

Compulsory Heterosexuality in a University Classroom

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This article tells what happened when I took a step toward challenging compulsory heterosexuality with prospective health education teachers, by incorporating critique of heterosexism and heterosexual privilege into an undergraduate course in teacher education at a Maritime university. I describe how an approach intended to counter inherent heterosexism in school curricula came face to face with the social relations of the classroom, the beliefs of prospective teachers, and prospective teachers' understandings of the organization of teachers' work. I question the possibility of liberatory pedagogy in teacher education, and ultimately in schooling, when, prospective teachers are establishing their own identities and are concerned about job security.

Dans cet article, l'auteure décrit ce qui lui est arrivé lorsqu'elle a voulu mettre en question l'hétérosexualité obligatoire des futurs éducateurs en hygiène en incorporant la critique de l'hétérosexisme et du privilège accordé à l'hétérosexualité dans un cours de premier cycle faisant partie du programme de formation des maîtres d'une université des Maritimes. L'auteure explique comment une approche visant à contrer l'hétérosexisme inhérent aux programmes scolaires l'a amenée à se pencher sur les relations sociales au sein de la classe, sur les croyances des étudiants-maîtres et sur la façon dont ils voient l'organisation de leur futur travail. L'auteure met en doute la possibilité d'une pédagogie libératrice dans la formation des maîtres et, au bout du compte, dans les écoles, lorsque les futurs enseignants établissent leur propre identité et s'inquiètent de leur sécurité d'emploi.

School health education in Canada supports a primarily conservative agenda. Health education is typically grounded in Western, patriarchal, abled, middle-class, heterosexist assumptions. In school health curricula the experiences of women, Native peoples, people of colour, people with disabilities, lesbians, and gay men are usually either ignored or distorted and thereby constructed as Other.

Feminist and critical theorists call for liberatory education. This does not mean "adding on" the experiences of so-called minority groups to a predominantly white, male, middle-class, heterosexist curriculum. As Ursula Kelly (1990) points out, "it is necessary to critique those forms of subjection informing our human subjectivities" (p. 36). She writes of the pain and struggles as well as the joys of such difficult work—a way of being as a teacher fraught with tensions and inevitable contradictions. She describes the focus of her own work as follows:

Teaching to and for social change is only possible as and when we teach for subject change . . . [necessitating] that each of us critiques the place of our own practices as teachers . . . [while setting up] a terrain of sharing through tension, difference, and critique, a terrain on which are acted out the moments of race, class, gender, sexual, regional and abled constitution which are our subjective and social selves. (p. 37)

I was recently reminded of my own contradictory positioning in Celia Haig-Brown's (Bryson, de Castell, & Haig-Brown, 1993) account of a nine-day "gender equity" course we team-taught in the summer of 1991. She writes about our efforts as white, heterosexual women to address anti-essentialism by inviting to class resource people from so-called minority groups:

We exploit our friends. We call [on] them to be what Suzanne [de Castell] calls performing parrots. "Step right up: a real live Lesbian. She walks and talks and you can ask her anything you want." We expose our friends to ignorance and abuse: "Black woman, First Nations woman, Woman of Asian origins, Lesbian. Come to my class and enlighten us." When is a token not a token? How many differences, how much diversity to really address this theoretical position called anti-essentialism? How many lives? How much pain? (p. 48)

In personal communication Suzanne de Castell described her talk to our "gender equity" class (de Castell, 1991) as "personally awful." Impressed with her eloquence and humour, I was unaware of her pain. Our "real live Lesbian" powerfully affected my understanding of feminism: I was shocked to hear her describe how lesbians were not women as far as feminism was concerned. I learned from her that it was up to me to critique my own heterosexism and to incorporate this critique into my own practice.

