

# On Diversity in Teaching and Learning: A Compendium

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## Diversity and Education: Sexual Orientations

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### I. Introduction

The Faculty Teaching Excellence Program has created an important set of guides on diversity/-ties and on fostering diversity in the classroom. The pamphlets in the series "On Diversity in Teaching and Learning" address a variety of issues, techniques, and contexts, which are all relevant to my topic. For example, the exercises devised to expose unexamined assumptions and challenge race or gender stereotypes could be adapted to initiate discussion on sexual orientation.

I take my brief to be somewhat different: to focus on a wider range of issues positioned around one of the parameters of diversity, **sexual orientation**. This is not because sexual orientation is ignored by the other pamphlets in the series; on the contrary, it is not infrequently mentioned, just as it is prominent as one of the parameters of difference the current campus-wide diversity initiative expects each unit to consider as it develops its diversity plan. However, there is no disguising the fact that almost without exception, sexual orientation is the parameter which is likely to cause the most discomfort, to judge from public and private discourse at least. Likewise, while it is now illegal to discriminate on the basis of "race, color, national origin, sex, age, handicap, creed, religion, or veteran status," controversy rages over the question whether discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation ought also to be prohibited by law. (Recent Colorado history makes it possible to say this without fear of contradiction or the accusation of hyperbole.) Legal protection against discrimination on other grounds emerged over time, and from our vantage point in history it is not possible to predict whether future Americans will look back on this period of contestation over "gay rights" the same way we now look back on the civil rights movement, say, or the fight for women's suffrage, or whether they will perceive it as something that might have been but never was, like the presidency of William

Jennings Bryan. It is not my aim to enter the arena of this ongoing debate, much less of other controversial issues, such as legal recognition of same-sex marriages or equal access to adoption for gay men and lesbians (or even equal access to custody of their own children). Rather, it is to offer fellow teachers a series of observations on pedagogical issues that arise in connection with this topic precisely because it is controversial.

The "Faculty Teaching Excellence Program" has named this current series "Diversity in Teaching and Learning." Quite rightly, for only in the larger context of "learning" does "teaching" occur in the first place. I reject a division of labor according to which teachers teach and students learn. Rather, we all, teachers and students alike, learn over the course of our lifetimes, not least of all by the dialogue and debate that is explicit or implicit in every classroom, on every university campus, and in our democratic society. Although teachers may—and I emphasize "may"—have a grip on more and more accurate information than their students, it is not sufficient for the teacher merely to pass on a quantum of that information nor is it possible or even desirable for the teacher to pass on one "right" interpretation of that information. For teachers do not hold some static truth to be inculcated, and while those who give the impression they do may be regarded as memorable teachers by some students, in my book they fail at the most basic mission of education, which is the fostering of an insatiable spirit of inquiry in others as well as the nourishing of that spirit in oneself.

For the very reason that sexual orientation, what it is and what its ramifications in our society are, currently provokes disagreement among many and discomfort in some, it is an ideal topic for intellectual inquiry and debate, and thus for learning without end. I often think of this in spatial terms: the word that seems best to describe the trajectory of open-ended inquiry and debate this kind of life-long learning demands is "out"—all puns intended. This is the "out" of the Latin behind education, a leading outward or away from one's initial positions and ignorance, quite clearly the opposite of *in-doctrination* of any kind. This is the "out" of the outback and outer space—the

unknown that sparks the kind of exploration and discovery, expeditionary, scientific and imaginary, our culture prides itself on valuing and encouraging. And of course it is the "out" of "out of the closet," a turn of phrase that has now entered mainstream diction and is being used of all sorts of revelatory self-identifications besides the original application of the metaphor, that of being openly gay/lesbian. The links between all these "outs" have yet to be explored and fully realized. What I am proposing is that today, in our society, the issues behind and surrounding what it means to be "out" can serve as a healthy provocation to education, the life-long process of moving our minds and imaginations ever further "out" along a potentially infinite number of axes.

Note: I address the gay/lesbian distinction briefly in IV, below. For efficiency, I occasionally use either word to stand, by way of example, for both. Moreover, as will become clear, I do not exclude either bisexual or transgender as categories for discussion. I also employ "LesBiGay," which is coming into increased currency and covers many if not all possibly relevant bases.

