Making Excellence Inclusive: Higher Education’s LGBTQ Contexts

In the past forty years, higher education has made great strides in building campus and classroom spaces that are more fully welcoming of Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, and Queer (LGBTQ) people, as well as of academic explorations related to gender and sexuality. The past few years alone have seen the founding of the advocacy and support group LGBTQ Presidents in Higher Education, the Expanding the Circle conference on Creating an Inclusive Environment for LGBTQ Students and Studies, and new programs and courses on gender and sexuality throughout college curricula. Combined with important policy changes, initiatives like these are not only creating warmer climates for LGBTQ students, faculty, and staff, but also shaping healthier environments for robust discourse among students across diverse identity groups and shifting terminologies.

And yet, as Warren Blumenfeld details in this issue of Diversity & Democracy, barriers to the full inclusion of LGBTQ people still exist throughout higher education. Likewise, programs and pedagogies that engage directly with questions of gender and sexuality may be located at the edges of the curriculum, implicitly marginalizing the issues and people they address. Such marginalization not only damps the civic and educational participation of people who identify as LGBTQ, but also deprives all students of important opportunities to explore critical aspects of human experience.

If higher education is to be the vibrant educational and democratic forum that society needs, it must become a safer and more welcoming place both for LGBTQ individuals and for studies of gender and sexuality. Fortunately, colleges and universities are recognizing this and implementing new programs and policies that aspire to these ends. This issue of Diversity & Democracy explores how higher education is creating classroom and campus forums that engage with LGBTQ issues. Our authors seek answers to the following questions: What pedagogies can improve perspective taking among students while contributing to more LGBTQ-friendly climates? What programs and courses can provide opportunities for students to explore topics related to gender and sexuality? How are disciplinary and interdisciplinary studies creating pathways for students to contemplate timely and controversial topics related to LGBTQ issues? What can faculty across disciplines do to support LGBTQ students in their classrooms? The articles showcase pedagogies and programs that aim to make excellence inclusive across the spectra of gender and sexuality, making higher education more inclusive and engaging for all students in the process.

Seeking social justice for LGBTQ people is not simply a matter of improving things for the immensely diverse group of individuals who identify with that label, as Heather Hackman points out in this issue. Rather, it's a matter of creating institutions that are more just for everyone—that eschew all types of discrimination, invite investment and engagement, and offer opportunities for everyone to succeed. This issue of Diversity & Democracy provides multiple points of reflection for institutions looking for ways to engage with LGBTQ issues in various contexts.

—Kathryn Peltier Campbell, editor of Diversity & Democracy
Applying the Seven Learning Principles to Creating LGBT-Inclusive Classrooms

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Higher education has made great strides in LGBT inclusiveness, with many campuses instituting gender-neutral housing and bathrooms, LGBT history month and programming, and other initiatives that create learning environments that are more welcoming of LGBT students and studies. Nonetheless, as Rankin et al. (2010) found in their recent multicampus climate assessment, LGBT respondents experience significantly greater harassment and discrimination than their heterosexual counterparts, and are more likely to find their institutions’ responses to incidents of bias inadequate. (Editor’s note: See Warren Blumenfeld’s article in this issue for more information about the study.) The high-profile suicide of Rutgers freshman Tyler Clementi in 2010 following cyber-bullying by his roommate exposed the world to one story behind the study’s numbers. Faculty who may want to help address these negative contexts might wonder how to do so in the context of their teaching.

My approach to this challenge originates in a learning science perspective informed by a strong sense of social justice. In the book How Learning Works: Seven Research-Based Principles for Smart Teaching, my coauthors and I distill fifty years’ worth of research on learning into seven interacting principles (Ambrose et al. 2010). These principles stem from research in cognitive, motivational, and developmental psychology, as well as diversity and inclusiveness studies. These principles apply to all learners, but in this article, I will examine the seven principles in relation to LGBT contexts in higher education, highlighting areas of connection and identifying pedagogical guidelines to create classrooms that are more inclusive.

It is worthwhile for faculty to be aware of LGBT contexts for their teaching, because these contexts influence the fundamental goals of student learning and performance. LGBT students do not learn differently from other students or have unique ways of knowing, and faculty do not even necessarily know who their LGBT students are (indeed, students themselves may be actively sorting out their own identities). But by being aware of the principles outlined below, faculty can create more inclusive climates for all students by supporting their various identities and interests.

1) Students’ prior knowledge can help or hinder learning.

