International Journal of Sexuality and Gender Studies, Vol. 5, No. 2, 2000

"Everything I Didn't Want to Know I Learned in Lit Class": Sex, Sexual Orientation, and Student Identity

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If discussing sexuality with college students is difficult, discussing sexual orientation often seems impossible. However, given the prejudice and societal violence against lesbians, gays, bisexuals, and transgendered persons, students need to understand the harmful effects of homophobia and heterosexism. This article offers a review of the literature on teaching about sexual identity, nonthreatening strategies for effecting change, and suggestions about fiction and poetry that might be used in the classroom to raise awareness. Secondary sources provide additional techniques and resources.

KEY WORDS: homophobia; heterosexism; teaching; sexual orientation; lesbian literature.

Sex. Who understands it—or can even define it? Whether from President Clinton or students queried in a recently censored medical study, the responses sound eerily evasive: oral intercourse, they claim, is not sex. Although the media discuss sex all the time, getting students to talk about it in the classroom is problematic. In the late 1980s, when a British feminist scholar attempted to open discussion of sexuality among first-year U.S. college students in a writing and literature course as part of the analysis of Lanford Wilson's (1979) play *5th of July*, she was met with total silence (Buck, 1987, p. 31). The situation, at least in eastern North Carolina where I teach at a large regional university, has not changed all that much over the years. Yes, students are much more willing to talk about sex—just not *their* sex or sexual orientation. However, that same scholar later found a nonthreatening way to approach the subject. In teaching Alice Walker's (1982) *The Color Purple*, she devised the strategy of asking the students to talk about *why* they found it so difficult to discuss sex. What she found was that they had been taught

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it was both an inappropriate topic for school and an embarrassing one because it was so personal. And she soon realized that they lacked a level of language that was neither clinical nor moral. Using these student comments then allowed her to lead into the yet more prickly topics of Celie and Shug's lesbian relationship and the ways in which race, sex, and sexual identity are intertwined.

Since Buck's article, "'You better not never tell nobody but God. It'd kill your mammy': Obstacles to Talking about Sex with Our Students," was published in *Feminist Teacher* more than ten years ago, numerous articles have articulated similar problems in teaching about sexism, homophobia, racism, and other intolerant attitudes in college classes. Clearly, sexual orientation is one of the most sensitive areas for discussion. Because twentieth century literature is far more open and uncensored about sex and race than earlier literature, problems of silence and hostility tend to surface in the modern and contemporary literature courses as well as in the Women's Studies classes I teach. As an open lesbian who does not necessarily "come out" in every class, I have experienced the same type of negative teaching evaluations that caused Ian Barnard (1993), a teaching assistant "for a lower division class in 'Third World Literatures' at a relatively prestigious research university" to conclude that

> the fact that my students saw my anti-homophobic comments and my lesbian and gay readings of some of our required texts as "irrelevant" to the course shows not only that they do not see this kind of work as academically legitimate, but also that they are not hearing the words "lesbian and gay" in any of their other classes (pp. 50, 51).

Obviously, we must discuss the topic of sexual orientation, but *how* we approach it is crucial. As the beating death of gay student Matthew Shepard and the Littleton, Colorado high school massacre have shown us, the effects of intolerance can be fatal. (One of the taunts reportedly flung at the members of the "trenchcoat mafia" was that ultimate insult to males: "fags.")

Columnist Ellen Goodman (1999) warns us about the underlying societal assumptions that might justify violence against those who differ from the majority, particularly in sexual orientation. Analyzing the $25 million verdict against the "Jenny Jones" television talk show, she claims the jury bought into the "subliminal message" that

> murder is a predictable result of humiliation. Humiliation is a predictable result of allowing a straight man like Jonathan Schmitz to be "ambushed" on television by a gay man like Scott Amedure (p. 19A).

The difficulty for those of us who teach is that our students too often internalize this subliminal message that gay or lesbian identity justifies violence, a message directly or indirectly promulgated in middle and high schools:

> A 1993 report from the American Association of University Women Educational Foundation found that 85% of the boys and 87% of the girls surveyed said they would be "very upset" if called **gay** or **lesbian**. Not even the category of actual physical abuse provoked a reaction this strong among boys (Pohan and Bailey, 1998, p. 3).

This finding is supported by a random sampling of high-school health teachers, which found fewer than half teach about homosexuality, and those who do, cover the topic in less than one class period (summarized in Tice, 1995, p. 47). To overcome such prejudice, Michael J. Reiss (1997), writing in the *Journal of Moral Education*, favors teaching about homosexuality and heterosexuality in secondary schools (to students age 11–16/18) and suggests a number of strategies to better inform students and allow them to develop their own values (pp. 343-ff.).

