

Queer TAs in the Classroom:

Perspectives on Coming Out

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Introduction

This essay addresses how LGBT graduate students, teaching assistants, and professors feel about discussing their sexual identities in the classroom, and the implications of being out in the classroom. Our essay is informed by a series of informal discussions with LGBT and non-LGBT teaching assistants on campus. These conversations have provided us with a range of opinions and concerns about this topic. Here we present and analyze some of these insights by juxtaposing the fears

and concerns about personal disclosure in the classroom with arguments for this disclosure.

Personal Disclosure and the Teaching Process

One of the arguments against the disclosure of one's identity in the classroom is that the instructor has to maintain a degree of professionalism and formality when working with students. Revealing information about one's personal life or sexual/gender identity may be considered

a detriment to creating a positive learning environment. For example, students who are uncomfortable with LGBT issues may feel insecure about voicing their opinions in the class; students with strong oppositions may aggressively express their views and interfere with the learning and teaching process; students who do not identify as LGBT may believe that the instructor favors queer students and their allies.

Despite these concerns, we would like to suggest that our readers consider challenging these notions. At the fundamental **COMING OUT** level there >>>process of exists an disclosing one's indefinite LGBT identity number of and/or behavior; issues, other can be a lifelong than sexuality, process of selfthat may potentially acceptance threaten students' comfort zones. Concealing one's identity in an attempt to avoid controversy creates a over-protective sterile and classroom. A significant proportion of these fears can be mitigated by solid teaching methods: for example, creating an atmosphere of healthy discussions, or assigning short reflection papers and group

projects that can make students confidant in expressing their personal opinions without feeling threatened or silenced. Well explained and explicit grading and participation policies would ensure fairness for all students, thereby reducing concerns about any type of favoritism.

Hard Science and Coming Out

A second argument against disclosure is that the subject of sexuality may not be relevant to the content of the course. For example, in physics or mathematics the instructor's sexual identity should not matter and adds no useful context for learning the material.

While the issue of sexuality or identity may be relevant in the humanities or the social sciences, it may not only be inconsequential, but also questionable, in other fields. Our position on this concern is that the classroom is not merely about

course content but is also a social environment influenced and shaped by personal interactions. How we learn and how much we learn is often determined by these exchanges regardless of the subject matter. Examples or anecdotes used to illustrate and animate what appear to be objective scientific concepts often rely on

heterosexism and other dimensions of social inequality as demonstrated elsewhere in this book. Furthermore, countless professors and TAs casually speak about what they did with their wife/husband, children, or family during vacations or holidays in the classroom, regardless of the discipline, and this self-expression about family and personal affection is seldom questioned as being unprofessional, distracting, or irrelevant.

The classroom is a microcosm of everyday social life and intersects with all the other things we are, and do, outside of it. In this context, we must remember that students have LGBT family members, friends, allies, and colleagues, and many are themselves LGBT. In this regard, it seems pointless and exclusionary for instructors to maintain heteronormative decorum in the classroom.

Political Agenda

Another argument against discussing sexual identities in classrooms is that instructors' openness about their identities may be interpreted by students as a political statement. The classroom, according to this position, should not be used as a forum for pushing an LGBT agenda.

As previously discussed, reservations against using classroom space and time for LGBT issues frames sexual identity as

being isolated from, and unrelated to, other critical topics of social significance that are commonly and openly discussed in class such as: women's invisibility in mathematics and the sciences, western canonization in art and literature, and so on. Moreover, the classroom does not exist in a vacuum nor is it socially neutral. The classroom is prefigured as a space determined by race relations, gender, (dis)ability, and class relations (who gets to attend college or which people are more likely to earn Ph.D.s and become professors), and as such it is already a political space. In this context, viewing openness about LGBT identities as an imposed political statement serves to queerness and "other" indicates unawareness of these issues.



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QUEER TAS IN THE CLASSROOM

Instructors preoccupied with concerns about concealing their LGBT identity spend an inordinate amount of mental energies preserving the impression of assumed heterosexuality. These inhibitions can obstruct the fluency and joy of teaching. In contrast, openness about one's sexuality can enhance teaching and learning. It is important for LGBT instructors to be "whole" persons in all walks of life: trying to cover this very important aspect of people's lives, specifically if they do not wish to, is not only unhealthy and repressive but also perpetuates heteronormativity. instructors can and should serve us as positive role models for both heterosexual and queer students.

Concluding Remarks

As humans, we are many things at the same time and many of our markers are out in the open. For example, in most cases, we embody and carry our racial and ethnic backgrounds. We are perceived as either



A TA should try to dedramatize the process of coming out in order to avoid silencing certain opinions. I did it in passing, in a nonthreatening, nonaggressive way.

>Teaching Assistant

biological males or females. Our diverse accents, languages, religions, ages, (dis)abilities, or national identities may also be obvious from our words, actions, clothing, names, rituals, and celebrations. The rights or privileges we may or may not have, or the documents we carry on us as "proof" of the legitimacy of our presence in the U.S., simultaneously

speak to the multiple identifiers of our backgrounds and social locations. Given these conditions, why must special care be exercised to shroud instructors' sexual or gender identity?



CLAGS (Center for Lesbian and Gay Studies) contains a wide range of information for any academic interested in scholarly LGBT content.

Should we consciously hide our racial backgrounds or other markers in an effort to be professional or effective teachers in the classroom? Do we question whether being a woman, a black TA, or a young or old person will "distract" students from understanding the concepts in molecular biology or subatomic particles? In SU's

current efforts to create a more diverse and comfortable learning and teaching environment, it is unconscionable to challenge the ability of any teacher to teach effectively based on her or his identity, including sexual or gender identity, sex, race, (dis)ability, age, social class, religion, and/or culture.²

>>ENDNOTES

- 1 > See Susan Adams or Ahoura Afshar, both in this volume, for examples.
- 2 > We would like to emphasize that graduate students, TAs, and instructors reserve the right to decide whether or not to disclose their sexual identity. The decision to do so is individual and must be respected as such.