Students carry with them knowledge formed from their experiences, which shapes the way they see the world and ultimately process content. For LGBT students, this might mean bringing to the classroom a sense of isolation that stems from being highly visible as a sexual or gender minority, or conversely from being closeted and invisible; it might mean bringing a sense of injury at being subject to stereotypes, bullying, physical harassment, and neglect by authority figures. LGBT students may come to college with a sense of alienation stemming from having grown up in educational and social systems that devalue them: in Tennessee, for example, the state senate recently advanced a “Don’t Say Gay” bill that, if passed in the house, would prohibit teachers from discussing homosexuality prior to the ninth grade. As Henry Giroux said, “Can learning take place if in fact it silences the voices of the people it is supposed to teach? And the answer is: Yes. People learn that they don’t count” (1992, 15). Students of all sexual and gender identities can also bring incorrect prior knowledge, in which case the learning process must start with unlearning misconceptions. Many LGBT students already have experience with unlearning ingrained notions related to sexuality, and replicating this process can facilitate learning in other areas.

2) How students organize knowledge influences how they learn and apply what they know.

Learners naturally connect information along pathways formed by their experiences. As educators, we want to reinforce rich and meaningful connections, the kind that experts possess. But we should be careful not to impose our “expert” filters in ways that predetermine what is meaningful. Consider the case of a student picking a project topic for a geography class who decides he wants to study factors that affect the development of gay neighborhoods. Whether this connection is encouraged or discouraged (implicitly or explicitly) will determine the formation of different semantic networks in the brain. In general, richer, more meaningful knowledge structures stimulate creativity and facilitate the transfer of knowledge to new contexts. Allowing students control over their own learning influences their motivation, which leads to the next principle.

3) Students’ motivation determines, directs, and sustains what they do to learn.

Most theories of motivation explain it in terms of two broad factors: what students value and how successful they expect to be influences their motiva-
tion to learn. Like many students who receive negative messages related to their social identities, LGBT students may have low self-esteem, leading to lowered expectations of what they can achieve, and may exert less effort as a result. When instructors provide negative reinforcement related to students' identities, they can further lower students' expectations for themselves, creating a cycle of learned helplessness. On the other hand, LGBT students who value academic achievement may take refuge in it as their only socially sanctioned source of self-worth. These us, influencing our assumptions and shaping our actions. For instance, if we are heterosexual and cisgender (that is, conforming to societal expectations of what is "normal" in relation to gender), we might be unaware of our privilege and unintentionally use noninclusive language and examples in our teaching, or we might have experienced being the "other" in different contexts, leading us to build empathy and question our own beliefs. If we hold LGBT identities, we may feel a sense of responsibility about being visible, active, and approachable on campus, or we may have rightful and Pinel (2004) showed that activating the stereotype of gay males being pedophiles right before a babysitting task produced observable decrements in performance as observed by independent judges unaware that the stereotype had been evoked. This phenomenon, called "stereotype threat," occurs regardless of whether students believe the stereotypes because it generates emotions, like anger, that impede cognitive processes and performance. This has important implications for how faculty frame projects and assessments, particularly for traditionally stereotyped groups. Avoiding unintentionally activating stereotypes, while framing assessments as diagnosing learning or effort rather than innate ability, helps level the playing field for students belonging to groups stereotyped as deficient in certain areas.

Classroom approaches to sexual and gender identity impact learning and performance, both for LGBT students and for students across identities.

students are quite successful, but the knowledge they learn can be detached from their sense of self. This principle applies similarly among majority students who might be interested in LGBT topics. When instructors provide negative reinforcement about topics in which students show interest, they undermine potentially powerful sources of motivation for learning, regardless of a student's particular identity.

4) To develop mastery, students must acquire component skills, practice integrating them, and know when to apply what they have learned.

Faculty are responsible for fostering students' skills, but their attempts to do so can be constrained by their filters. Research has illustrated the importance of cognitive filters or expert blind spots, but social and emotional filters can also have an impact. Like students, all faculty members bring to the classroom a constellation of intersecting identities, and it is important to examine how those identities empower or limit concerns about job security and quality of professional life. (Rankin et al. report that LGBT faculty, too, experience discrimination and harassment because of their identities [2010].) It is important for all faculty members to examine our emotions around these issues of identity: our anger at societal oppression, passion about righting wrongs, feelings of empowerment from gains achieved, fear of offending people, doubts about our competence in handling difficult conversations, etc. Our pedagogical challenge lies in focusing these emotions productively while sharing our disciplinary mastery with students.