While recognizing that forms of oppression intertwine in complex and mutually determining ways (de Lauretis, 1990), liberatory pedagogues are beginning to describe their concrete struggles with heterosexism. Joseph Neisen (1990) describes heterosexism as:

a form of oppression incorporating a belief in the inherent superiority of one form of loving over all others. The belief then is used to justify dominating those who do not subscribe to the privileged practice . . . [it] is the continual promotion by major social institutions of heterosexuality and the simultaneous subordination of all other lifestyles (that is gay, lesbian and bisexual). . . . When our institutions knowingly or unknowingly perpetuate these prejudices and intentionally or unintentionally act on them, heterosexism is at work. (p. 36)

In her widely cited work about the power of compulsory heterosexuality, Adrienne Rich (1980) writes: "This assumption of female heterosexuality seems to me in itself remarkable: It is an enormous assumption to have glided so silently into the foundations of our thought" (p. 9). She says that failure to examine

heterosexuality as an institution would be akin to failing to admit the variety of forces that maintain the economic system of capitalism and the caste system of racism.

Activists have challenged schools to confront heterosexism and homophobic acts of individual and institutional violence against lesbian and gay students and teachers (Khayatt, 1990; Rofes, 1989; Trenchard, 1992; Wicks, 1991). They argue that curricula continue to reflect heterosexist assumptions, homophobic slurs are commonplace, and the school system has failed to support lesbian and gay students and teachers. Fearing reprisals, many lesbian and gay students and teachers continue to hide their sexuality, often with disastrous personal consequences. The activists call upon gay, lesbian, and heterosexual teachers and administrators to work actively on behalf of lesbian and gay youth and teachers.

But efforts to deal with heterosexism in schooling come face to face with opposition from communities entrenched in heterosexism and accepting of homophobic violence. Social institutions such as schools, the nuclear family, the church, the medical and legal systems, and the media reinforce what Helen Lenskyj (1991b) describes as “heterosexual hegemony” (p. 62)—a form of hegemony kept in place through intimidation and violence. Not surprisingly, James Sears (1992a) found prospective teachers unwilling to become proactive on behalf of lesbian and gay students and teachers.

Health education researchers have drawn attention to the social construction of heterosexism in school health curricula and classroom practice (Fine, 1988; Lenskyj, 1991a, 1991b; Patton, 1990; Sears, 1992b; Whatley, 1988, 1992). Generally, these researchers have raised questions about the invisibility of bisexual, gay, and lesbian sexuality, and the stereotypical portrayal of lesbians and gay men in school health curricula and resources; they support a vision of school health education that celebrates diversity of human sexuality, counters heterosexism and homophobia, politicizes lesbian and gay issues, and legitimizes the experiences of lesbian and gay students and teachers.

Feminist academics who deal with the politics of difference in their classrooms have documented their experiences (Ellsworth, 1989; Lather, 1991; Lewis, 1990; Orner, 1992). Each searches in her own way to understand student response to liberatory curriculum. Collectively their work shows how efforts toward emancipatory education can still reinforce relations of dominance. Others have focused specifically on how the topic of sexual identity is taught in women’s studies courses (Crumpacker & Vander Haegen, 1990; Fonow & Marty, 1992). But little attention has been given to classroom experiences of educators attempting to challenge heterosexism in mainstream or health education classrooms.

This article is about my attempts to incorporate critique of heterosexism and heterosexual privilege into an undergraduate course in teacher education at a Maritime university, about what happened when I took a step toward challenging compulsory heterosexuality in a university classroom with prospective health

education teachers. I have chosen to re-present this aspect of the course because for me it illustrates the difficulties I faced attempting to do critical pedagogy in a social climate that is at best conservative and at worst sexually repressive (Williams, 1990).

The course I teach is intended to prepare B.Ed. students to teach health education. It is compulsory for physical education majors, but other students take it as well. I structure the course around student presentations and assigned readings intended primarily to raise critical questions about health education, including the ideologies inherent in traditional approaches to health education. I expose contradictions in curriculum materials that explicitly intend to educate students about their bodies, yet are silent on the relationship between the body and lived experiences of oppression. I point in particular to silences related to gender, ethnicity, disability, socio-economic status, and gay and lesbian existence, showing how health education contributes to systemic racism, sexism, heterosexism, and prejudice against persons with disabilities, and has a synergetic effect.

