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# Teaching students to question assumptions about gender and sexuality



*If public schools are to promote a just and equitable society, they have a responsibility to teach all students to think critically about prevailing gender norms.*

By **Mollie V. Blackburn and Summer Melody Pennell**

On a Saturday afternoon, Summer and her partner were doing yardwork when an unexpected educational opportunity arose. Two of their young neighbors peered at them over the back fence and, realizing that they — two adult women — lived together, began peppering them with questions. When Summer explained that they were married, the older sibling, a boy, asked, “What do you mean you’re mar-

ried? Does that mean you’re gay?” Both women affirmed that they got married the same as other people, and yes, gay was an accurate term. The boy had only heard the word used as an insult, so he was a little confused. “Some people think being gay is bad,” his sister said, “but it’s OK.” The brother added, “You’re the first lesbians I’ve ever met.”

For Summer’s young neighbors, it was a simple but im-

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portant lesson in differing forms of gender and sexuality. Seeing the two women together prompted them to rethink their assumptions about marriage and ask, without any apparent awkwardness, some frank questions about what it means to be gay. However, many people go through childhood without ever having such conversations. Even as late as high school, many students say that they have never, to their knowledge, had any personal interactions with queer and/or gender-nonconforming people, or they have met queer people but didn't feel comfortable talking with them, or the queer people they met were in no mood to teach them about their identities.

Every student in our public schools should have opportunities to learn about differences in gender and sexuality, just as they should learn about the world's differing cultural traditions, religious practices, and political systems. Such knowledge about human differences is, we believe, a basic requirement for active citizenship in a diverse, pluralistic, and equitable society. Further, for the many students who will discover themselves to be LGBTQ+ at some point in their K-12 years, opportunities to talk with teachers and peers, in a matter-of-fact and nonjudgmental way, about gender and sexuality, will help them feel safe and supported at school. If they have no such opportunities — and if they witness only heterosexual romantic relationships in school, at home, and in the community — they may come to believe that heterosexuality is compulsory (Rich, 1980) and that they have little freedom to be themselves.

While we applaud efforts by educators to be inclusive of LGBTQ+ students, inclusion isn't enough. If public schools are to promote a just and equitable society, they have an obligation to teach all students about the concept of *heteronormativity* — the assumption that “heterosexuality is the only normal and natural expression of sexuality” (Cochrane, 2016) — and challenge them to debate the logic and fairness of heteronormative customs and laws.

By extension, that also means challenging the assumption that heterosexuals must be cisgender (referring to people whose current gender identity corresponds to the sex they were assigned at birth). Historically, a “straight” woman, for example, has been presumed not only to be sexually attracted to men but also to have been identified as a female from the moment she was born. However, this rests on a pair of dubious premises: first, that sex is binary (that is, 100% male or 100% female, with nothing in between) and second, that one's gender is fixed and unchanging.

Of course, reality is more complicated than that. Many people identify as neither male nor female, or they place

themselves somewhere along a continuum from hypermasculine to hyperfeminine. And sometimes girls grow up to become men, and vice versa, which also means that a person identified at birth as a boy might eventually become a straight woman — it's not true that one has to be cisgender to be heterosexual.

In short, our societal assumptions about gender and sexuality, not to mention our laws, have always been in tension with the ways many people actually lead their lives. And nowhere has this tension been more pronounced than in our public schools, which have been shaken many times by fierce conflicts over teachers' and students' gender identities. (For a more detailed history, see Jackie Blount's 2005 book *Fit to Teach: Same-sex Desire, Gender, and School Work in the Twentieth Century*.)

In the late 1970s, for example, the conservative activist Anita Bryant led a well-publicized campaign against queer teachers that caused some to be fired and prompted many others to closet themselves (Blount & Anahita, 2004). In 1988, members of the National Education Association (NEA) held a contentious vote on a resolution to support affirming counseling practices for lesbian, gay, and bisexual students. Ultimately, the resolution passed, leading to funding for counseling resources, as well as giving classroom teachers an official document to turn to as justification for supporting and affirming LGBTQ+ students (Blount & Anahita, 2004). However, the debate was bitter and divisive.