What may be more surprising than the dearth of information available in public schools is that "sexual orientations, despite their historical and consistent presence in society, are generally not addressed in university curricula" (McQuarrie, 1998, p. 164). And when they are, it is usually in psychology or sociology courses dealing with deviancy. Therefore, it is heartening to see two recent articles: one recommending inclusionary strategies—like a case study utilizing differing sexual orientations—for college courses in management (McQuarrie, 1998,) and one offering a sample course design for counselor education (Whitman, 1995). A most helpful book is *Overcoming Heterosexism and Homophobia: Strategies That Work* (1997), edited by J. T. Sears and W. L. Williams, which includes essays and bibliographic resources. Essays in this collection offer a plethora of suggestions on workshops and other ways that teachers might help people "unlearn" prejudices, including the use of experiential activities like "brainstorm[ing] slang words or stereotypes, participat[ing] in guided fantasies, or role-play[ing] scenarios related to the lives of lesbians and gay men" (Myers and Kardia, 1997, p. 198). Another useful resource is the 1993 "Bibliography for an Anti-Homophobic Pedagogy: A Resource for Students, Teachers, Administrators, and Activists" (Barnard, 1993, pp. 51–52).

While in a quarter or a semester we cannot hope to eliminate intolerance, by preparing ourselves we can help our students think critically about human difference and learn to understand, if not always approve, those differences. One way of preparing ourselves is to ask some questions about our teaching. Do we, for example, assert (or let our students assume) our heterosexuality by using the pronoun "us"—while using "them" for gays and lesbians? When students mention relationships, do we assume they are heterosexual rather than homosexual ones? Do we feel relieved when students turn the topic away from sexual orientation? (Adapted from Verrone and Whitman, n.d.) Once we have sensitized ourselves to our own heterosexist assumptions, we can begin with our students.

One way of breaching the barriers, used by a colleague who teaches a course on the German Holocaust, is to have each student interview every other student in the class and provide written reports. These reports often focus on how student expectations and stereotypes have been replaced by a truer understanding of others. Although it is unlikely that a gay or lesbian student will "come out" to a peer interviewer, the fact that each student gets to know the others will make it easier for him/her to accept someone who later identifies as homosexual. Yet another

strategy for raising student consciousness is to give students the Heterosexuality Questionnaire (in Peach, 1998, pp. 81–82). Asking questions like "What do you think caused your heterosexuality?"; "If you have never slept with someone of the same sex, is it possible that all you need is a good gay lover?"; and "Why do heterosexuals feel so compelled to introduce others into their lifestyle?" can emphasize the absurdity of some of the societal preconceptions about homosexuals. And as a teacher of literature, I favor stories, poems, and plays that include various sexual orientations or focus on the lives of gays and lesbians—like Pat Parker's (1991) poem "My Lover Is a Woman," which reveals discrimination from all her and her Caucasian partner's communities: African-American, lesbian, and white. One invaluable source for such literature is Lillian Faderman's (1994) anthology of lesbian literature of the past three centuries, *Chloe Plus Olivia*.

Although topics like rape, incest, and sexual harassment call for sensitivity in presentation, most students have read about, have personal knowledge of, or know someone with personal experience of these situations. Raising the fact of homosexuality is quite different, because of homophobia and religious intolerance, of course, but also because—aside from the couple of (usually closeted) gay or lesbian students—the class is certain that homosexuality has nothing to do with them or their families and friends. And the most powerful weapon of homophobia is the belief that "I don't know any homosexuals." As Rosenblum and Travis (1996) explain:

> whether in race, sex, sexual orientation, or social class, dichotomization yields a vision of "them" as profoundly different and promotes the leveling of sanctions against those who associate with "them." Ultimately, dichotomization results in the stigmatization of those in the less powerful category, i.e., it provides the grounds by which whole categories of people may be made the objects of contempt (pp. 23–24).

And that contemptuous attitude, as Karen Yescavage and Jonathan Alexander (1997) remind us in "The Pedagogy of Marking: Addressing Sexual Orientation in the Classroom," is the first step toward discrimination. As two people who are openly gay in the classroom, they admit such "marking" of themselves "inadvertently allow[s] our straight students to bracket off our sexuality and resist thinking about how our 'difference' questions their 'normalcy.' It is exactly such notions of 'normalcy' that we wish to problematize" (p. 113). One of the ways they do that is to recognize that heterosexual teachers do indeed "talk about or at least make pointed insinuations in the classroom about their intimate lives" (p. 114), and that their job as teachers is to make clear that one's sexual identity, whether gay or straight, *is* a public subject position as well as a private one. This is perhaps the hardest idea for students to understand: that the personal *is* political, and that our attitudes, our very selves, are shaped by our subjective experiences as biological beings in a specific history and culture.