## II. Sexual Orientation and the Curriculum

The most obvious way sexual orientation as an issue can serve pedagogical purposes is as a theme of intellectual inquiry in a college course. For example, courses on gay and/or lesbian literature are not uncommon on college campuses today. Anyone who has thought about devising such a course immediately faces the question: what is gay literature anyway? What defines literature as lesbian? Is it explicit theme? The author's sexual orientation? If so, does this have to have been conscious on the part of the author? The reader? Such questions should be built into the course and, at least in more advanced discussions, lead to consideration of "sexual orientation" itself. Is it omnipresent as a recognized variant in human societies, and are the different cultural expressions of variations along the parameter of the relative genders of individuals involved in erotic liaisons and attractions roughly congruent and comparable? Or is each culture's recognition (or lack of recognition) of difference along this

parameter more a product of that culture's construction of difference altogether?

Indeed, to carry that last question one step further, is the whole issue of insisting on sexual orientation as a significant difference, in societies and as somehow defining for individuals, a product of a peculiar set of institutions and circumstances in late nineteenth-century Europe and North America? The word "homosexual" was after all first attested in English in 1892 (a fact of which Halperin 1990 makes a great deal, esp. pp. 15-18). This is in brief the debate between "essentialism" and "social constructionism" engaging many scholars of Lesbian/Gay/Bisexual/Transgender Studies. Both positions come in a variety of shades and intensities. The dispute itself would make a stimulating course in intellectual history or philosophy, for some maintain that this controversy is but another instance of the debate about the status of essences which has been lively since Plato and formed the ground for the European scholastic controversy between nominalists and realists. (So Boswell in Duberman et al. 1989 17-36.)

The status of such distinctions needs to be interrogated cross-culturally as well as historically. Are such lines drawn in other cultures? What is the validity of our own categories when applied to other cultures? How do our society's views and expectations affect our very perceptual apparatus as observers? Indeed, how have they, picked up on by our informants, limited the information to which we have been given access and even in some cases begun to alter long-standing traditions and institutions? Anthropologists are particularly attuned to this last set of questions.

My main point is that to bring sexual orientation into the classroom as a stable and seemingly self-evident *thing* is begging the question. Sexual orientation must be approached under the sign of the question and must itself be the object of the intellectual quest. Nor need this inquiry be limited to courses on gay or lesbian literature. Indeed, it is, at some level, unavoidable (except that it has so often been avoided) in many courses on the traditional canon. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, contrasting the issues involved in gay and lesbian studies with debates we have become familiar with in the cases of Women's Studies

or, say, African-American Studies and with the type of meditation that goes back as far as Virginia Woolf's on Shakespeare's (imaginary) sister, poses the following mind-benders: "Has there ever been a gay Socrates? ...a gay Shakespeare? ...a gay Proust?" (1990 52). Is the issue legitimately avoidable when we teach Shakespeare's sonnets? In a more introductory class, which might not approach those difficult poems but rather stick to more standard dramas, it will be up to the teacher to complicate the students' reading of, for example, *Romeo and Juliet*. However desperate the teacher is for his/her students to "make connections," for them to read this play (or see the Zeffirelli film) as if it were several weeks of *Two Teens of Verona* probably does more intellectual damage than not reading it at all. That is, I know, a very strong statement, but it is bred of the old Socratean conviction that citizens must be disabused of their readiness to equate what seems with what is. Here the issue is one of anachronistic projection. If the students are not challenged to consider that the universe of erotic desire represented on the Elizabethan stage cannot be understood without reference to the entire system of Elizabethan erotics, from Marlowe and his boys (and his *Edward II*) through Will with both young lord and dark lady all the way up to the virgin queen herself, they will remain as complacently unreflective about their own positions with respect to media-presented eroticism and sexuality today. Not to mention the conventions of Elizabethan acting, since Juliet will have been played by a boy in girl's clothes, so that on the stage even the most "heterosexual" of relations had homoerotic overtones.