Recent years have seen a number of improvements. The public has become increasingly aware of the challenges that queer youth face, and growing numbers of educators, too, have become more supportive of LGBTQ+ youth and attentive to their needs, focusing not just on preventing bullying and suicide but also on including queer issues and people in the curriculum and teaching about heteronormativity. Many teacher education programs now address queer issues in social foundations courses, and some offer dedicated courses on queer issues in education. There are also many statewide support groups and a nationwide organization, GLSEN, that advocate for LGBTQ+ youth.

Still, queer educators and students continue to face a lot of hostility, evident, for example, in the eight states that have enacted so-called “no promo homo laws,” which “expressly forbid teachers . . . from discussing lesbian, gay, or bisexual people or topics in a positive light” (GLSEN, 2018). Consider, for example, the 2015 case of Omar Currie, then a 3rd-grade teacher in North Carolina (where a no promo homo law existed but has since been repealed). Currie, with the support

of his vice principal, used the children's book *King & King* (de Haan, 2000) to address gendered bullying in the classroom. A review committee affirmed that the book was appropriate, after holding a public meeting where supporters for Currie far outnumbered those opposed. Still, Currie and the vice principal ended up resigning in the face of hostility from various parents and administrators (Schaub, 2015), choosing to take positions at other, more supportive schools. (Currie's effort was recognized with the GLSEN iNSIDEoUT Advocate of the Year Award.)

Even when they have to work within and against district or state constraints, though, committed teachers continue to find ways to support their marginalized students and teach all students about gender and sexuality. Many of these efforts remain undocumented, sometimes occurring only behind closed doors, but a number of researchers and practitioners have published accounts of their teaching experiences (e.g., Blackburn, Clark, & Schey, 2018; Blackburn et al., 2009; Mikulec & Miller, 2017; Miller, 2016; Ryan & Hermann-Wilmarth, 2018). An example from our own experience might be a model for others to adapt, particularly in schools where teachers and students feel relatively safe to study and discuss matters related to gender and sexuality.

### **What does it look like to teach about heteronormativity? A concrete example**

In the summer of 2015, Summer gave a presentation at the National Council of Teachers of English's Conference on English Education in New York City about her efforts to train secondary teachers to support LGBTQ+ students (Pennell, 2017). Although the activities that Summer described — including a “heteronormativity scavenger hunt” and a “gender spectrum activity” (Pennell, 2017, p. 62) — were designed to be conducted with teachers, it occurred to Mollie, who was in the audience, that she could use them effectively with the students in her high school LGBTQ+ literature course.

Mollie's high school was an arts-focused charter school in a mid-size Midwestern city. Over the years, Mollie, an education professor at a nearby university, had worked with a number of teachers there, particularly in a teacher inquiry group focused on combatting homophobia and transphobia in the area, and she had seen that both the founder and the principal of the school were steadfast in their desire to create a safe environment for students of all sexual and gender identities. As a result, the school tended to attract many LGBTQ+ students; roughly 30-40% of students self-identified as something other than straight and cisgender.

The course that Mollie offered was an elective class for upper-level students (though it also provided credit toward a graduation requirement in English). Here, we focus on Mollie's second semester teaching the course.

### ***Making norms visible***

On the first day of the semester, Mollie provided a hand-out that defined heteronormativity and asked students to consider how it affected people's daily lives. For homework, she assigned them to complete the scavenger hunt that Summer had recommended, which required them to find two settings in which traditional gender roles and identities appear to be taken for granted. How might queer people experience those places and events, and what might it look like to challenge or disrupt those gender norms?