5) Goal-directed practice coupled with targeted feedback enhances the quality of students' learning.

This principle highlights the impact of how educators frame tasks in advance and provide feedback afterward. If instructions and feedback betray bias and prejudice, they can actually depress rather than enhance students' performance. For example, Bosson, Haymovitz, and Pinel (2004) showed that activating the stereotype of gay males being pedophiles right before a babysitting task produced observable decrements in performance as observed by independent judges unaware that the stereotype had been evoked. This phenomenon, called "stereotype threat," occurs regardless of whether students believe the stereotypes because it generates emotions, like anger, that impede cognitive processes and performance. This has important implications for how faculty frame projects and assessments, particularly for traditionally stereotyped groups. Avoiding unintentionally activating stereotypes, while framing assessments as diagnosing learning or effort rather than innate ability, helps level the playing field for students belonging to groups stereotyped as deficient in certain areas.

6) Students' current level of development interacts with the social, emotional, and intellectual climate of the course to impact learning.

Throughout college, students develop in many ways, including intellectually, socially, and emotionally. Students belonging to stigmatized groups (whether by sexuality, gender identity, race, religion, or other identity categories) face the additional challenge of developing positive self-images as members of those groups. Majority students also go through their own developmental processes, often facing the challenge of coming to terms with their privilege. Course climate can interact with these developmental processes to open or foreclose pathways for learning.

An example from my own experience illustrates this point. I once worked with a transgender student who did not identify within the gender binary, and who was taking a statistics class where the instructor collected student data broken down by gender (male or female) in order to illustrate a statistical concept. While the practice of using student-
generated data is generally desirable, in this case, the student remembers nothing from that class other than frustration at being asked to choose between two equally undesirable alternatives and disappointment at not having raised these concerns. The nature of statistics is to put people in boxes, count, measure, and compare them, but some students find this act of labeling oppressive.

As educators, we need to interrogate our disciplines to find and resolve such disconnects, paying particular attention to content. Even students’ GPAs can be affected by whether they see themselves reflected in content, which carries messages about students’ power and agency (Astin 1993). California’s new law requiring gay history to be taught in public schools stems from an understanding of this dynamic. As a statistician, I initially struggled to incorporate diversity content when teaching abstract numbers and formulas, but I eventually developed my course on the statistics of sexual orientation, where I introduce formulas as tools to answer questions about the LGBT population (DiPietro 2009).

7) To become self-directed learners, students must learn to monitor and adjust their approaches to learning.

This principle highlights the importance of reflection, strategic self-awareness, and self-monitoring. The principle has critical implications particularly for closeted LGBT students, who can spend significant metacognitive energy that should be devoted to these tasks trying to mask their identities: monitoring their classroom speech; using gender-neutral pronouns; avoiding mention of revealing names, places, and websites; and otherwise censoring their speech and writing. This diverts cognitive energy away from the real focus of the classroom—delving deeper into content—and can translate into unrealized learning potential. With warmer classroom climates, students can feel freer to focus their self-monitoring on their learning rather than on their presentation.

Conclusion
As these seven principles show, classroom approaches to sexual and gender identity impact learning and performance, both for LGBT students and for students across identities. In the classroom environment, the pedagogical challenge is to create a safe climate that allows all students to engage in exploration. A final point on this topic comes from DeSurr and Church (1994), who describe a continuum of classroom climates, from those that explicitly marginalize LGBT perspectives to those that explicitly centralize them, with variations of implicit marginalization and centralization falling in between. When they asked instructors to classify their course’s climate, most located it somewhere between implicitly and explicitly centralizing, while their students rated the same climate as implicitly marginalizing. Thus in seeking to create more inclusive classrooms, instructors should be sure to seek feedback from students and make adjustments to pedagogy and content when possible. By doing so, educators can create warmer climates for LGBT students and studies, maximizing learning opportunities for all students in the process.

REFERENCES


New Publication from AAC&U


In releasing this new edition of The Drama of Diversity and Democracy, the Association of American Colleges and Universities invites higher education to reengage with one of our most foundational questions: the role educators can and should play in building civic capacities—knowledge, skills, commitments, collaborations—for our diverse and globally connected democracy. This edition features a new foreword by Ramón A. Gutiérrez and a new preface by AAC&U President Carol Geary Schneider. The original version of this publication was released in 1995 as part of AAC&U’s national initiative, American Commitments: Diversity, Democracy, and Liberal Learning.

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