I have offered this extensive example because it happens to be common and closer to my area of expertise than others, but there is hardly a field (taken broadly) that cannot be made to yield some story, and some history, by our questioning what sexual orientation means in its terms. I would not say that this rejected stone should become the new universal cornerstone of intellectual inquiry, but it is well recognized that focusing on the marginalized in any field is an efficient way to figure out how the central coordinates of that field are devised and drawn. (Compare in experimental science the importance and challenge of outliers, singularities, and apparent

anomalies.) Obvious case studies could include: sexual orientation in psychology, sexual orientation in biology, sexual orientation in the law, sexual orientation in politics, sexual orientation in ethics and religion, where "in" means "as it is conceptualized by." By looking at the field "sexual orientation" one asks not merely how gays and lesbians were treated, but also to what degree heterosexuality is intrinsically the norm in the standard view of these various perspectives, and what dislocations (if any) this brings in its wake.

### III. Sexual Orientation as Pedagogic Provocation

In teaching, as in understanding, simplifications and handy schemas are valuable first steps, but such first approximations are only valuable insofar as they serve as stepping stones towards more informed and more nuanced views. The fact that the debate about many aspects of sexual orientation is both current and obviously complicated means that it can frequently be made to exemplify for students the complexity of representation. Other pamphlets in this series have suggested media analysis, and representations of gay men and lesbians also lend themselves to analysis. What makes discussion even more layered in the case of gay men, lesbians, and bisexuals is that there is not merely a question of *how* they are represented publically (e.g., stereotyping or mainstreaming), but whether they should be, or even are being represented. This all came out in the debate, no more than a few months back, about the advertisement for a furniture store which presents two men discussing "their" home and design preferences.

We need to help our students interrogate a whole set of representational practices that, when we note their distortions and asymmetries, appear less mimetic than constitutive of what we take to be "reality." To exemplify distortion, one might consider why the TV commercial I saw a few weeks ago for an upcoming adventure film of Hercules presented him as a "lady's man"—I'm *not* making this up—while Classical antiquity knew him as equally muscle-bound, yes, but also a lover of boys and, in one famous episode, a cross-dresser. It might be interesting for students to consider

why these episodes are not likely to show up soon on commercial TV. Asymmetries are abundant, and students can be asked to look out for them and bring them in for discussion. For example, why is it that news reports of gay people always identify the person(s) involved as "homosexual" (even to the point of redundancy, as in "Laura, Eve's homosexual lover"), while never identifying anyone as heterosexual (as in "Mr. X, her heterosexual rapist" or "Baby Y, abused by her heterosexual parents")? On a deeper level, why is "sexual orientation" itself always taken to "mean" LesBiGay, rather than a set of categories which leads to "straight" just as much as to gay, lesbian, or bisexual? Here one compares "gender studies," still largely regarded as "women's studies." At this point it might be productive to introduce students to the concept of marked vs. unmarked as an analytical tool not limited to linguistics.

To return to the case of the furniture store advertisement, why does it remain outrageous to so many, or at least to such vocal people, that the two men shown might constitute a gay couple? The controversy itself could and should become a topic of discussion. Although the very currency of the issue presents particular challenges to teachers to insure fairness and respect for all participants in the discussion, whatever their positions, that currency almost guarantees the discussion will be lively, even passionate. That passion can be harnessed so that students will articulate their positions with ever greater force and precision—they will have to, because there will be vociferous opposition on at least some of their points. I like to think of "sexual orientation" as a powerful "provocation" to students to question a whole range of conventional assumptions, valuable whether the outcome for the individual student is a change of mind or a clearer and more informed presentation of his or her original position.

#### IV. Groups and Individuals

It often happens that when LesBiGay people are identified as a "minority," somehow, before you know it, the discussion has become one in which the "rights" of one minority are being pitted against those of another. This is another arena in which

contextualizing may help move debate from smoke- to light-generating. The passion evident behind the opinions expressed should be able to be redirected towards an inquiry about "rights" as an abstraction. Is the business of rights in a democratic society a zero-sum game? There is certainly no reason to indulge in "comparative victimization": in a properly nuanced discussion, acknowledging the historical suffering or disadvantages of one group in no way lessens respect for the suffering other groups, or a particular other group, has experienced. Egregious victimization may, indeed, must be noted, but victimization less egregious is not thereby rendered trivial. What may emerge more clearly is that there are certain patterns of discrimination, repression, stereotyping, and pseudo-science that are remarkably similar even when the groups against which discrimination is directed differ markedly.