That biological identity is the first question we ask about newborns (is it a boy or a girl?) indicates not only male privileging but the binary way in which we think

of sexual identity—something that transgendered individuals like Billy Tipton, born Dorothy, who had five wives and lived as a male jazz musician for forty years until 1989, have called into question. As her/his biographer, Diane Wood Middlebrook (1998), comments:

> A perpetual improviser, never out of character, Billy drew her material from the gender fundamentalism of everyday life: the general belief that gender difference arises from anatomical sex differences in human beings and that gendered behavior is the natural outcome of sex difference. Playing a sequence of roles historically reserved for the "opposite" sex, Billy demonstrated by her accomplishment that gender, unlike sex, is in large part a performance: *she* was the actor, *he* was the role (pp. 10–11).

The question of whether sexual identity (much less sexual orientation) is primarily biological or socially constructed is a vexed one. Each view has its proponents. Perhaps what is most important is raising students' awareness that their binary concepts of sex and gender must be expanded so that we see sexuality and gender expression on a continuum, with numerous possibilities. In a composition class, a colleague discovered how Bernard Cooper's 1951 essay "Burls" (a child's amalgam of "boys" and "girls") presents a way of easing students into a discussion of sexual identity: is the "boy" who wanted to dress in women's clothes a cross-dresser, a transsexual, a gay male? And does the label really matter more than the pain?

Fortunately, the question of sexual identity has engaged the creativeness of many recent writers like Great Britain's Jeanette Winterson. Her 1992 novel *Written on the* Body, which I assigned in my senior/graduate English course, provided an instructive lesson as to the intensity of our need to label persons by "sex." The unnamed narrator, who has played the field and withheld commitment from his/her previous lovers, falls deeply in love with a married woman who returns the love but who is discovered to have cancer. As students attempted to identify the sex—and therefore the sexual orientation—of the narrator whose partners are identifiably male and female, they relied on what appeared as the narrator's stereotypical "masculine" and "feminine" behaviors: risk-taking (the many lovers) vs. commitment (to one woman); aggression vs. self-sacrifice (the narrator hits the lover's husband, who has lied about her need for cancer treatment, but had earlier given up seeing the lover as the price demanded by the doctor-husband for agreeing to treat his wife with a new therapy). In deciding the narrator's sex, the class split virtually down the middle, revealing more of the students' values and desires than those of the author. Their inability to pin down the narrator's sexual identity caused consternation, at least partially because without that knowledge it was impossible to pinpoint the narrator's sexual orientation. But of course, Winterson (who is openly lesbian) is making the point that biology is *not* destiny, and such labels merely impede our knowledge of the essence of a person. The narrator's obsession with the lover's body as it may be ravaged by the cancer, and the narrator's suffering in being denied intimacy with the object of that love, are the real subjects of the text.

I find that stories often help students to cope better with a topic like sexual orientation. As Jacqueline Jones Royster (1996), talking of white scholars telling the stories of African Americans, says, "In order to construct new histories and theories . . . stories must be perceived not just as simple stories to delight and entertain, but as vital layers of a transformative process" (p. 35).

Especially effective, in my view, are works in which sexual orientation is the background to a different theme. In Jane Rule's (1981) story "Middle Children," for example, she treats the lovers not primarily as lesbian but as "middle children" who learned early to be caretakers of their siblings so that in middle age they buy a much too large house and lovingly "adopt" the young men who rent their rooms, bring their girlfriends over, and pour out their tales of woe to sympathetic ears.

Night Songs, Penny Mickelbury's 1995 police procedural novel, worked in much the same way in a mystery fiction course I taught recently. The interracial lesbian love affair—of a police lieutenant who heads the Washington, D.C. hate crimes unit, with an African American reporter—is subordinated to the search for and discovery of the serial killers preying on prostitutes by striking with a hunting knife. Despite one or two student objections to a brief sex scene, because the novel introduced students to a protagonist whose sexual orientation is secondary to the mystery, most students seemed to understand both race and sexual orientation as integral *components* of the female hero's (hera's?) identity rather than as separable (and in the case of sexual orientation) *chosen* elements.

