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1994

## Antihomophobic Pedagogy: Some Suggestions for Teachers

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### Recommended Citation

Barnard, Ian. "Antihomophobic Pedagogy: Some Suggestions for Teachers." *Radical Teacher* 45 (1994): 26-28. Print.

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## Antihomophobic Pedagogy: Some Suggestions for Teachers

### Comments

This article was originally published in *Radical Teacher*, volume 45, in 1994.

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**Source:** Barnard, I. (1993). Anti-homophobic pedagogy: Some suggestions for teachers. *Feminist Teacher*, 7, 3, 50-52.

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Despite the current boom in Lesbian and Gay Studies and Queer Theory, most campuses remain hostile environments for gay, lesbian, and bisexual (hereafter referred to as gay) students, staff, and faculty. Gay students continue to face formal discrimination in campus housing and benefits policies, and informal persecution from homophobic peers and teachers, and from an institutional apparatus that still excludes gays from its curriculum.

Gay concerns must not be ghettoized to the pitifully few departments, programs, and courses in Queer Theory and Lesbian and Gay Studies. They must infiltrate every aspect of every curriculum. I write these suggestions, then, for the teacher who is not teaching a Queer Theory or Lesbian and Gay Studies class, but who nevertheless is committed to the work of decentering heterosexuality in the classroom and in the social realms that the classroom produces and is produced by.

Teaching can never be a neutral activity. The ways we define our disciplines, the texts we teach, the ways in which we teach them, the ways we set up our classrooms, the methods by which we evaluate our students--all these choices (whether our own or not) embody specific ideological assumptions and have far-reaching effects both inside and outside the classroom. Any anti-homophobic pedagogy will impact all methodologies and epistemologies, both those explicitly concerned with homosexuality and those which seem to be ignorant of--or even hostile to--gay concerns. Whether we teach gay texts or not, whether in fact we have any say over the texts we teach or not, it is in the ways in which we read and teach all texts and the ways in which we organize our classrooms and construct our students that we must most relentlessly deploy anti-homophobic agendas.

**(1) Do not assume that all your students are straight.** Such an assumption reinforces the invisibility that most gay students already suffer. Too often when discussing gay issues, even well-meaning teachers (including gay and lesbian teachers) use words like "you", "us", and "them" in a manner that suggests everyone in the classroom is straight or implies that gays exist only in some comfortably distant space (San Francisco?).

It's a good idea to remember (and to tell our students) that at least one person in ten is lesbian, gay, or bisexual; we are almost certain to have at least some gays in our class. When we ask questions of students or use examples in the classroom we should not assume that students are heterosexual. Some exercises designed to contest homophobia actually end up reinforcing it. For instance, role-playing exercise where students "imagine" what their world would be like if they were gay, or "heterosexual questionnaires" that ask respondents how their heterosexuality was constructed, are great tools for raising heterosexual consciousness, but at the expense of

obliterating the identities of gay students in the class.

**(2) Set an example by not using heterosexist language.** In the classroom, we must avoid examples or language that reinforce peoples' assumptions that everyone is heterosexual, that only heterosexuals should be addressed or discussed, or that heterosexuality should be the center of the universe. For instance, rather than saying "if a woman wants to bring her boyfriend to the dance...", we can say "if a woman brings her partner..." or "...girlfriend or boyfriend". We need to tell our students that they need to be alert to their own use of heterosexist/homophobic language in their comments in the classroom and in their papers; this includes overtly homophobic terms such as "fag" or "dyke" and presumptions of universal heterosexuality ("any woman would die to spend the night with Brad Pitt").

We can explain that such language silences gay students in the classroom, who should not be expected to assert or justify their sexual/affectional orientation. We ourselves must consistently challenge homophobic stereotypes, assertions, and jokes if students, texts, or other teachers make them. Often, gay and gay-supportive students will be too frightened to challenge homophobia in the classroom setting. They rely on us for leadership in setting a positive and supportive example and to make the classroom a safe environment for them.

**(3) Do not tokenize gay concerns in your syllabus.** Sometimes teachers want to include gay issues in their courses, but do so by marginalizing these issues, relegating them to one week in a fifteen-week course, to one optional reading at the end of the semester, etc. As a result, students get the message that these issues are not important, that they are an afterthought, or that they are too controversial to be included in the main body of the course. Not unexpectedly, then, many students will respond accordingly: with hostility.

I try to say the words "lesbian", "gay" or "bisexual" with great ease and informality when discussing gay issues. My message is that gay issues are an important and legitimate field of academic inquiry and not to be talked about in a hushed or awkward tone. If gay issues are presented in a non-sensationalistic manner, students will usually respond accordingly. I have been surprised to notice how quickly my students begin to initiate discussions of gay issues and how many of them--of all sexual orientations--choose to write papers and facilitate presentations on gay topics.

