**Queer Matters**

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| http://www.rethinkingschools.org/img/archive/22_03/RS-22_03-47t.jpg |
| Illustration: Katherine Streeter |

*Educating educators about Homophobia*

***By William DeJean and Anne René Elsebree***

As queer teacher educators we have come to the realization that our pedagogy is a response to what we didn't receive in school. From kindergarten through high school our schooling experience never included us. We knew of no gay or lesbian students, teachers, or administrators. The curriculum we studied made no mention of our existence. Throughout our school days, we rarely heard the words gay or lesbian spoken; rather, "faggot" and "dyke" were the words of choice. In every aspect of our schooling, our story was never told, and if it was told, it was through rumors and lies.

It was no different when we became high school teachers. In the early years of our career, we knew of no gay or lesbian teachers who were out at school. Many times we were told, often by a gay or lesbian colleague, of the dangers we would face if students, administrators, or parents found out we were queer. If a heterosexual colleague needed advice on how to support a gay or lesbian student, or needed help addressing a homophobic comment made in class, he or she often lowered his or her voice or asked to speak in private before starting the conversation. If memories of our own schooling didn't inform us, our colleagues did: It was not safe to mix teaching with authenticity.

Today as teacher educators, it is not surprising to find that much of our teaching focuses on supporting equitable and socially just learning spaces for all students, parents, teachers, and administrators. What is surprising is having so many other colleagues who often do the same. Yet, even within this environment, when the "queer issue" unexpectedly appears in a colleague's classroom — a homophobic comment is made, a student comes out, class members try to find ways to address homophobia that they encounter while student teaching — our colleagues tend to turn to us. Over the years, we have supported their requests to be guest speakers, to individually support queer or queer questioning students, or to provide resources they can use in response to conversations occurring in their classrooms. We are happy to report that many of these conversations occur in open offices, spoken in full voices.

While we were excited to support the opening of the educational closet, unintentionally we became seen as the "residential experts" for all things queer. That is, while many of our colleagues felt versed to conduct class sessions on topics of race, class, gender, ability, or language diversity, anything queer, if addressed at all, was seen as an "issue" for us to cover. When we mentioned this to a senior colleague, she invited us to conduct a workshop to our faculty and staff during a monthly College of Education meeting here at California State University San Marcos. It was our hope that the two hours we were allotted would provide our colleagues time to think, read, and discuss queer matters in education. In addition, by providing materials they could use in their own classes, we hoped to transform queerness from being seen as an "issue" for us to address into a topic that matters for all of us.

**You Gotta Feel It!**

From our vantage point, the exploration of topics of equity and social justice is often approached from a distant, hypothetical "objective" point of view — something to read about, to discuss, to observe, but rarely felt. Because of this, we designed the opening of the session so that the approximately 40 participants could feel the effects of having to hide, cover, or censor what they said. We instructed participants to think about the most important person in their lives and to write in detail about an event that captured why that person was so important to them. Once participants finished writing, they were instructed to get into pairs with one person assigned the role of storyteller and one person assigned the role of listener.

We told the storytellers that they had five minutes to tell their partner, without the use of their notes, about the person and the event they wrote about. The storyteller could make no mention of pronouns, proper names, or any other markers that would indicate the gender of the person in the story.

As storytellers began to tell their stories, we watched as a few began to avoid eye contact or lower their eyes as they struggled to find words to tell their story. Others sat with arms crossed, in a pose that suggested heavy thinking. A few others simply stopped speaking all together. Watching this happen reminded us of how we must have looked to our high school students when, early in our career, they would inquire about the simplest of topics such as, "Are you married?" or during a class session asked, "What did you do over the weekend?"

At the conclusion of the activity, we posted two questions on the overhead for partners to discuss. The first asked them to share about their individual experience with the activity. The second instructed them to talk about what the experience caused them to think about. When we opened for a large discussion many of the storytellers shared how frustrating the activity was for them. They reported the difficulty they experienced filtering their language, thinking through each word before it was spoken, understanding how the altered language changed the meaning and intention of their story, and ultimately managing their anxiety to share a brief story. As one colleague said, "I learned more about the difficulty people face just to be who they are." Another person shared, "I learned how important language is."

We reminded our colleagues that the activity might have felt frustrating, but as the British teacher Clare Sullivan has written, "Psychologically there is a world of difference between choosing not to tell your colleagues, and being worried they will find out." For that reason we hoped that our workshop would offer ideas, support, and resources for their own classrooms.

**Anticipating Resistance**

Like many teacher education programs, our college's mission statement focuses on social justice. We are lucky to be surrounded by many colleagues whose work reflects this mission. Yet our experiences as both students and now teachers in higher education had taught us to expect some resistance to our presentation. For example, when we chose queer matters as the focus of our graduate dissertations, we struggled to find advisors. During that search, we were warned that queer research might limit where we could get jobs, *or worse*, be posted on our résumé forever. Today, working in the university setting, if we come out in class, we can expect a few students to post negative evaluations on us because of our supposed "gay agenda." Or, most recently, when our research plan was reviewed, we were asked to consider finding a word to replace "homophobia," because the reviewer deemed the word too negative.