I have selected four critical episodes in my teaching of heterosexism as a curriculum issue. These experiences occurred the first time I taught the course, and at the beginning of my first full-time position in a faculty of education. The ten women in the course were elementary, home economics, and physical education majors. The nine men were all physical education majors. All students but one had entered the B.Ed. program directly from high school, and all were in either their third or final year of a four-year program.

CRITICAL EPISODE 1

I first introduced the topic of heterosexism in an introductory talk about the politics of curriculum. To illustrate a point, I asked students to evaluate any health education book for sexism, ethnocentrism, ageism, ableism, and heterosexism and to present their findings to the group. The students selected books ranging from stories for pre-school children to university-level textbooks. The students' presentations were well done, evincing critical thought; the students seemed to have a good grasp of this level of political criticism.

Whereas most students could show how health education texts promote heterosexism by ignoring, marginalizing, or distorting gay, lesbian, and bisexual existence, classroom discussion revealed that some students viewed this as acceptable given the reactionary climate of the province. Although not all students participated in the discussion, those who did framed their argument as follows. They said that an anti-heterosexist pedagogy would be seen as promoting homosexuality; many people believe homosexuality is morally wrong; and teachers who attend to heterosexism in the curriculum are at risk because of objections from parents and school boards. Thus, although students could name heterosexism some students believed an anti-heterosexist pedagogy was inappropriate.

CRITICAL EPISODE 2

A second critical episode occurred in response to selected readings about social relationships in classrooms. I asked students to respond in writing to an article about homophobia in schooling published by the British Columbia Teachers' Federation (Wicks, 1991). In the article Michael Wicks writes about his experiences as a gay student and teacher in a homophobic school environment, and calls for an end to the conspiracy of silence surrounding homosexuality and to the destructive expression of homophobia in schools.

The students' written responses varied according to gender. Most men and a few women questioned Wicks' statistics on the number of people who define themselves as lesbian or gay. Some men said Wicks exaggerated the extent of homophobia in schools, a response I read as a rejection of lesbian and gay existence and a denial of homophobia.

In contrast, most women and a few men supported Wicks' argument. They wrote with a tone of care and concern, and an openness about the issues presented. Women students were also more willing to critique their own practice. One woman thought lesbians and gay men should be accepted, but said she did not know whether she approved of them showing affection in public. She noted that this was a contradiction she would have to resolve.

Almost all the women and men said that prejudice against gay men and lesbians was wrong and that lesbian and gay students and teachers should not be discriminated against. But these views were often presented with the caveat that they held "as long as homosexuals do not force their 'lifestyle' on others." This response suggests that students supported the heterosexist stereotype that lesbians and gay men relentlessly attempt to recruit "heterosexuals," and that students accepted heterosexuality as given rather than as a political institution.

Whereas some students said homophobia should be discussed in the classroom, most of these students said it would be best dealt with either in a social studies classroom under the topic of "Human Rights," or by a public health nurse. This response suggests the students believed that dealing with heterosexism and homophobia in the classroom was a matter of choice, that it could be taught as an isolated topic, and that it was something that should be dealt with by someone else. As well, most students reasserted the arguments presented earlier: to do something about heterosexism and homophobia in school curricula would be seen as promoting homosexuality and teachers' jobs would be in jeopardy.

CRITICAL EPISODE 3

A third critical episode occurred when I dealt with approaches to teaching "Human Growth and Development"—Department of Education discourse for sexuality education. We discussed how the curriculum promoted sexism and heterosexism by ignoring lesbian sexuality and dealing with gay sexuality only

in the context of AIDS. During the discussions, vocal students reasserted their opinions and concerns about teaching about gay and lesbian existence.

A junior high school teacher, whom I invited to speak to the group about her approach to sexuality education, confirmed the students' opinions. She said it would not be safe for teachers to talk about lesbian and gay sexuality in the classroom, that local communities were "very conservative" and she advised the students not to deal with such "controversial topics" in the classroom. Thus, rather than challenging the students' assumptions, the teacher reinforced heterosexist ideology. This experience further isolated me from the students.