In a classroom of diverse but majority white students, it is often difficult to get students in the racial or sexual minority to speak about their experiences with discrimination. Marge Piercy's 1976 novel *Woman on the Edge of Time*, with its sci-fi view of a future in which the sources of racism, sexism, and homophobia no longer exist, offers a beginning point for discussion. Piercy contrasts a potential dystopic New York, where heterosexual slavery and class exploitation reign, with another potential future: the utopian Mattapoisett, in which all hierarchies have been dismantled, even the biological power of giving birth, and who a person sleeps with depends on personal choice, not societal pressure. The protagonist, Connie, is particularly resistant to such bisexuality, much like our students, though she gradually learns to accept difference. To facilitate the ensuing discussion, a friend of mine who works with AIDS health education and does diversity training suggested dividing the class into "focus" groups, and when a sensitive issue is going to be discussed, giving them time first to talk among themselves, venting their opinions without teacher intervention or interdiction.

Another useful exercise, especially in teaching understanding of the problems caused by racial, ethnic, or sexual orientation bias, is to assign students in each group the task of presenting the *opposite* experience from their own. These focus groups can then be used to examine specific topics over the semester that combine their personal experiences with the literature or other material for analysis.

As teachers, we obviously have to take into account a number of factors, including what *Women's Ways of Knowing* (Belenky *et al.*, 1986) makes clear, that

frequently women learn differently from men, through praxis rather than theory. So we need to use a variety of approaches. Some students (often male) become nervous in a classroom where authority is de-centered, when reader response theory opens the class to the idea that there is no single truth or "right way" of reading a text. And student expectations of women teachers as maternal rather than professional figures can create obstacles, which Lana K. Rakow (1992) observes in her review of the research (p. 10). As one former colleague complained, she has students question her grading in ways her husband never encounters. A similar experience of students' gender expectations is recounted by two lesbian teachers, one who identifies as butch—Deb—and one as femme—Michelle. They found that students expect Michelle to be compliant in giving extensions and bending rules whereas the students expect consequences from Deb for late papers. And while they want sympathy for their personal problems from Michelle, they instead seek to try out their solutions to their problems on Deb (Gibson and Meem, 1996, pp. 15–16).

Although we can't—and shouldn't try—to be all things to our students, we *can* help them navigate the turbulent waters of sexual discussion. We can prepare students for examining sensitive subjects. Before teaching Toni Morrison's *Beloved* (1987), for example, we can talk about the real conditions of slavery, especially for slave women, and the ways in which motherhood differed for them and privileged white women. Frequently fathered by white masters, the children of slave women might be sold "downriver" without their mother's knowledge, much less consent. Before having the class read a novel that joins sex and violence like Mickey Spillane's 1948 detective story *I, the Jury*, we can talk about how violence is eroticized in everyday culture, in videos, TV, movies and on the world wide web as well as in print. Before showing a video on rape or sexual harassment, we can talk about both preventions and remedies. Before having the class read a humorous coming out novel like Rita Mae Brown's *Rubyfruit Jungle* (1973), or one in which a teenager turns to black magic and then suicide rather than face his homosexuality—Randall Kenan's *A Visitation of Spirits* (1989)—we can discuss the ways in which heterosexism and homophobia can determine whether we get an education, progress in our careers, find a life partner—even continue to live.

In sum, there are many ways of approaching sexual, racial, and sexual orientation topics; we ourselves have to find the ways that seem most workable. And if it happens that after a semester of trying to teach tolerance and understanding, you receive a student evaluation, as I did, that says, "As a white, Christian female, I was deeply offended by Dr. Farr's slack attitude on the dangers of lesbianism and free sex. She spent far too much time discussing the black culture and slavery when slavery has not been around for over 100 years. . . . everyone born today, black or white, has the same opportunity to receive an education and at no time does one race deserve special priviledges [sic]," we must remember those whose minds we have opened to new understandings—those who have said "thanks for the class. I learned so much". As Audrey Fisch concludes in her 1998

article "On the Discomforts of Teaching [African American literature]," "we need to recognize that if we think carefully and talk openly about what really matters in society today, there may be painful moments. These moments are a challenge and an opportunity, not the disasters we might sometimes think they represent" (p. 43). Yescavage and Alexander (1997) reach much the same conclusion:

> As much as we propose open discussion of sexual orientations, we recognize that such discussion is often problematic and frequently very discomfiting, both for ourselves and for our students. To think critically is to risk an unstabling of the socially prescribed "self" in the pursuit of greater self-awareness. This is as much a part of the feminist pedagogical perspective as is encouraging and validating voices of the marginalized "other". Indeed, pushing our own boundaries and comfort levels, as we suggest pushing them in regard to static notions of homosexuality and heterosexuality, is a large part of discovering the personal and political possibilities of teaching (p. 121).

First we change ourselves. Then we change our students. Only then can we change society.

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