These experiences informed us of the need to think through all aspects of the presentation. For example, we had an outline of the presentation reviewed by a few faculty members asking them to highlight areas they thought might invite resistance. And a few days before the workshop, we asked colleagues who we knew would be supportive of the workshop, to sit at different tables around the room. We wanted them to consider taking leadership during an activity, to respond to any negative comments they heard, or to simply help each activity move along smoothly. We thought these strategies would lessen any formal resistance we might face during the workshop. Yet when in the middle of the workshop, our colleague, a gay Latino, told us he was excusing himself from the rest of the presentation, it was clear we hadn't planned for everything.

**Words Matter**

"Can I say homosexual, or should I say gay?" "What does queer mean?" or "What is the difference between transsexual and transgender?" are some of the questions we were often asked. To help answer these questions, we began our next activity by providing each participant with a word or definition that we found in Gay, Lesbian, Straight, Education Network's *Talking the Talk: A Glossary of LGBT Terminology and Match-up Game*. Once each person had his or her word or definition, he or she was instructed to move around the room looking for his or her counterpart. For instance, if a person's word was "heterosexism" they were to walk around the room until they found someone they believed had the correct definition. This process became a lively interaction as our colleagues discussed and debated their understanding of the terminology and matching definitions.

As we watched and listened to these discussions, we noticed no one lowering their voice, nor needing to "speak in private" to have the discussion. We wondered how different our schooling experiences would have been had we heard the words gay or lesbian used. Or how different high school teaching could have been had we had role models, let alone colleagues, who would speak with us about queer matters in public using full voices. Once teams agreed they had the correct partner, we provided them with a packet with a complete list of words and definitions.

We debriefed this activity, by instructing participants to individually record what the activity caused them to think about. As people finished writing, we asked them to share their thoughts with colleagues seated at the same table. When we opened up for a large group discussion, a few colleagues spoke of the importance of vocabulary in addressing topics of social justice. For example, one participant admitted to avoiding the topic in class "because I do not know what language to use." Another person thanked us for providing her with a tangible list of terms that were respectful and descriptive of queer identities.

**Knowledge Matters**

We wanted our colleagues to feel knowledgeable about queer matters in education, but to also have access to resources they could use for their own professional work. To do this, we found articles on a range of topics that we believed would do just that. For example, we used California Assembly Bill 537 so that our colleagues would learn more about this specific law which protects queer youth and staff from discrimination and harassment in schools; GLSEN's "One Umbrella, Many People" to learn more about diversity found within the gay and lesbian community; and Nick Divito's article about being a gay male high school teacher.

We placed each colleague into evenly divided teams with each team assigned one article to read. Once an individual had completed his or her reading, we asked groups to discuss and take notes on four essential questions: What is the article about? What should others know about this article? What did the article cause you to think about? How could you use this in your classes?

One person commented to his group that he was reminded "how classrooms and schools are not safe environments for all students and the emotional and academic implications of that." While another person pointed to the "extent to which this issue is ignored or overlooked in our schools and the destruction that can result."

As they finished their discussions, we divided participants up so they were grouped with colleagues who had read different articles. Each person was given two minutes to share the answers to the four essential questions.

Watching our colleagues interact in the readings and discussions brought back memories of being students in our teaching credential programs. Like the majority of our schooling, the teaching programs we enrolled in made no mention of the gay and lesbian community. Looking back, it is clear that as queer people, we were simply not supported to negotiate our identity within a high school environment. Because of this, our early years of teaching were spent in search of resources, healthy role models, and a professional community that supported us. We wondered how different our educational journey could have been had just one of these articles appeared or had these discussions taken place during our teaching preparation programs.

To conclude the readings, we hung poster paper around the room and provided Post-it notes to our colleagues. We instructed participants to post a thought, a question, an idea, or a response they had from the readings and discussions. Once completed, participants were given time to walk around the room reading the comments. One person commented that her "students can benefit by having information and experiences and real dialogue on this topic." Another person wrote simply that the discussion of the articles caused her to see that "there are many people thinking and acting in ways that can interrupt homophobia ...and that we must all do our part."

**An Ongoing Journey**

We were invited to conduct the workshop because many colleagues had asked us to be guest speakers, to help respond to homophobic comments, or to assist in supporting queer students. Today we have had colleagues send us email requesting additional resources for their courses, stop us in the hallway looking for support in using the activities they learned in the workshop, or come to our offices to discuss the successes and challenges they have faced using the reading in their classes. From feedback we continue to receive from many of our colleagues, the workshop established the understanding that the lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender community are not "issues" for only the queer educators to address but rather *matters* for us all to explore.

That exploration has continued for us as well. Our colleague, who left the presentation, later told us that as a gay man of color, he felt excluded from the presentation. And though we had asked him months earlier, he did not remember being invited to participate. This experience highlights other important topics of queer matters. The queer community is heavily portrayed as being young, white, and male. Because of this, we consciously discussed our white privilege from the start of the workshop and used a range of resources throughout the presentation. Yet, because of our colleague's feedback, we continue to wonder if who we are might reinforce that mindset. In addition, this incident again underscores the need of effective and ongoing coalition building between all members of the queer community. And finally, while our heterosexual counterparts are free to publicly disagree, we wonder whether all queers in the faculty need to be seen as getting along.

After the workshop, we were encouraged when a colleague said, "We don't have time to wait around for LBGTQ peoples to step-up... This is 'our' issue. These are our students."

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