CRITICAL EPISODE 4

While teaching about sexuality education I received a notice from a university-based lesbian and gay men's speakers' bureau offering to provide speakers for faculty who wished to include gay and lesbian content in their classrooms. I grasped the opportunity—though Suzanne de Castell's comment about the "performing parrot" rang in my ears—still believing that it would be helpful for my students to hear about experiences of being lesbian or gay from those directly involved. I thought the presentation would raise the students' awareness about the necessity of dealing with homophobia and heterosexism in schooling.

The presenters, Anne and Jim (not their real names), talked about their developing awareness of being lesbian or gay, their experiences coming out, and their present lives. Anne described how she came to terms with her unhappiness in a heterosexual relationship and how her experience of being lesbian interconnected with her experience as a black woman. Jim said he internalized homophobia and repressed his sexuality for 20 years. He said that he regretted not having had the opportunity to learn acceptance of his sexuality when he was in school.

The presentation was one of the most moving I have experienced. The students listened intently, but asked few questions. The three women and two men who did speak asked relevant and thought-provoking questions. I resisted filling in the silence, allowing the students space to participate in their own time. I assumed the silence meant students were overwhelmed, as I was, by the power of the presentation. I felt sure that the presentation had helped clarify any hesitancy among the students about the importance of anti-heterosexist practice. I left the class exhilarated, though exhausted from the intensity of the session.

The next day I asked for feedback about the session with Anne and Jim. I was totally unprepared for the students' responses. A male student began by saying that the students had been talking together after class. He said something like "We think that the presentation promoted homosexuality . . . and we think it is wrong." I remember the "we" clearly. Another male student said that he could not see what the presentation had to do with teaching, and another student said that he could not relate to Jim's description of his having no sexual relations for

20 years. This prompted laughter. I asked the students if anyone else had any other opinion. No one answered. The attack continued for almost 30 minutes. I do not remember anyone expressing a positive response. I have never been so aware of my body—my heart pounded as I listened to the angry words.

At the end of the session I told the students I needed time to think about their comments. I asked them to put their thoughts in writing, so that I could think further about what they had to say.

Reflecting on the experience, with the help of a woman colleague, I realized that only a small group of students had dominated the conversation. Most were men. I remembered that a woman had tried to interrupt, but a man had stopped her by shouting, "Well that's not what you said before!" As the same student had become more angry and contradicted himself, I had heard another woman ask, "What is it that you are saying?" I had not picked up on the women's comments. I had not questioned the man student's use of "we." I had assumed that all the students agreed with those who spoke.

Many written responses to the presentation were contradictory and confusing. Most students either began or concluded by saying that prejudice and discrimination against lesbians and gay men is wrong. But buried in the texts of some of the men's responses were such comments as "The presentation turned my stomach" and "It doesn't interest me to hear about love lives that aren't normal." Some students also said that all their friends agreed with them, that they knew someone who had been "hit on" by gay men, and that they had been taught by lesbian and gay teachers and considered them to be their "best" teachers. It seemed to me that these students were trying to justify or deny their homophobic responses to the presentation.

I was particularly interested in the written responses of the students who did not speak during the classroom discussion. Although these students did not openly disagree with the negative responses of the vocal students, their responses were more positive. Typical comments were: "I was uptight at the beginning, but I became more comfortable during the talk"; "I felt self-conscious and afraid to say anything"; "I learned a lot from the presentation"; "I lost my fear of homosexuals." A few of these students used the written response to analyse their own homophobia. Women students wrote:

My reaction at the beginning of the talk was both ignorant and immature. I was surprised at my reaction because I have studied about homosexuality before. Sometimes I feel open-minded about this concept but other times I feel so closed off. It is difficult to change the way one has been socialized and topics such as this raise confusing moral questions about what one considers is right and wrong.

