

Embedding LGBTQ+ inclusion into the curriculum: The experiences of LGBTQ+ teachers

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That moment when everything that came after would be different from everything that came before

I was a non-traditional student starting my MSW program in 2002 at the tender age of 42. First day of my first quarter in my macro practice class was the very first time any of my professors openly came out to the class. As we were orienting to the class, the professor informed us that she might suddenly run out of the classroom. She assured us that the reason would not be us, but that she and her partner were expecting their first child and that her partner might go into labour at any moment. I was gobsmacked – she had not just openly acknowledged that she was a lesbian – she had also shared that she was in an intimate relationship with another woman! Until that moment, I had never imagined that a professor could be openly out to their students as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, or on the queer spectrum (LGBTQ+). I had known two professors, a lesbian and a gay man in my undergraduate program who had come out to me privately but had remained closeted out of fear. I had believed that to be a successful professor, one had to hide their nonheterosexual orientation and/or their noncisgender identity.

The road less travelled

Ten years later in my doctoral studies program at the same university, I taught my first class (introduction to social work) as sole instructor in the same MSW program from which I had graduated. On the first day as we discussed what social justice might look like, I shared that

when I was 15-years old and told my parents that I was gay they threw me out of their house. Seeing how I and other LGBTQ+ were treated, my younger brother did not come out as gay until his suicide note when he took his own life just before his 30th birthday. Beyond this personal experience, I highlighted the overwhelming research evidence that LGBTQ+ people experience significantly higher rates of [mood, anxiety, and substance misuse disorders, and suicidality](#) than straight people – not because we are LGBTQ+ but because of the constant, pervasive, incessant, inescapable social stigma that we experience day in and day out. After several years of post-MSW clinical practice at a community mental health center that provided services to the LGBTQ+ community, I decided to pursue a PhD that would enable me to conduct research that would address heterosexist social stigma at the upstream level, as a way to address LGBTQ+ mental health issues downstream.

All the difference

In that first class that I taught, two different students came to me privately and thanked me for helping them to somewhat “normalize” their experiences as LGBTQ+ by seeing themselves reflected through an openly gay man leading one of their classes. That class was their “moment when everything that came after would be different from everything that came before.” I have been teaching for 10 years now and am open in every class that I teach. I don’t do this for myself, I do it for LGBTQ+ students who all too often feel invisible. I have had LGBTQ+ students in every class that I have ever taught, some have acknowledged their marginalized identities in class, others privately. I have been surprised that this dynamic also plays out among faculty and staff. For every openly LGBTQ+ faculty such as myself, there are several that share their LGBTQ+ identities with me but like the two undergraduate professors, still fear consequences should they come out themselves.

Journeys of moments

Although there are certainly more than two, I see my journey as an openly gay professor as a metaphor for Robert Frost’s words: “two roads diverged in a wood and I - I took the one less travelled by, and that has made all the difference.” While I could have taken the road of concealing my sexual orientation, following in the footsteps of that first openly lesbian macro professor in the first day of my MSW program, I have taken the road of open acknowledgement. It has made more of a difference than I could ever have imagined.

Four days before I formally began my current faculty position, the Supreme Court of the United States ruled in favour of full marriage equality (*Obergefell v Hodges*, 2015). Just a few months later, on November 5th of that same year the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day

Saints, the major religious and cultural institution of the state, with some 55% of the population being members [reaffirmed its doctrine of marriage](#). This policy stated that any member in a same-sex marriage, even if legally recognized would be condemned as apostate and children in such families could not be baptized until they were 18, and then only if the young person in question renounced their parents relationship. In all the years I have taught, it has been typical for one or two students to meet with me to discuss their own struggles with their identities. During the ensuing weeks, more than a dozen students sought me out for counsel. Most of these were straight students who had close friends and/or family members who identified as LGBTQ+ who were alternately terrified, depressed, and/or suicidal. Because I was openly gay, they came to me for resources, support, and ideas as to how they could be supportive for their loved ones. I was never more grateful that I had taken that less travelled road.

As an openly gay faculty whose scholarly focus is the health and wellbeing of LGBTQ+ communities, I am able to influence social attitudes at my college and university, as well as the surrounding community. I highlight practice implications of the negative impact that internalized stigma and long-term concealment of LGBTQ+ identities has on mental and physical health (Hoy-Ellis, 2016, Hoy-Ellis and Fredriksen-Goldsen, 2017), and how we as LGBTQ+ people can be a rich resource to support our own communities' mental health (Hoy-Ellis et al., 2016).

References

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