

## Bringing Up LGBTQ Issues in the Classroom

In the “When We Fight, We Win!” issue of *The Change Agent*, there is a whole section dedicated to LGBTQ issues and history. Are you wondering what it will be like to bring these articles into the classroom? Are you imagining some hard conversations or some challenging classroom moments that might come up as a result of the content in these articles? If so, we offer these ideas for going forward:

**1. First of all, be clear about your goals. Ask yourself, “Why am I bringing this particular article (or articles) into my classroom. Some good reasons for trying them out:**

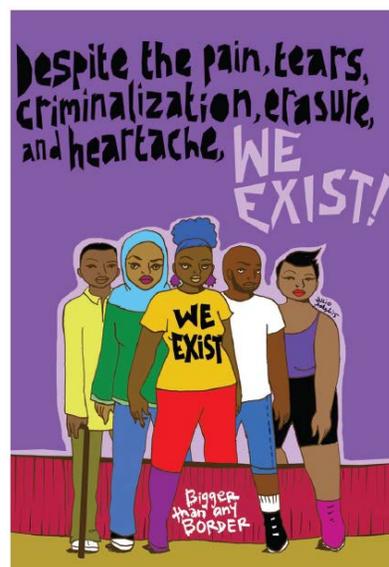
- a. You want your adult education program and classroom to be welcoming to everyone. No one should be invisible. You want to raise awareness about LGBTQ issues. You believe this content represents an opportunity to acknowledge and appreciate the life and struggles of many people in all of our communities and in all of our classrooms.
- b. You feel confident that the content is compelling and will pull people in and promote learning because there will be a high degree of engagement with the material.

**2. Next, check in with yourself.**

- a. Do you have people you can check in with and ideas about how you can do this *not* in isolation?
- b. If you bring this content into the classroom, will you be making yourself vulnerable in a way that you are not ready for? Are you prepared to be seen as the LGBTQ teacher or the LGBTQ-friendly teacher?
- c. Are you prepared to facilitate a potentially “hard conversation”? Will you be able to meet people where they’re at? Are you prepared for homophobia? (See links to classroom ground rules below.)
- d. Read the two attached articles by adult ed. teachers who talk about their own experiences with these conversations in the classroom. If you don’t feel comfortable, hold off on this content for now. Get support and consider bringing it up another time.

**3. Make a plan.**

- a. Look at the materials on pp. 17-28. What would help you get this conversation going? We recommend starting with the image on p. 21 – “We exist.” Students could discuss which groups of people have to assert that they exist. Explore the vocabulary in the text, especially the harder words like criminalization, erasure, and heartache. What does it mean to say “Bigger than any border”? What border is the artist talking about? What are some of the borders that keep us apart or keep certain people invisible?



Art by Julio Salgado (from p. 17)

- b. Get students thinking about the Section title: “Reclaiming Wholeness.” See the definitions of those words on p. 18. What groups might feel less than whole? Why?
- c. Develop lessons that teach academic skills in the context of these articles. These may include:
  - i. Adding knowledge of history and U.S. government especially how the Supreme Court works (p. 19) and social movements. (p. 22).
  - ii. Reading for details and being able to back up opinions about the text by pointing to evidence in the text (See “Dig Deeper” on p. 20, and you can develop similar questions – which send the reader back to the text for evidence – for other articles in this section.)
  - iii. Learning new vocabulary (pp. 18, 23, and 25)
  - iv. Reading and understanding charts (p. 19)

#### **4. Prepare your class.**

- a. Revisit ground rules if you have them; set them up if you don’t. Check these links for help in establishing ground rules:
  - i. <http://www.edchange.org/multicultural/activities/groundrules.html>
  - ii. <https://www.cte.cornell.edu/teaching-ideas/building-inclusive-classrooms/establishing-ground-rules.html>
- b. Explain your thinking for bringing in this material. Share your goals. Include academic goals.

#### **5. Launch your lessons!**

#### **6. Evaluate – it’s very important to take time at the end to check in with students.**

- a. Assuming you stated your goals at the beginning, ask your students to assess whether those goals were achieved. (These goals may – and should – include both academic goals as well as goals for community-building, raising awareness, and student engagement.)
- b. How well did the ground rules work? Is there anything there that you should revisit or rethink?

# Homophobia in the Classroom

## One Teacher's Response

by Cynthia Peters

"If one of my kids turned out to be gay, I would kill him," said one of my ESOL students.

"But you might not want to kill him," replied another, "because that would be murder, and they could put you in jail for that."

There was nodding all around.

I sat down, stunned. What had I prepared for class that day? A game for learning fractions? Reviewing the past tense? I couldn't remember. None of it seemed to matter. I didn't feel like a teacher at that moment. I felt angry, shocked, sad and personally vulnerable even though my own life partner is of the opposite sex and so for that reason, according to my students, I should be allowed to live.