It was interesting to see how our behaviour changed with these guest speakers [as compared] with others. . . . It was evident [that there was] homophobia in the classroom as very few people spoke or asked questions.

A man said:

I thought that I was going to spend the entire class listening to two people tell us how wonderful homosexuality is for everyone. I soon lost that idiotic attitude. During the entire presentation they did not try to promote or impose homosexuality. They were clearly there for our benefit and tried to give us a better understanding of what it is like to be a homosexual. I felt ashamed that I had prejudged the speakers. I did not realize the severe [added later] pain.

Clearly the discussion after the presentation would have been quite different had these students found the classroom a safe place in which to speak.

In my written responses I asked these students to tell me why they did not speak during that classroom discussion. One woman wrote:

I felt intimidated to speak up against the strong opinions raised by some. It is still hard for many of us to speak freely about homosexuality — our silence did not mean we agreed with the negative responses, we are still a little uncomfortable.

A man wrote:

I felt my opinions were best left untold. Many times they deviated from the class majority. Thus I felt it better to remain silent.

Another woman was more explicit:

I didn't ask many questions because I had an irrational feeling that if I did people in the class might wonder if I was gay. That sounds crazy but I feel that this might be the reason why others didn't speak.

Both women and men reasserted their fears about talking about anything to do with gay or lesbian experience in the classroom. They spoke about the threat of repercussions from parents. A woman student wrote:

I do not think that students should be taught about homosexuality in schools because I do not feel that society is ready to accept it. We are still at the point where parents or guardians must sign permission slips before their children can take basic sex education. And in [this province] can teachers honestly teach that homosexuality is acceptable when many people in these communities refer to homosexuals as "queers" and "fags" and in many cases assault them for this reason only?

Although this is only one of a possible 20 versions of what had happened in the classroom, it raises questions about the possibility of liberatory pedagogy. My work is shaped and limited by my experience as a heterosexual woman. Although teaching about heterosexism poses some threat to my being in the world,

particularly in the untenured world of academe, as a heterosexual woman I speak from a safe place relative to women who define themselves as lesbian (Doe, 1991; Miss is a lesbian, 1989).

My heterosexual privilege was clearly revealed in Suzanne de Castell's response to an earlier draft of this article. I wrote "I have a feeling that my lesbian sisters will have lots to say about how I approached the study of heterosexism," and I asked "How might a professor who is lesbian or gay have dealt with heterosexism in the classroom?" She suggested that I talk not about how my lesbian sisters might do it differently, "but how they wouldn't do it at all, and if they did, and failed (as they would) they couldn't tell the STORY of that failure. It's just not a matter of difference here but of existence at all." Of course—so obvious now—how much more is there to unearth?

So, limited by my own heterosexist myopia, I am in a contradictory position of benefitting from heterosexism while attempting to challenge heterosexist practice. My experience fits Elizabeth Ellsworth's (1989) statement that classroom practice is "always partial, interested, and potentially oppressive to others" (p. 324). This leaves me wondering, Where to from here? How can I do my work differently?

Solutions do not lie simply in teaching strategies or more careful use of language. Joseph Neison (1990) argues that use of the language of "heterosexism" rather than "homophobia" "avoids the trap of continual dialogue on the 'pros' and 'cons' of homosexuality and concentrates on the real problem—discrimination and prejudice against gay men and lesbians" (p. 37). But in this instance using "heterosexism" as a starting point did not put the problem of heterosexism in the lap of heterosexuals. Although the discussion began at the level of heterosexism, it was reduced to an argument about the appropriateness of gay or lesbian experience as a "lifestyle"—ending in an "us" versus "them" argument. Powerful groups re-define problems in their own interests.

Nevertheless, any anti-heterosexist practice threatens patriarchy. The response papers, textbook analysis, and guest speakers did provide different levels of threat to heterosexual privilege. And the response papers did allow some students a place to "speak" in support of an anti-heterosexist pedagogy. Providing such opportunity would seem to me particularly important when attempting liberatory pedagogy. Textbook analysis is less threatening to the social order than listening to the live voices of those engaged in consciousness-raising. Clearly, the objections of those most threatened grew louder as the critique grew stronger. As Magda Lewis (1990) says, consciousness-raising is threatening because it *is* successful. If such critique were incorporated into examination of heterosexism, students might be better prepared to understand and deal with their own reactions and those of others.