Another line of inquiry may be to examine whether we do (or, a different question, whether we should) have rights as individuals or members of a group? In either case, how are groups of all sorts defined and what is their ontological status? How have they been conceptualized in other times and in other cultures? It is in the context of these last questions that a field of inquiry one might call "comparative minorities" is constituted. Introducing "sexual orientation" as a parameter of difference to be explored along with race, gender, ethnicity, class, and so forth, will productively complicate the discussion in so far as sexual orientation is among the most controversial. But of course, just how settled are the other modes of classifications? Exposing the historical and cultural contingencies of certain aspects of traditional or recent classifications of the human population is itself likely to provoke anxiety, even hostility, to the degree that affiliation with one or more of various groups is constitutive of many individual's sense of identity. But if examination and exploration of the history and status of such group identifications cannot be undertaken in a university setting, with its multiplicity of voices and perspectives, where can it be?

This kind of ever-subtler analysis can be fostered as well by discussion more narrowly focused on Lesbian/Gay/Bisexual/Transgender issue. As the proliferation of "/"'s suggest,

there are complexities involved in the constitution and subdivision of what used simply to be called "homosexuality." How has this space been marked and named, and by whom? What are the similarities and differences between "gay" and lesbian"? How does the label "bisexual" fit in the picture? What further complexities does the category "transgender" add, and how do they all challenge a whole range of assumptions about sex and gender? Again, what is "sexual orientation," and to what degree does "choice" (and at what level or levels) have to do with it, as indeed, with other expressions of sexuality or even other aspects of human identity?

That the field as a whole generates more questions than answers suggests that it is a ripe area for investigation, inquiry, and discussion. The controversial nature of some of the questions may inspire students to take a more critical view of various empirical studies, demanding to be satisfied about sampling methods and statistical analyses, and questioning whether even established correlations necessarily imply causation. The whole set of questions sketched above should help students move away from more elementary analysis in terms of static, all-too-frequently binary oppositions, and help them articulate descriptions and analysis that can accommodate degrees, scales, historical and cultural difference, and overlapping and intertwining "allegiances."

## V. Addressing Anxiety in the Classroom

A recent pamphlet reminded us never to allow any individual or group in the classroom to "feel responsible for the ills of society." And no individual or group is responsible. Given the breadth of debate, this could, in different eyes and classrooms, cut different ways. But focusing, as I would, on the resistance to inclusion and acceptance of les/bi/gay/transgendered individuals, one is immediately confronted by the topic of "homophobia." What is it, and why are they saying such terrible things about it? Others have queried its status, and I cannot here enumerate, much less examine, all their objections. I would begin merely by observing that characterizing anyone's position as

"caused" by "homophobia" is not very helpful, either as an intellectual argument or as a pedagogical maneuver. In fact, it is counter-productive. Furthermore, it seems to me that the concept of "homophobia" itself deserves to be put under the same question mark as "sexual orientation." Is it a psychological phobia like claustrophobia? Psychologists and psychoanalysts may be able to provide a better answer, but to my knowledge, it is not a clinically-recognized disorder. And if it were, is it not telling that none of those who are "diagnosed" with it are rushing for treatment? It seems in fact that this is a figurative phobia, where outspoken negative opinions about homosexuality and homosexuals are figured as an illness affecting members of society on a case-by-case basis. It is noteworthy that in no other case is anxiety about or abhorrence of a subset of society—neither racism nor anti-Semitism or anti-Catholicism, for example—termed a "phobia." The most closely comparable word, "xenophobia," is applied not to individuals but to entire countries or cultures, and is understood to describe neither a psychological condition affecting individuals nor a personal pathology but a cultural norm. And so, let's face it, is what we, ducking the issue, carelessly call "homophobia." To be sure, hostility to homosexuality may be more acute in certain individuals, but it is nonetheless a widespread cultural norm. When we hear voices of resistance, we aren't hearing the voice of pathology but of society, or a sizable portion of it. Whether or not we replace "homophobia" with some (admittedly awkward) phrase like "anti-homosexual prejudice" doesn't alter the fact that "homophobic" discourse and practices, like all discourse and practices, are learned. It is the business of teachers and students alike to examine that discourse and those practices, their sources and ramifications. Doing otherwise, and avoiding the responsibility of engaging in true debate by charging that one's interlocutor is incapable of unprejudiced participation in discussion (even when it may be true) is not what should be going on in a university classroom.

