



## Introduction: Interrupting Expectations

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**T**his book is not a “how-to” manual on LGBT pedagogy. It will not give you specific assignments to use in your classrooms, nor will it provide you with “scripts” to use when talking with students about LGBT issues. Why have you been asked to read this book, then? The three brief comments below, from undergraduate students here at Syracuse University, capture the essence of an “issue,” and the teaching practices that reinforce it, that we problematize in this volume. Take a look at this:

I took French classes last year, and even though my TA seemed very liberal, as part of getting us to speak in French, she’d ask questions like “How would you describe your ideal boyfriend?” and “How would you describe your future plans for marriage and children?” I know it was unintentional, but it felt like my whole existence was erased.

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And this:

I was just in a class that covers progressive issues and we were talking about how gay people are oppressed. It was nice that nobody really said anything derogatory towards LGBT people, but all of the other guys felt compelled to keep saying things like, “I’m straight,” and “but I’m not gay” while talking about these issues. I was almost tempted to make up a girlfriend or something just so everyone wouldn’t know I was gay. It was almost like I had to match up to their masculinity. I really felt like I wasn’t good enough to give my opinions because I wasn’t straight.

And this:

It sucks how the entire burden of making the classroom a safe space can fall on the shoulders of queer students. I would think that a classroom that feels like a safe space would be a more comfortable environment for everybody. I don’t know whether my TAs and professors are scared of dealing with this stuff or if they just have the privilege of not thinking about it.

These students, from a range of academic disciplines, may be in your class this semester. How will you create an environment that acknowledges and respects their experiences and concerns? Here’s something more to consider: despite recent efforts by administrators, staff, students, and faculty here at SU, a particular ideology, responsible for these students’ discomfort, continues to impair our learning and living environments because it often masquerades as something else, thus hiding the way it actually operates. What is this system of beliefs? Did you guess *homophobia*? Homophobia—languages and practices that support discrimination against and fear/hatred of LGBT people—is indeed one part of this pervasive problem. Homophobia, however, is merely the mask through which we glimpse aspects of a larger systemic concern: *heteronormativity*. Efforts to eradicate homophobia largely fail because, as SU faculty Barbara Applebaum points out, “You cannot understand homophobia without understanding heteronormativity.”

“Interrupting Heteronormativity” is grounded in two assumptions: first, that as a teaching assistant, you care about the work you do as an educator; and second, that as

an employee of Syracuse University, you accept your responsibility to work toward fulfilling the mission of the university. A central focus of this mission, as Vice-Chancellor Deborah Freund points out in the “Preface” to this volume, is to provide students with an environment rich in diversity in order to prepare them for living and working in a heterogeneous world. For Syracuse University, this conception of diversity includes *sexual and gender diversity*. Freund writes: “as a leading academic institution—and in particular one that has been at the vanguard of social justice—it is incumbent on us to engage these issues [of heteronormativity], introduce them into our classroom discussions and lead the way to a more harmonious society based on acceptance, understanding, and inclusion” (Preface). As a responsible employee of SU, and as a responsible teacher, it is essential that you understand, acknowledge, and consistently work to interrupt heteronormative classroom practices that silence many students and inhibit the learning processes of everyone on this campus.

Although the term “heteronormativity” is gaining some currency in pedagogical theories and practices, the term is often left out of discussions about “diversity” altogether. Heteronormativity sounds complex, but is actually quite simple. As a term, heteronormativity describes the processes through which social institutions and social policies reinforce the belief that human beings fall into two distinct sex/gender categories: male/man and female/woman. This belief (or ideology) produces a correlative belief that those two sexes/genders exist in order to fulfill complementary roles, i.e., that all intimate relationships ought to exist only between males/men and females/women. To describe a social institution as heteronormative means that it has visible or hidden norms, some of which are viewed as normal only for males/men and others which are seen as normal only for females/women. As a concept, heteronormativity is used to help identify the processes through which individuals who do not appear to “fit” or individuals who refuse to “fit” these norms are made invisible and silenced. Heteronormative institutions and practices, then, block access to full legal, political, economic, educational, and social participation for millions of individuals in the U.S. This anti-democratic, exclusionary ideology undermines the fundamental mission of Syracuse University.