**(4) Ensure that your students have easy access to addressing gay issues and that gay students feel they can make their voices heard.** This means not only including gay issues in our discussions, but also using gay texts in our courses and inviting papers and projects that present gay perspectives and anti-homophobic analyses. Students should understand that anyone in the class may write such a paper if they are interested in gay issues and that students who choose to do so are not marking themselves as gay or lesbian (which is not to deny the possibility

that some gay or lesbian students might want to come out in the classroom).

**(5) Do not base a course on "open-ended topics, discussions, or texts.** Too often as teachers we feel that we are doing the right thing by assigning our students "open-ended" essay topics or by inviting students to argue "both" sides of a controversial current event. The ideologies and institutions of liberal pluralism tell us that this is the way to promote "free speech" or "democratic" argument. But these kinds of topics and discussions have the effect of privileging dominant power relations and of further silencing our gay students. For example, if we ask our students to debate about whether homosexuality is "wrong: or not, we are expecting our gay students to justify their existence, and we would invite homophobic remarks. Would we ask our students to debate the rightness or wrongness of heterosexuality or racism?

Gay students have a right to expect not to be wounded in this way in the classroom. Teachers should avoid texts that adopt this type of pro and con approach (i.e., most generic composition readers) and should create assignments that do not invite homophobic responses. For example, instead of asking students whether homosexuality is wrong or not, we might ask them to analyze a homophobic article, explaining who they think the intended audience is, what assumptions the writer makes, what values the argument embodies, what rhetorical strategies the writer uses, etc.

Better still we could invite students to analyze, for instance, Queer Nation's founding manifesto, "I hate straights". Instead of asking students to agree or disagree with the article, we could ask them to discuss the article's use of the pronouns "I" and "we". Or we might ask students to conduct research as to why the article's authors adopt the positions that they do. Or we could say to students, "you are a member of Queer Nation. Explain what you hope to accomplish with this manifesto."

The topics I have suggested are no "narrower" or more "restricted" or "less free" than any other topics. Every time we give students an assignment we circumscribe their possible responses. The question is not one of "censorship" then. We can choose how to circumscribe assignments, not whether or not we should circumscribe assignments. If teachers don't want to have to read homophobic papers and don't want gay students to be subjected to such papers, we must frame our assignments in ways that do not invite such responses. It would be disingenuous to ask students if homosexuality is "wrong" and then chastise those students who answer affirmatively.

**(6) Discourage straight students from revealing their sexual orientation.** Students should realize that when they announce their heterosexuality to the class or preface a comment with the words, "I am straight but...", they not only (inadvertently perhaps) distance themselves from the topic at hand instead of engaging in it, but they also put gay students in the class in an awkward position. When straight students "come out", gay students are forced to either come out, lie, or remain silent about their homosexuality. This may result in other students assuming that the gay

students actually are gay, which reinforces the silence that is already imposed on them in so many spheres of their lives.

If students do identify themselves as heterosexual, we can ask them why they are making this identification public and invite them to discuss the possible consequences of this public identification for the gay students in the class. Straight teachers also should avoid proclaiming their heterosexuality to the class (either explicitly or implicitly by referring to a spouse). In addition to the distancing effects that such a proclamation can have, it has other consequences because of the student-teacher power relationship in the classroom. Sometimes such proclamations are made in good faith, but they have the inevitable effect of making the classroom a comfortable space for straight students and, especially when gay issues or materials are under scrutiny, or enabling some straight students to give a sigh of relief, secure in the knowledge that the teacher is "one of us".

The straight students' comfort is often won at great cost to gay students. Gay students might feel that the teacher is able to discuss gay issues so openly only because she/he does so from the safety of her/his announced heterosexuality, a luxury that they do not have; they are further denied the possibility of a role model (whether fantasized or real) in the classroom or a point of identification with the teacher. Straight teachers should be willing to run the risk of being thought of as gay by their students.

**(7) Gay students should come out to their students.** Not every gay student is a member of a visible campus gay group. Some campuses have no such groups. Some students are too afraid to join. Queer students--especially those who are not out--sometimes feel isolated and alienated, even feel like they are the only gay person on campus. Given the disproportionately high suicide rate among gay teenagers and the shocking lack of positive gay role models for young adults, gay teachers owe it to themselves and their gay students to be out in the classroom. Gay students, especially those who are out, need to see real-life, institutionally legitimized gay professionals standing in front of them, teaching them and their heterosexual peers. Given the reach of institutionalized homophobia and the relative invisibility of gays in this society even today, a gay student's or teacher's coming out is not equivalent to a straight student's or teacher's "coming out". In the second case, the power and size of an existing relation of social inequity merely is rehearsed, while in the first case, the voice of the "other", just by proclaiming her/his existence, contests that power structure both by her/his presence and her/his unashamed insistence that this presence be seen, heard, acknowledged, and taken account of.