## VI. Towards an Open Classroom

Authors of a recent pamphlet on the multicultural classroom suggest an exercise whereby all participants, on the opening day of class, identify their identities according to a range of parameters. One can imagine some people for whom saying "lesbian" is no more problematic than saying "Louisianan," but given the status of the debate, there will be others for whom this would be difficult. More important, whatever the speaker's view, there are almost sure to be listeners who will quickly forget what state a person comes from but will think of nothing but her sexual orientation every time she opens her mouth to speak. It is this that makes the question of "coming out in the classroom," already fraught for many people, so difficult, both in practice and in analysis. There are individuals who wax dogmatic about this, but I find such approaches unrealistic. I am torn between idealism (as much of what follows will strike some readers) and reality both as I have experienced it and as others, who have had more unhappy experiences, have relayed it to me or described it in print.

Since teaching is personal, I should say that I personally, as a teacher, don't focus on the problematic of "coming out" in the classroom. If at a certain point in the life of a class that means in a relevant context referring to my partner and using a masculine pronoun, then so be it. Before proceeding with this line of thought, let me acknowledge that I am well aware that my experience, and style, is not independent of my authority in the classroom, which was always that of the white male product of "elite private institutions," as they are called, now further bolstered by the title "Professor." Clearly, the impact on the classroom dynamic and how students feel they could respond would almost certainly be different if a female and/or minority assistant professor or teaching assistant came out. (On the other hand, I know of a Boulder faculty member quite similar to me who has received FCQ's with "fag" scrawled over them—ironically, the teacher is heterosexual.)

More broadly, I no longer regard "coming out" in any context as something a gay person has to do over and over again. "Coming out" is a very important process for gay and lesbian people in this society, but it is the society that makes "coming out" necessary and largely shapes it. Many other gay people agree with

me that in the mid-1990's, "coming out" is no longer the point: it's "being out," whether we make a point of it in a particular situation or not. Indeed, acting as if being out is no big deal can itself be the message and the point. One cannot hold this point of view without regard to the communicative situation in which one finds oneself. It would be as absurd for me to imagine that because one group of students happened to learn I was gay, all subsequent groups would know it, as it would be for me to expect all subsequent classes to understand the Latin passive periphrastic because I taught it to a previous year's class. Furthermore, in the larger world, given the current climate and cultural norms and expectations, not being out is still tantamount to being not out. Being straight is the unmarked category.

All teachers, gay or straight, need to be attuned to the fact that a student's or students' "coming/being out" in the classroom can change classroom dynamics as radically as if the teacher had done so. However, in my view, the issue isn't whether the teachers or students are or come out. The real issue is: Is the classroom open, explicitly and implicitly, to the diversity of sexual orientations? A teacher does not have to be gay or lesbian to make his/her classroom an open one. (Indeed, I have known closeted homosexual teachers who constructed much more oppressively heterosexist classrooms than any number of enlightened heterosexuals. One might say in their defense that these teachers were probably terrified of exposure and were themselves targets of the antihomosexual discourse of the society, but by passing as straight—in part by passing on that discourse—they did much damage, particularly to the gay/bi/lesbian students who were in their classes.) The more open the classroom, the less impact anyone's being out will have on classroom dynamic.

A classroom open intellectually in all dimensions is likely to be an intellectually exciting and challenging space for students and teachers alike. What defines such an open classroom as far as sexual orientation is concerned, and how would you go about creating one? You would begin by not assuming that everyone is heterosexual, neither everyone alive today nor everyone who has ever lived. In every subject, from mathematics to economics to language courses, some of the hypothetical

examples could involve a girl and her girlfriend or boy and his boyfriend. In many subjects, one will be able to add diversity simply by reporting what has hitherto been obscured, whether it's Michelangelo's sonnets (which may change how we look at his statue of David) or Hercules' boyfriend or Gertude Stein and Alice Toklas. You wouldn't say "members of the opposite sex" as if that's the only way humans bond and ever have. Most importantly, you wouldn't assume all your students are straight. You thus wouldn't force them to choose between, on the one hand, coming out and falsifying your assumption and, on the other, remaining silent and letting the lie stand.