Our purpose in this book is twofold: first, to make visible the everyday, seemingly inconsequential ways in which our classrooms become sites for the reinforcement of heteronormative ideologies and practices that inhibit student learning as well as student-teacher and student-student interactions. And second, to help you learn how to identify,

bring attention to, and work with your students to *interrupt* these ideologies and practices in your classroom. In addition to its focus on “practical” classroom concerns, this book also provides a conceptual framework or *pedagogy*—an approach to or perspective on teaching—for thinking about but also beyond the course content, to include students’ relation to the material, the experiences and knowledge students bring into the classroom, the particular classroom structures, course units, or sequences and their relation to the goals of the course, your role in students’ learning processes, peers’ roles in students’ learning, students’ roles in your teaching, the examples you use, the technology you use, and so on. In essence, your *pedagogy* provides the reasons for why you do what you do in the classroom. The *LGBT pedagogy* in this book provides you with an approach to teaching that foregrounds the ways in which heteronormative ideologies and practices are embedded in all classrooms, and suggests ways to interrupt those practices in order to create the most effective learning environment for all students in your classroom. In a very real sense, then, the *LGBT pedagogy* in this book challenges you to work toward fulfilling the educational mission of this institution, rather than simply fulfilling particular course or disciplinary goals. One of our fundamental responsibilities as teachers at SU is to engage with students in a collaborative effort to examine and interrupt the limits of our experiences, perspectives, and knowledges in order to create spaces for a socially-just vision of the world.

This book had its genesis in the work of the University Senate Committee on LGBT Concerns. Through a 2003 Vision Fund Grant, the committee began a “self-study” of the needs and interests of students, interest and expertise of faculty, and current course offerings in order to evaluate how and where LGBT issues might enter into the curriculum and SU community. As part of efforts to disseminate their findings and ideas, co-chairs Margaret Himley and Andrew London presented on LGBT Pedagogy at the Future Professoriate Program’s Minnowbrook conference in May of 2003. Stacey Lane Tice, Assistant Dean of the Graduate School and Director of the TA Program, coordinated that presentation, and then in conversation with Himley and London, developed the idea to produce a book on LGBT pedagogy for incoming graduate teaching assistants in the fall of 2004. From this conversation, Stacey Lane Tice, Margaret Himley, Andrew London, Adrea Jaehning (Director of the LGBT Resource Center), and Derina Samuel (Associate Director for Professional Development Programs of the Graduate School) formed an editorial board and invited us—graduate students Kathleen

Farrell (Sociology), Mary Queen (The Writing Program), and Nisha Gupta (Cultural Foundations of Education)—to serve as editors.

During our initial editorial meetings, we made the decision to first create the framework and contents for the book, and then send out a campus-wide call for volunteers who would contribute in various ways: as essayists, interviewers, interviewees, researchers, and designers. We also invited graduate students whose work we knew focused on issues of race, ethnicity, socioeconomics, (dis)ability, gender, and nationality to contribute their disciplinary expertise to this volume. We sought undergraduate students whose ideas and experiences could provide concrete evidence for the importance, even necessity, of identifying the heteronormative practices in classroom interactions, assignments, and examples, and working to interrupt those practices through LGBT pedagogical frameworks. And, we invited a cadre of faculty across disciplines to discuss their “LGBT-supportive” pedagogical ideas and teaching experiences with graduate student interviewers.

Finally, throughout our “recruiting” process, we emphasized the necessity for a range of perspectives and identities. We identified very early on that this book, while focused on LGBT pedagogy, could not ignore the fundamental connections among LGBT concerns and issues and those of other communities on campus who struggle for visibility and voice: people with disabilities, people of color, and feminists, among others. Also, in order to demonstrate to you that a *LGBT pedagogy* in your classroom practices is not only possible, but important and desirable for all teachers, including those who do not identify as LGBT, we have included the experiences, ideas, and voices of individuals who do not identify as LGBT. The efforts of straight (or heterosexual) allies to make SU more visibly- and structurally-supportive of the LGBT community has been and continues to be essential to the success of SU’s LGBT community. This book reflects their efforts, as well as the efforts of LGBT-identified people.

Our initial conception of the framework for this volume has, surprisingly, remained consistent throughout the year-long process. The book is divided into three parts: Part One is comprised of ten essays that discuss various aspects of and perspectives on heteronormativity. These ten essays are grouped into subsections: the first section, “Framing the Issues,” does just that. In the first essay, “Heteronormativity and Teaching at Syracuse University,” Susan Adams examines the pervasiveness and invisibility of heteronormativity in our culture through her discussion of concrete examples—from pop culture and from the scientific community—and demonstrates the effects of this on

classroom practices. In “Cartography of (Un)Intelligibility: A Migrant Intellectual’s Tale of the Field,” Huei Lin reflects on the implications of students’ expectations of teacher-training and “diversity pedagogy,” as well as the challenges to her “interruption” of those expectations. Ahoura Afshar, in “The Invisible Presence of Sexuality in the Classroom,” argues for the importance of acknowledging the ways in which ideas about and expressions of sexuality are always embedded in classroom lessons and interactions.

