



The Invisible Presence of Sexuality in the Classroom

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Should discussions of sexuality be included in the classroom?¹ The easy answer might be no: it is not ‘relevant’ to the subject matter of most courses except perhaps to those that explicitly engage with human sexuality, such as Child and Family Studies, Sociology, or Women’s Studies. Moreover, this reasoning might go, given estimates that within the general population less than ten percent identify as non-heterosexual, there’s a good chance that in a class of sixty students everyone is straight.

It is this kind of perspective, however, that not only contributes to the invisibility of LGBT students, but it also constructs and reinforces heteronormativity in our classrooms and across campus.² LGBT students (and teachers) ARE present in our classrooms—whether we choose to see them or not—and it is their very *invisible presence* that demonstrates the power of heteronormativity to mask that which does not conform, and to naturalize that which does. This is a problem for both LGBT and heterosexual students and teachers

alike. Heteronormative assumptions and practices regulate the beliefs, behaviors, and desires of ALL of us, restricting the range of possibilities of identification and expression for ALL of us, to such an extent that even momentary and joyful expressions (e.g. the heterosexual man singing “I feel like a woman” in the Chevy commercial discussed by Susan Adams) become sources of discomfort and fear.

Practices of regulation and restriction are integral to creating and maintaining hierarchies of power, which in turn limit the kinds of learning and teaching that can happen in our classrooms. As responsible teachers, we know that our pedagogical theories and practices need to expand the kinds of learning opportunities we provide students, not restrict them. In fact, the administration of this university recognizes the importance of this by emphasizing the link between a rich intellectual climate and a diversity of perspectives and people: “[. . .] diversity in our student body, faculty, and staff has far-ranging and significant educational benefits for *all* non-minorities and minorities alike” (Syracuse University Academic Plan, 2001). Particular strategies to create more inclusive curricula have been developed and implemented in programs and departments university-wide because “[s]tudents in diverse learning environments learn more, and have higher



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Airing and understanding multiple perspectives is a procedure for building knowledge together, rather than a morally charged contest for truth and correctness.

**>Marjorie DeVault
(DeVault, 1999)**

levels of satisfaction and greater degrees of civic engagements. They are better able to appreciate the ideas of others and they are better prepared to enter the world they will lead” (SU Academic Plan, 2001). This diversity of students, faculty, and ideas includes: “race, ethnicity, gender, age, religious beliefs, *sexual orientation*, and physical and mental ability” (Syracuse University Human Resources, emphasis added).

In principle, then, SU values diversity. Taking a closer look at what diversity means and how it is “practiced,” however, exposes some gaps between these principles and actual, everyday classroom procedures, particularly when that “diversity” topic is sexual orientation. It’s

important to note that sexual orientation is a term that does not reference a particular set of people; it's not only about LGBT people, but also non-LGBT, or heterosexual, people. Why is this broader definition of sexual orientation important? Because the sexual orientation of heterosexuality is simultaneously institutionalized and naturalized to the extent that it becomes the invisible norm against which all other sexual orientations, identifications, or expressions are named "abnormal." The issue of "invisibility," then, isn't just about LGBT students and teachers; it's about the ways in which our assumptions about (hetero)sexuality are invisible to us. And we carry these assumptions into our classrooms. As a result, heteronormativity is reproduced, most often unconsciously, through our own everyday classroom practices. Rather than expanding the kinds of learning opportunities we create space for, we inadvertently reinforce a regulated and restrictive framework for understanding the complexity of human sexuality.

II. Ten years ago, research with Syracuse University LGBT students showed that one third of the respondents would have gone to another school had they had sufficient information on the circumstances surrounding LGBT issues on campus (Sherrill & Hardesty, 1994).

Although the situation has changed since then, this statistic may still be accurate to some degree. Bias against those who are perceived to bend the rules of heteronormative behavior pervades SU's campus climate. There are still cases of verbal abuse and physical attacks against LGBT students on this campus: instances of name-calling, of derogatory comments written on doors, dry-erase boards, or computer desktops in residence halls and on campus, and even of physical assault on the basis of perceived sexual orientation (Syracuse University Public Safety, 2004; see also Byrnes, 2003; Wightman, 2003). "Fifty-one percent of bias-related incidents reported last fall [2003] had to do with sexual orientation, while 27 percent concerned gender" (Moritz, 2004). These statistics show that many LGBT students face problems that their straight peers do not. Non-straight students often experience a complex process that involves questioning their sexual orientation, achieving a comfortable sexual identity, coming out, and self-acceptance. They often experience loneliness, isolation, and exclusion in this process. And, they are often targets of homophobia simply because the heterosexual majority claims an exclusive version of sexuality and morality due to the regulative powers of heteronorms. Despite these facts, there is silence in our classrooms when it comes

some point in their lifetime (Laumann et al., 1994). One may have such experiences without having a LGBT orientation. Being unaware of such facts may cause heterosexuals to experience these fantasies with immeasurable anxiety, dreading that they might be gay.

Gay-bashing may also be seen as a way of proving one's masculinity. The pressure to "prove one's heterosexual manhood" can lead to the need to disparage gays in all ways. This kind of sexual stereotyping not only encourages violence against those who are perceived to be LGBT, but also causes psychological dissonance for straight youth, who are endeavoring to comply with rigid gender roles. It is because of these rigid gender roles that sexuality is an issue that all students face, regardless of their sexual orientation.