I did not try to mask my feelings. I felt too much respect for the members of my class. We were friendly and affectionate with each other. I cared a great deal for each of them. They had consistently impressed me with their finely tuned sense of justice and fairness, and their understanding of how power reveals itself in U.S. institutions—in the workplace, in the school system, in the home, in how U.S. foreign policy impacts their countries of origin.

But here they were advocating killing their own children in the event they should be gay, and the only argument against doing so was a practical one ("you'll go to jail"), not a moral one.

"My sister is a lesbian," I told them. The classroom was silent. "It hurts me to hear what you are saying." I know I showed what I was feeling—my face had probably gone pale and my hands may have been shaking—and it affected them. Because of the trust and affection we had built up over many hours in the classroom, they had no desire to cause me pain. And their faces

showed what *they* were feeling—conflict between their hatred of homosexuality and their curiosity about what it could mean that someone they thought they knew and respected could be close to a gay person. I felt that the students were looking at me completely differently.

"My sister is a wonderful person. I love her. My parents love her. If they had rejected her because she is a lesbian, we all would have lost so much. Our family would have been divided. I am so thankful that they loved their daughter even though it was hard for them to understand her."

When issues arise in the classroom, most teachers respond as teachers. We look for what can be learned from the moment; we see it as an opportunity for critical thinking, debate, and English language practice. In a flexible classroom, such moments might lead to a writing project or some research. Maybe we mine the conversation for vocabulary and create a lesson plan around related themes for the next class. I have done that kind of thing many times. But in this case, I reacted not as a teacher, but as an individual who was clearly *affected* by what the students were saying. The students experienced an immediate consequence to their words and sentiments. I didn't absorb what they said in a neutral way. Instead, I let it bounce back to them, and thus they got a second look at it in a different light.

Not that they changed their minds. "It's against the Bible," they argued. "It's against nature, and a crime against God."

"The Bible also says not to have children out of wedlock," I replied. There was no need to point out that most of the people in the class had gone against the Bible on that score.

We all looked at each other, feeling un-

nerved, and I didn't rescue the situation from uneasiness—the way I usually might in difficult situations. We sat in this strange stillness. The charged feeling hung in the air. I had no particular strategy about where to take the class, but I had a strong sense that I didn't want to be less than honest about my reactions. This felt like the more respectful—if more potentially teacherous—path.

"Next class," I offered, "let's all bring in pictures of our family." We returned to the lesson plan of the day, but something had been opened up between us. It felt raw but honest.

For the next class, I brought in pictures of my sister. "She looks just like you," the students said, still seeming to study me with new eyes.

I showed them pictures of her sons. I showed them pictures of my parents and siblings and numerous cousins and nieces and nephews—my parents proudly in the center of it all. Ours is a mixed race family as well.

While we passed around everyone's photo albums, delighted over baby pictures, noted the family resemblances, and teased each other about the changes that are apparent over time, we talked about family. The students wrote about family being important because it offered unconditional love and because it was a source of comfort in a difficult world. We noted that this was something we had in common despite our di-

verse families. One student began to speak up about the importance of accepting people who are different from you. She talked about tolerance. She argued that people should mind their own business. "No one's asking *you* to be a homosexual," she said.

I did not attempt to steer the class toward any kind of resolution on the matter of homosexuality. But I hope I opened up a space for people to think about it differently, and for at least one student to voice her own argument against homophobia. As teachers, we often confront moments that challenge us to decide how to handle our own (sometimes very strongly held) political positions. There are various ways to take on these moments. In this particular experience, I learned that being personally honest but not didactic had some value. It was possible for me to pursue this course partly because, being straight, I did not have to take an enormous personal risk. It was also possible because I felt enough respect for my students to give them an honest reaction. This confluence of factors may not always be present in the classroom, but when it is, it presents a way forward. Teachers can draw off of it to find their way, respectfully and honestly, towards greater understanding.

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## Coming Out to Students

*by Deborah Schwartz*

*When I taught adult basic education at the Archdale Family Literacy Project in Roslindale, Massachusetts, I kept a journal. More precisely, we—the ten women students and myself—all kept journals. Our medium was stacks and stacks of green steno-pads. In them, we tried to tell the truth about our lives, though the students started noticing gaps in my story. They challenged me not to hide myself from them. Following are several edited entries from my own journal, which tell the story of coming out to my students. Most are from my experience with this class, but I also included two entries from two other classes I taught concurrently.*

### March 3

They are writing frantically in their journals. S writes about driving the rats out of her apartment. C writes about playing her music as loudly as she likes. L writes about her grandmother—about living with her in the mountains and drinking her coffee so black that it stings her eyes before she swallows.

When J reads, she interrupts herself to tell us that she's getting evicted because her oldest son Tom came home with some guy named Eddie who lit a joint in the hall then walked into her apartment with the lit joint and now the housing authority has the right to evict them.