As above, there's no reason why the very problematic of the issue shouldn't be a topic for discussion, both in material and in classroom interaction. Why did someone go to the trouble of editing Michelangelo's poetry to remove him from the ranks of the sodomites in the first place? Why is it that identifying oneself as lesbian or bisexual is considered by most people a revelation? If the atmosphere suddenly gets frosty—and colleagues have frequently reported this fallout from coming out—or, as one colleague eloquently phrased it, "What happens when the teacher [or another student] becomes the text?" we have another golden opportunity to talk about cultural expectations and practices. There is no reason these should go unexamined, especially if we regard the university, as I certainly do, as the place where nothing should go unexamined.

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#### Ralph Hexter Biography

Ralph Hexter hails from Cleveland, Ohio. He went to Harvard College, where he majored in English literature (with a special emphasis on the medieval period). Upon hearing that there was such a thing as Comparative Literature, he determined to take it up, since under that rubric he could also include the French, German, Latin, and Greek he also studied. He was graduated *magna cum laude* in 1974, leaving Harvard with both the first Bowdoin and Briggs prizes in English and a fellowship to study in England. He read Classics and Modern Languages (Greek, Latin, and German) at Corpus Christi College in Oxford, taking First Class Honours in 1977 after spending as much time on the continent as possible and adding Italian to his list of languages. He then entered the graduate program in Comparative Literature at Yale University. A grant from the German government supported his research in Munich for two years (1979-81) and he returned to Yale to start teaching in the Classics department in 1981, receiving his Ph.D. in 1982. He taught at Yale for ten years, both in Classics and in the then newly-formed Humanities Major, leaving as Associate Professor. He held administrative posts within several departments and programs and served for one year as Acting Associate Dean of the Graduate School. He came to the University of Colorado at Boulder in 1991 as Professor of Classics and Comparative Literature and Director of Comparative Literature. He has served as Director of the Committee on Medieval and Renaissance



Studies and Acting Chair of the Department of French and Italian, and on many too many committees. He taught as a guest lecturer at the Folger Institute and has been an NEH Fellow of the *Villa I Tatti*, Harvard Center for Studies in the Italian Renaissance in Florence. He is the author of *Equivocal Oaths and Ordeals in Medieval Literature* (1975), *Ovid and Medieval Schooling. Studies in Medieval School Commentaries on Ovid's Ars Amatoria, Epistulae ex Ponto and Epistulae Heroidum* (1986), *A Guide to the Odyssey. A Commentary on the English Translation of Robert Fitzgerald* (1993), and articles on Vergil, Horace, Goethe, and a variety of topics in Medieval Latin. He is co-editor of *Innovations of Antiquity*, published in 1992 in Routledge's series "The New Ancient World." He is frequently asked to lecture on his work (most recently in Italy and Berkeley), and his current projects include Homeric interpretation and Vergil, classical and medieval literary history, and Renaissance Latin drama.

Ralph Hexter began college right after Stonewall, and from nearly the beginning he was engaged in gay, lesbian and bisexual issues. He was involved in the formation of the

Harvard-Radcliffe Gay Students Association (as it was then called); his senior year he was its second president. At Yale he participated in the faculty/student/staff group which hosted multiple national conferences, established a research fund, and convinced the university to extend spousal benefits to same-sex partners. Since Harvard days he has worked closely on many projects with Professor John Boswell of Yale's History Department, author of *Christianity, Social Tolerance and Homosexuality* and the recent *Same-Sex Unions in Pre-Modern Europe*. With Professor Boswell he organized a conference on "AIDS and its Metaphors" for the Kinsey Institute, and he continues to work both on and off campus at the intersection of academic and diversity issues, from serving on the Chancellor's Standing Committee on Gay, Lesbian, and Bisexual Issues to editing, translating and speaking widely on two fifteenth-century Latin plays about the entrapment of a homosexual priest. He and his partner of fifteen years live in the mountains and enjoy hiking, cross-country skiing, riding, and—lest there be no truth to stereotypes—opera.