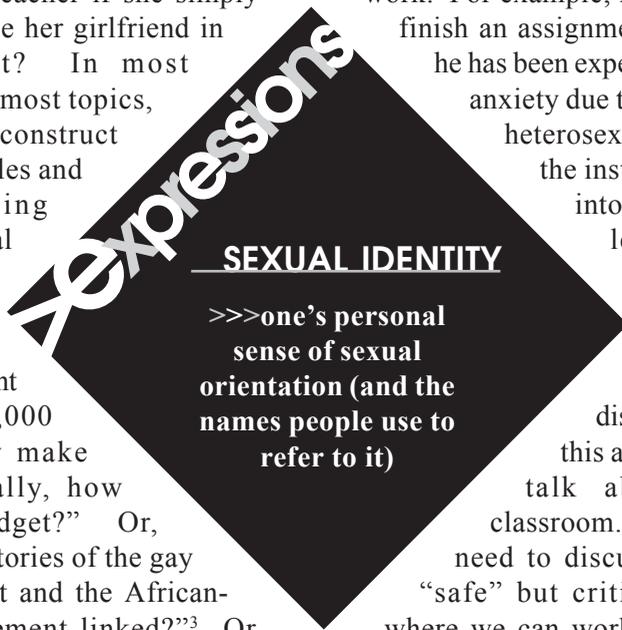
III. Including discussions about sexuality in the classroom, however, does not necessarily mean that it has to be part of the syllabus of each course. What's important to acknowledge and make visible is that heteronormativity is present, even if invisible, in all our classroom interactions: in student-student and student-teacher pre- and post-class banter, and in students' and teachers' physical and verbal behaviors. For example, engineering student Alex Chapeaux describes how a professor's "innocent"

question about his girlfriend compelled Alex to tell this professor that he didn't have one. When the professor prodded him for an explanation, Alex replied: "I [am] looking for a boyfriend" (Rupp, et.al., 2004). Chapeaux observes that "now she is more careful about what she says in front of me" (Rupp, et.al., 2004). In addition to our interactions with students, we need to pay attention to how heteronormativity shapes the scenarios and examples we use to explain material. For instance, in a course on statistics an example that uses "married couples" ignores the fact that non-heterosexual marriage is not legalized or recognized in many places, and that this kind of example simply reinforces heterosexual privilege. An alternate example might be just as effective: "What would be the effect of civil unions for LGBT people on birth rates?" This simple

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but profoundly important change in language interrupts heteronormativity while also affirming that sexuality is a complicated issue. In a language course, an instructor should be sensitive to usage of pronouns: maybe it is not an accident that a bloke refers to 'he' as his partner. Should a student have to come out to the class or to the teacher if she simply wants to describe her girlfriend in an assignment? In most courses, and on most topics, instructors can construct effective examples and problems using non-conventional subjects. For instance, you could ask, "if Dave and Bob want to buy a \$200,000 house but only make \$25,000 annually, how should they budget?" Or, "how are the histories of the gay rights movement and the African-American movement linked?"³ Or, "what is the most efficient building design for non-gender-specific dorms?" These small, but significant, changes acknowledge the presence of LGBT-identified students, and create a more inclusive and effective learning environment. SU student Matt Ward

comments: "It is important to see yourself reflected in what is around you" (Rupp, et.al., 2004). Beyond being consciously aware of and working to interrupt heteronormative assumptions in class assignments, TAs and professors should be sensitive to the effects of a hostile environment on LGBT students' academic work. For example, if a student fails to finish an assignment because she or he has been experiencing stress and anxiety due to homophobia and heterosexism in the dorms, the instructor should take into consideration the legitimacy of this excuse. If issues of sexuality are brought up in a discussion, then view this as an opportunity to talk about it in the classroom. There is a great need to discuss sexuality in a "safe" but critical environment where we can work with students to interrogate the "facts" they've learned about sexual diversity through the images and languages that dominate the media and other social institutions, and show them alternative views. It is often in college when students form a stable sexual identity and LGBT students have their first



“coming out” experience (D’Augelli, as cited in Eddy and Forney, 2000). Some students may experience their friends’ or peers’ coming out and may have questions about it. Some may also be under pressure to comply with rigid gender roles that are expected from them. In addition, because heteronormativity affects all people—LGBT or straight—failing to consider these issues further silences the topic of sexuality. Rather than limiting our perspective to issues of bias or violence against perceived or LGBT-identified individuals, we must understand that, as SU Professor Barbara Applebaum points out, “a lot of [...] 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.”⁴ This norm limits the range of sexual expressions for straight students as well as LGBT-

identified students.

We need to recognize that our role as educators affects students and issues they are dealing with, and address such issues that are generally left out of our class discussions. We can make use of different opportunities—discussions of local events, lectures that present a range of relationships, assignments structured to connect students’ everyday lives with abstract concepts—that arise to create spaces in the curriculum and classroom for perspectives that bend rigid heteronormative views and interrogate the power relations inherent in these views. This can help students understand that difference in sexual identities or orientations is a fact in an environment of great diversity. From this perspective, everyone can learn from differences found in ourselves and others. This is the responsibility of all employees at Syracuse University: to create and sustain an academic and social environment in which diversity in all its dimensions is valued.

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>>ENDNOTES

- 1 > This essay uses various terms—sexuality, sexual orientation, sexual identity—that are distinct from each other, but linked by structures of heteronormativity. The two former terms can refer to sexual practices and/or sexual identity, while the latter term generally refers to how an individual self-identifies. For the purposes of this essay, I’m using “sexuality” as an umbrella term for a range of sexual practices and/or sexual identities, including heterosexuality. The term “gender,” on the other hand, refers to sets of behaviors/identifications that are attributed (by social norms) to females and males. Thus, gender cannot be conflated with sexuality, although it is intricately linked with it. For more specific definitions of each, please refer to the “Glossary” in this volume.
- 2 > Please see the essay in this volume by Susan Adams for more on heteronormativity.
- 3 > I owe these examples to Dean Allbritton.
- 4 > From interview with Barbara Applebaum in Part II of this volume.