C responds, "Even in this lousy project, you still have some rights." She is on her feet: "Do you know how often they've threatened to evict me? Just for playing my music after church on Sunday afternoon?"

C is smart and community-minded. She has set up this protocol of letting the neighbors know when she's going to be playing loud music. Half the time, they say it's fine and half of those times she invites them over because "it's no fun to dance alone," and the other half of the time, she shares chicken with them and then they change their minds, and half of the time they end up watching TV together.

"All those halves don't add up," B notices.

"They add up," responds C. "Believe me, they add up." Everyone laughs. The classroom is a world of words and stories and noise and quiet while we're writing.

We have authority over our lives for this brief time. The crocus doesn't just come up in the spring, but has the purple-colored chutzpah to bloom through the hard, cold earth. These women are like that. They give me bravery, but what do I give them? Room, that's all.

### April 23

"Read what you wrote, Deborah. You always make us read what we wrote," J notices that I skip passages when it's my turn to read. I remind her that it's ok to skip passages, or to not

even read at all.

"But Deborah, you never tell us anything about your life, or at least anything good," which I know is a code word for anything interesting.

"Well nothing all that interesting happens in my life," I counter.

"Are you kidding?" replies C.

"You come in here some mornings and you look like a train hit you. You and your double latte!

Then some days you come in looking like

a shining star. You have a life too, just cause you're a teacher doesn't mean you can hide behind that. Jesus, you know what color each of our bedroom walls is painted. We don't know anything about you. Nothing that counts anyway. You take a risk, Missy, and read!" That's what C says.

So I read without censorship. I read about how hard it is pretending to my family that I am not who I am and that my partner is not my partner and that the commitment ring that I wear is just another ring. Then there is a silence. C and L and B and A and J are there listening to me so intently. The way I try to listen to them when they read their truths.

I say, "Oh God, I am so sorry. I have been lying to you about having a boyfriend, and..."

"It's ok, honey, sometimes you have to lie, but here you don't," C says to me. "Keep reading."

When I'm done, B says, "Girl, you're a lesbian." That makes us all laugh.

Then A says, "My sister's cousin GG is a fag and we love him. He does all our hair."

It goes on like this. They want to know about sex and I tell them I'm too uncomfortable to talk about that. But I can give them some resources. They want to know who sleeps on the couch, and I tell them we try not to go to bed

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**"Read what you wrote, Deborah. You always make us read what we wrote," J notices that I skip passages when it's my turn to read.**

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angry. They want to meet Nancy. They want to call her at work and invite her to our end of the year party, which I remind them isn't until May.

Later, they draw a huge invitation to Nancy. Here's what it says on the front cover: *YOU ARE INVITED TO OUR GRADUATION PARTY*. On the inside it: "Thank you for putting up with Deborah. We love her and now we love you."

### May 26

Nancy came to the party last night. She played with the kids. J wanted to sit next to her and later came over to me and said she thought she was shy. C's teenage girls were staring at us at one point, but later they kissed us both goodbye. Nancy loved meeting the women and eating the heaps of food they piled on her plate. J's speech about being the first one in her family to ever get the GED made us all weepy, but when B put on "I'm coming out," saying that she knew we would like this "old people's music," and persuaded Nancy to dance with her, I thought I had died and gone to heaven.

[The same year I was teaching the ten women, I also taught two other classes in which the issue of sexual orientation surfaced. The following two entries are about experiences in those classes.]

### May 10/Notes from the VideoFest

During the first half of the Spike Lee film, "Get On the Bus," I struggle with the gay jokes and name-calling circulating in the room.

I try, "Let's respect everyone, please." Then: "Abide by our ground rules, or I'll kick you out of here." And finally, "No gay jokes. It's mean and it's unacceptable."

"What are you a Dyke or something?" S calls out so that everyone can hear.

I remember how I have just promised myself to never lie again. I look at him. He is waiting for me to say something. The whole room is waiting. "Well," I pause, not at all sure what it is

I will say, "Well, yes, I am a Dyke."

Some of the students giggle. We watch the movie. Later, as I walk up to the front of the room, floating a bit above my body, ready to hand out their assignments and then dismiss them without discussion, I hear S's voice loud and clear from the back of the room as he gets up to leave. "Hey Deb, I'm sorry." That's what he says.

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### May 12

Before class, when I am usually alone doing some planning, a kid I have never seen before comes to visit.

"Listen," he tells me. "You can't tell anyone. I live up at the Beech Street Projects and I will be killed if they know." I tell him about BAGLY (Boston Alliance of Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual and Transgender Youth). I tell him about the gay men of color group at the Fenway. He gives me one of those hip, youth handshakes. I'm really klutzy and don't know the moves, so I just hug him. When he leaves, I cry.

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