work?**

Many of our faculty believe that being a feminist helps in the practice of LGBT pedagogy, but it is certainly not a requirement. Barbara Applebaum (Cultural Foundations of Education) suggests: “You don’t have to be a feminist, but you have to understand oppression in a more macro perspective.” Other faculty comment:

>> I am a feminist, and that certainly informs my teaching of LGBT issues. But, do you have to be a feminist to do so? I’m not sure. I’m happy to entertain the possibility that a teacher might not be a feminist and also teach LGBT content successfully. There are certainly some LGBT rights advocates who are anti-feminist, pro-life, etc.

>**Thomas Keck (Political Science)**

>> I certainly think that it helps when someone embraces feminist politics unapologetically. In the given moment here at SU, in Syracuse, and in the larger world in terms of all sorts of politics, the reality oftentimes is that someone who sees “feminism” as a dirty word probably isn’t going to embrace the notion of LGBT pedagogy. Those, like womanist scholars, who see the term feminism as being problematic at a definitional level but who also

challenge gendered structured in their work, can and do teach LGBT pedagogy.

>**Winston Grady-Willis (African American Studies)**

>> Do you have to be a feminist pedagogical practitioner? To some degree, yes, you do, because I think if you are feminist it means that you critically analyze gender and power.

>**Karen Hall (English)**

Why might a feminist orientation be considered important, by some faculty members, to practicing effective LGBT pedagogy? Feminist theorists critically examine the power relations embedded in social constructs of gender, race, sexuality, ability, class, and so on. These social constructs create and reinforce, feminists argue, hierarchies of power and profound inequities in our cultural structures and institutions. Processes that naturalize and normalize systems of privilege are integral to masking and thus maintaining dominant ideologies and practices. The themes that feminist theorists address include deconstructing the traditional societal power structures, addressing issues of implicit and explicit oppression by the dominant culture, and interrogating the intersections of oppression around social categories. As the previous statements indicate, many of our faculty interviewees believe that critical thinking skills are essential for developing students' abilities to uncover their "naturalized" beliefs and assumptions and to critically reflect on the effects of these beliefs on individual and structural practices.

Although the faculty interviewed for this volume indicate that identifying as LGBT and/or feminist may help one's efforts to engage in LGBT pedagogy, it is essential that every teacher committed to responsible pedagogical practices—heterosexual or LGBT, non-feminist or feminist—understand that she or he can and must do this work.

## Conclusion

>> At the institutional level, the University has at least three responsibilities: (a) guaranteeing a safe environment for LGBT students; (b) supporting LGBT student organizations; and (c) encouraging the incorporation of LGBT issues into the curriculum. I think the creation of a LGBT Studies (or Queer Studies) minor or major would be a great step. I am looking forward to further progress in this regard.

>**Thomas Keck (Political Science)**

As members of the future professoriate, we have a strong responsibility to address issues of inequality whenever possible. Indeed, this is a part of the core mission of Syracuse University. Responsible teachers recognize diversity in all its forms and construct our pedagogical methods to challenge invisible systems of privilege that perpetuate the exclusion of “non-mainstream” students from our curriculum and classroom practices. Learning to recognize and interrupt systems of privilege and normalcy in our own beliefs and teaching practices, as well as in students’ beliefs and practices, is essential to creating responsible and reflexive teaching and learning environments.

The use of the conscientious pedagogical techniques and “best practices” described by the faculty interviewed for this book should serve as a guide to new TAs from those who have “been there” and are familiar with the terrain of the SU landscape. Whether you identify yourself as LGBT or not, your actions in and out of the classroom as a TA and an LGBT ally will have lasting effects on the lives of the students you teach. Take an active role in the changing face of higher education in America. Your students, the campus environment, and society at large will all benefit. There’s no telling where your influence will end. See you in the classroom.

>>The author would like to thank Nisha Gupta for her substantial help with re-organization and revision of this essay.

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## >>ENDNOTES

- 1 > See “(Un)Straightening the Syracuse University Landscape” in this volume.
- 2 > See “The Invisible Presence of Sexuality in the Classroom” in this volume.
- 3 > See “The Importance of LGBT Allies” in this volume.