Students' responses varied widely. Some focused on cisgender stereotypes, such as advertisements that suggest that men are better drivers than women. Others pointed to the dichotomous, either-or categories that people tend to apply, such as when hospitals use pink and blue blankets to distinguish between female and male babies, or when stores divide clothes and toys into girls' sections and boys' sections, or when wedding parties are divided between bridesmaids and groomsmen. And other students described ways in which such dichotomies tend to exclude people who are gender nonconforming — for example, when one is expected to choose either male or female pronouns or given no option to use a unisex bathroom.

Only a handful of students focused on sexual preferences, mainly in the context of dating and marriage. One student noted that when shopping online for wedding invitations with a friend, she found only bride-groom invitations, none for same-sex couples. Two other young women mentioned that their families and friends assumed they were dating boys and would, ultimately, marry men. Both of them said that marrying a woman would certainly disrupt people's expectations. (One imagined the reaction to a note that said, “Hey Dad, I want to marry a girl.”)

Only one student commented on people's assumptions about sexual behavior, noting that some young women are “slut-shamed” (i.e., shamed for having sex), while others “set out to lose their virginity as though it's the albatross around their shoulders.” The perception that one has to choose between these dichotomous versions of womanhood, she said, could make asexual people like herself feel “lost, broken, confused, immoral.”

Finally, one student noted that a prime example of heteronormativity is the failure on the part of many people even to acknowledge that LGBTQ+ communities exist. Simply welcoming discussion about the lives of LGBTQ+ people can amount to a serious challenge to the status quo.

Expanding on this, another student said her family was “amazed” by the lesbian-themed book she borrowed from Mollie and took home the first day of class to make her family “aware of important things [she] will be learning.”

Over the following weeks, Mollie led the class in discussing the ways heteronormativity plays out in all sorts of contexts (such as advertising, shopping, school, and marriage) and the ways LGBTQ+ people experience those situations, as evidenced by students’ own experiences and narratives from published memoirs and fiction. At times, the conversation turned also to what it means to be an ally to trans people, such as when a genderqueer student said that if a teacher told the class to split into male and female groups, they would want a friend to join them in refusing to choose a side.

At other times, the conversation turned the spotlight on sexuality, too, usually focusing on behaviors like holding hands and kissing. One day, for example, the class launched into an animated discussion of dating practices and public displays of affection, after a student commented on how she sees straight couples “holding hands or whatever” in the mall on crowded days, but she sees gay couples being physically intimate only when the mall is relatively empty. Either way, she said, she feels put off: “Like, in general, I’m uncomfortable with people kissing.” The gender of the kissers doesn’t matter to her, she reiterated. “I’m just kind of like, ‘don’t make out in public.’”

Students were able to enter the conversation in a variety of ways because we established a broad understanding of heteronormativity, one that includes the notion of cisnormativity. So students talked mostly about cisgender roles, like what men and women are expected to be and do, but they also talked about transgender people and experiences, such as pronoun usage and access to bathrooms. They talked a bit about social practices such as dating and marriage and even less about sexual behaviors and desires (though this seems to be what adults fear the most when they imagine engaging students in these kinds of conversations).

Although this broad understanding of heteronormativity invited students into the conversation in multiple ways, this approach risked limiting the conversation to disparities between men and women, while erasing issues pertinent to sexual minorities, such as lesbians, gay people, and people who identify as bisexual. This risk, however, in this case, was mediated by a student who spoke to her experiences as someone who identified as asexual.

### *Considering one’s own place in the world*

Several weeks after the scavenger hunt, Mollie introduced the gender spectrum activity. During a discussion of the book *Beyond Magenta* (Kuklin, 2015), in which a number of transgender teens share stories about their lives, Mollie asked her students to brainstorm about the ways society tends to categorize men and women. As they offered ideas, she typed them into a table projected on the front wall, putting the descriptors for men (e.g., nonemotional, protective, strong, uncaring about appearance, weight lifters, initiators of dates, paying for dates) in one column and descriptors for women (moody, dainty, flowery, modest, wanting kids, wanting marriage) in the other.