The second section, “Listening to Students,” gives you perspectives from graduate and undergraduate students at SU. In the first essay of this section, “(Un)straightening the SU Landscape” Aman Luthra—a recent graduate from the Geography department—shows us how heteronormativity intersects with the physical landscape of the SU campus. Undergraduates Brian Stout and Rachel Moran collaborated to give us an unsettling but important account of their experiences with homophobic behavior and heteronormative ideologies and practices both in and outside of the classroom spaces at SU in their essay, “Echoes of Silence: Experiences of LGBT College Students at SU.” Another undergraduate, Camille Baker, follows up with an essay describing “The Importance of LGBT Allies” at SU. The final essay in this second section, a collaborative essay by graduate students Eldar Beiseitov and Payal Banerjee, describes “Queer TA’s in the Classroom: Perspectives on Coming Out.”

The third section of Part One, “Engaging Nuances,” delineates some of the depth and nuance to the issues presented in this volume. Nicole Dimetman surveys our cultural landscape in “Understanding Current LGBT-Related Policies and Debates” and provides a thoughtful and thorough explanation of the current status of LGBT concerns in the U.S. In “(Trans)Gendering the Classroom,” Rob Pusch challenges us to think beyond gender binaries to the experiences of transgender students in our very gender-normed classrooms. The final essay, Sidney Greenblatt’s “International Students and Sexuality at Syracuse University,” moves outward to focus on international students’ encounters with heteronormative practices and LGBT identities on SU’s campus. This piece foregrounds the importance of understanding how the intersections of cultural, national, geopolitical, and religious identities affect students’ and our own relation to “diversity.”

The second part of the book, “Responsible Teaching,” is a celebration of the best LGBT pedagogical practices of various SU faculty members. Rather than create an instructional manual on how to “do” LGBT pedagogy, we opted to ask our seasoned faculty how they do it. Almost a dozen interviewers set out across campus to talk with almost two dozen teachers and the resulting hundreds of pages of transcripts were edited

down to one essay by Elizabeth Sierra-Zarella, a graduate student in Child and Family Studies. “Constant Queering: Practicing Responsible Pedagogy at Syracuse University,” plays with the interaction between “query” (question) and “queer” to create a rich “conversation” that highlights faculty’s successes, their struggles, and their understanding of the work to be done. This essay is followed by a related conversation, “Toward a LGBT Studies Minor,” in which members of the Senate Committee on LGBT Concerns discuss the challenges of creating a LGBT minor that could provide a space in the curriculum devoted to sustained inquiry into theories, histories, literature, and activist movements that have formed a politics of identity called LGBT.

“Interrupting Heteronormativity” was designed as a teaching resource guide; we see each essay in this volume as a pedagogical resource meant to inform your teaching practices around heteronormativity. However, we also know that this book is incomplete; many readers may find that its goals require additional work beyond these pages. The third part of this volume, “LGBT Teaching Resources” was designed as a starting point for those instructors who want to learn more about the LGBT community, LGBT pedagogy, and academic work on these areas. Within this section you will find Dean Allbritton’s, “Using Film Inclusively: Or, Queering Your Classroom,” a valuable contribution focusing movies with LGBT content and the possible uses of these in a wide range of academic courses. Following this, we’ve included local Syracuse and Syracuse University LGBT community resources, including political, social, and religious groups, businesses, and meeting spots, compiled by undergraduate Justin Welch. Our list of Online LGBT Resources will introduce you to many national groups as well as help you find LGBT facts and statistics. Reference Librarian Adina Mulliken assembled an abundant list of academic texts that address various aspects of LGBT pedagogy and campus life and her bibliography is included here, followed by a more general list of academic sources addressing sexuality and gender studies. Our resource section ends with a LGBT glossary of terms, to help you maneuver your way through this new world of ideas and terms.

When the editors asked Patty Hayes (Graduate Assistant at the LGBT Resource Center) to write a short reflection on the post-production session for the student writers and editors, and faculty advisors of the *Student Voice* special issue on SU’s LGBT community (May 6-12, 2004), she responded with a reflection that concludes with this comment:

## INTRODUCTION

As I sat and listened to the students, one after the other, talk about their own personal epiphanies, I marveled at their courage and honesty. Certainly, what started out for some “merely” as a class project, was a catalyst of sorts, both personally and professionally. Clearly, the learning that took place in the course of this assignment went well beyond what any syllabus or course description could predict. What more could one ask for in terms of getting an education?

To us, this exemplifies the kind of learning that can happen when students, staff, administrators, and faculty demand experiences that stretch us beyond our “comfort zones” to encounter and interact with others on their terms. Clearly, the students in these Newhouse classes (assigned to produce this special issue) learned about the LGBT community not by demanding that this community explain itself to them, but rather, by listening closely, listening respectfully, and listening responsibly as this community shared with the students what it means to live as LGBT in a world structured by heteronormativity. We hope that you, too, will listen closely, respectfully, and responsibly to the ideas and experiences of students, staff, and faculty presented in this book. This volume is an opportunity for you to challenge and transform your own pedagogical beliefs and practices.

>>We thank Patty Hayes for providing her reflections on the post-production discussions of the *Student Voice* special issue on the LGBT community at SU.