Simplistic solutions to improving student-student and student-teacher interaction in the classroom also are problematic. Despite my understanding of

feminism, I neglected to recognize the role silence plays in coeducational classrooms. In the heat of the moment I assumed that silence meant affirmation of the dominant voices. I neglected to consider alternative understandings of student silence (Orner, 1992), and, as Magda Lewis (1990) says, "the threat to women's survival and livelihood that a critique of patriarchy in its various manifestations confronts" (p. 473). These words took on new meaning for me when I read the response of the student who said that she did not speak out in the classroom because other students might think she was "gay." What could be more damaging to patriarchy and consequently more threatening to a young woman's survival than defining herself as lesbian?

Similarly, no doubt hegemonic masculinity played a role in the men's responses. Robert Connell (1987) argues that an important condition of hegemonic masculinity is that it is heterosexual. Connell says that "contempt for homosexuality and homosexual men . . . is part of the ideological package of hegemonic masculinity" (p. 186). Given that hegemonic masculinity requires subordination of homosexuality, this might account for the anger some men expressed and the silence of those who responded positively to the presentation. Such critique must be incorporated into teaching about heterosexism.

As well, the fact that all the men were physical education majors may have played a role in expressions of homophobia in the classroom. Helen Lenskyj (1991a) writes:

Unfortunately, the male physical education teachers who are responsible for boys' sex education in most high schools are unlikely to present the most progressive views on homosexuality. After all, male team sport constitutes the classic training ground in machismo, and the acceptance of different sexual orientations is not compatible with the rigid sex role conformity required in the male "jock" sub-culture. (p. 291)

The paradox is that many lesbians and gay men in sport and physical education contexts who might challenge the status quo are forced to hide their sexuality for fear of losing their jobs (Lenskyj, 1991b).

Job security is, understandably, uppermost in the minds of many prospective teachers, and this was no doubt reflected in the students' concerns about community opposition to liberatory pedagogy. For me to acknowledge that parental opposition is a problem is not enough. Students' concerns raise questions about the extent to which B.Ed. programs provide prospective teachers with opportunities to develop the knowledge and skills required for working with parents and community groups as well as administrators and school board members.

Regrettably, I did not pursue further why many of the prospective teachers were reluctant to deal with homophobia and heterosexism in their own classrooms. If, as Helen Lenskyj (1991a) says, "any teacher, homosexual or heterosexual, who confronts homophobia will almost certainly be suspected of being homosexual" (p. 291), the students may have felt threatened. This feeling,

coupled with “the myth that lesbians and gay men frequently recruit and proselytize from the ranks of the young . . . despite the overwhelming evidence that the major perpetrators of child sexual abuse are heterosexually oriented men whose targets are young girls” (Lenskyj, 1991b, pp. 62–63), could intimidate prospective teachers and prevent them from taking a proactive stance against heterosexism and homophobia in schooling. Teacher education programs should, therefore, provide opportunities for students to examine their own homophobia and heterosexist assumptions and to expose the myths, stereotypes, and distortions that keep heterosexual hegemony in place.

Clearly, prospective teachers bring their beliefs, prejudices, and fears to the classroom. This raises the question of whether the cry of parental opposition to liberatory pedagogy is a red flag or a red herring, a question that must be taken up in the health education literature and with prospective and practicing teachers.

Is liberatory pedagogy possible? What can one learn in an unsafe space? There are always gems that provide hope and some are embedded in this article. But there is no room for complacency. On the last day of class I received a note from three women students. They said “You’ve done an excellent job at opening our eyes to issues of gender, equality, and sexuality”—and they added —“(perhaps an overemphasis on homosexuality).” The jury is out!

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