Mollie then asked the students to arrange themselves along the wall, depending on the extent to which they identified themselves with these traits; if they identified with all of the ones associated with men, they should stand on the far left; if they identified with all of the ones associated with women, they should stand on the far right; or they should arrange themselves somewhere between the two extremes. (Recall that this was in an elective course in a school with an assertive agenda of supporting LGBTQ+ people, so there was relatively little risk in identifying themselves in this way.) Only one student self-identified as a man and stood far to the left — what Mollie described as “so far over you’re almost beyond” — and he confirmed that each of the items associated with men described him. Another student, who self-identified as genderqueer, stood on the left-hand side of the line (though not as far over as the man) noting that:

I’m not like, super emotional, but I do cry over like . . . *The Walking Dead*, like TV shows and things like that easily. And I do like feel like I have to protect people, but it’s like a mutual thing, where I protect you and you protect me. And I exercise and I’m not very clean. Kind of gross, but it’s OK to pay for dates and stuff, and I do want to get married, I do want to have kids someday, so, I guess. . . . like, in terms of my appearance, I do feel really masculine, but I also have a lot of feminine traits.

Meanwhile, none of the students stood on the far right. Those who self-identified as women clustered between the midpoint and two-thirds of the way to the right, though several noted that they also associated themselves with some of the traits in the left-hand column, such as lifting weights and being protective.

The goal here was to challenge students to shift from reflecting on how heteronormativity plays out in society (the focus over the previous several weeks) to reflecting on their own experiences and how they fit, or don’t fit, societal

assumptions about gender and sexuality. At the same time, the activity was meant to make it clear that there was no “normal” place to stand. If anything, the aim was to show that wherever one happens to stand on the spectrum, one can find points of connection to peers who place themselves farther to one side or the other. As the genderqueer student explained, identity is not exclusive — they had many masculine traits and some feminine ones as well. Their gender identity might seem distinct (nobody else stood in precisely that spot), but they shared at least some traits with everybody else in the class.

### **Making it normal to discuss norms**

This was an elective English class for high school seniors, but the kinds of activities and discussions featured here can be used in many kinds of classes, and they can be modified for students of all ages. Indeed, we believe that young students, too, deserve opportunities to reflect on and discuss their own emerging ideas about gender and sexuality.

Of course, the nature of the curriculum should vary across grade levels. With younger students, for example, discussions about sexual identity typically focus on parents and other adult family members. (Teachers might ask, for instance, can a grown-up marry a person of the same sex? Do you know of any same-sex couples?), while discussions about gender identities might focus on kids and their peers. (Do boys have to like sports? Is it OK for a girl to be tough? Can you be both a boy and a girl at the same time? What if you decide to call yourself “they” instead of “he or she”?)

We recognize that teachers who do this work (especially with young children) may face intense pushback from parents, colleagues, and others (which is, again, why every educator must gauge the risk in their community). However, some amount of pushback may be worth it. Students may be facing harassment because they have gay parents, for example, or may be struggling with isolation, humiliation, and abuse because their gender identity does not match what their peers consider normal (Blackburn, Clark, & Schey, 2018), and these students might be desperately seeking information beyond what is offered in their homes or religious institutions. Whatever the risks for the teacher, consider the much greater risks that students face when nobody points out such gender norms or challenges students to question them.

Regardless of the age of the students, though, educators have a responsibility to teach about gender *and* sexuality. Heteronormativity has to do with both — not just the assumption that the only “normal” thing is for, say, girl babies to become women, wear women’s clothes, and behave in feminine ways but also that they must be sexually attracted to men. If they are uncomfortable talking about queer sex-

uality, teachers may be tempted to play it safe and steer the discussion in another direction. However, as Mollie saw in her class, students who are invested in the conversation will hold one another accountable and insist on putting all issues on the table, perhaps raising questions about topics that the teacher hadn’t thought to mention (such as, for example, whether couples, be they straight or gay, should make out in public). If we want students to question and confront heteronormative biases in their own schools and communities, we must question and confront it in all its forms. ■

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