
Seeking Readers: Integrating Gay and Lesbian Texts into a Developmental Reading and Writing Course

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For reading and writing teachers, the 1990s have posed an interesting paradox. Gays and lesbians are increasingly visible, with student and faculty groups organized in many high schools and colleges and with books and articles by gays and lesbians appearing in many mainstream and university publications. At the same time, however, gay and lesbian organizations have come under fire and, according to the American Library Association (1996), texts by gays and lesbians, or even texts that include gay or lesbian characters in a positive light, constitute the number one target of book banners in public schools. Within our culturally diverse society, there is a need to include gay and lesbian literature into the curriculum. Support comes from Gallo (1994). He reports:

The characters in the best of today's YA [young adult] literature are realistically portrayed, deal with issues that are more gray than either black or white, face painful realities of contemporary society, such as divorce, abortion, alcoholism, homosexuality, child abuse, physical disabilities, death, corrupt officials, and AIDS, and represent a wider variety of ethnic groups. The reaction from protestors is to demand content that is consistent with their personal worldview, to the exclusion of all other viewpoints. (p. 117)

With the potential volatility of the subject matter in mind, this article provides developmental educators with a pedagogical technique for integrating gay and lesbian texts into a college developmental course.

Setting

I teach in an urban open-access college at a large midwestern university. The Language Arts Department offers a series of paired developmental reading and writing courses that embody the theory that reading and writing are intimately connected. As suggested by Bartholomae and Petrosky (1986), we link all the readings through a single theme, with students' writing becoming additional texts. Gay and lesbian texts, among others, are used to help these developmental learners become readers, writers, and critical thinkers in a culturally diverse society.

Since the student population is culturally diverse, we include readings that exemplify racism, sexism, feminism, and culturalism. Stereotyping and discrimination are uncovered through these readings. For example, an excellent work about racism is Maya Angelou's (1969) *For the Boys*. To develop an understanding of another culture, Jack Shaheen's (1988) *The Media's Image of the Arabs* is used. Our culturally diverse students, typically between 18 and 25, are generally egocentric and homophobic. Through these readings and discussion, we encourage students to reflect on what it feels like to be an insider or an outsider of a group. We encourage them to draw on their personal experiences as they explore these insider and outsider roles. The students' experiences as an insider and/or outsider are the focus of their essays.

Course Design

The writing teacher meets with the students on Mondays, Wednesdays, and Fridays for 150 minutes per week. On Mondays and Fridays, students generate, revise, and edit their papers in a writers' workshop format with two in-class tutors and the writing teacher. On Wednesdays, the focus is mini lessons on brainstorming, prewriting, introductions, conclusions, writing mechanics, and/or the conventions of grammar.

The reading teacher meets with students on Tuesdays and Thursdays for 150 minutes per week to discuss the reading passages and develop reading strategies. Vocabulary development, summary writing, and journal writing are also part of the reading class. The journal assignments relate to personal experiences and are not used to check comprehension. The journals are "springboards" for the students' formal papers. The reading teacher also examines thesis, main ideas,

details of support, vocabulary, introductions, conclusions, and figurative language.

Examples of Integration

Several examples may help illustrate how we integrate gay and lesbian texts in the curriculum. My goal in this first example was to help students develop a sensitivity to others within a culture and celebrate cultural diversity rather than fear it. A particularly effective reading was "How I Came Out to My Parents" by Kenneth Kohler (1993). Kohler's personal narrative retells the emotional turmoil and fear that he goes through to inform his parents that he is gay. Kohler wants to tell his parents because he wants to feel loved by his parents, be part of the family unit, and come out to his church.

The students were to read the Kohler text and write a journal response. The journal prompt for this passage was

Recall a time when you told someone something he or she did not want to hear. Perhaps you had to tell your parents that you wrecked the family car, to persuade a sweetheart that your relationship was over, or to inform a friend or relative that a loved one had died. Free write about five minutes to explain how hard this was (Buscemi, 1993, p. 375).

The journal responses from the prompt varied. One student wrote how difficult it was for her to tell her husband that she and their children were going to move back to her hometown. Another student dealt with her guilt about telling her grandmother that she wanted to move out of her grandmother's home, which meant her grandmother would have to move into a nursing home. Are these students really dealing with Kenneth Kohler's issue of coming out to his parents? No, but that is not the journal assignment. According to Probst (1992):

Writing 'from' literature, rather than writing 'about' literature, leads students toward two kinds of knowledge: knowledge of self and knowledge of others. It demonstrates to the student the significance of introspection and reflection on one's own values and beliefs, one's own place in the culture, and one's relationships with others. (p. 121)

These students are trying to find their places in the scheme of reading, writing, and thinking.

To foster students' understandings of the reading, I asked them to write in class from an oral prompt. According to Gullette (1992), by having the students write a few sentences on a topic or question, it

implies to the student that the topic is serious and complex. While I took attendance, the students were given this oral prompt: "At the bottom of your journal, write something about the passage such as whether you liked or disliked the passage or questions that you have about the passage."

After the students finished writing and I walked around the room collecting the journals, I quickly read the students' thoughts about the story. The woman wanting to move back to her hometown wrote: "I would have been scared to tell my parents I was gay. I think he had a lot of courage, and his parents took the news well." The woman who wrote about telling her grandmother that she was moving out wrote: "I really liked the story, 'How I Came Out to My Parents.' I don't know how I would accept it if my son told me he was gay." These two students were identifying with Kohler's emotions through introspection and reflection. By their written responses, these two students were being open-minded.

To start the discussion, I informed the students that I was not going to lead the discussion. "I will use the Socratic method, where I will ask a few questions and you lead the discussion. I will act as recorder and write your thoughts and comments on the chalkboard." The discussion proceeded along the normal lines of what is the thesis? What are the major details? And other points of confusion. Eventually, the discussion became more lively and centered on the heart of the issue: Was homosexuality genetic? Inherited? Personal choice? Psychological? Biological?

Finally, a single mom with three children stated, "I don't want a lesbian sitting on my couch." As these words came out of her mouth, the classroom went completely silent. The classroom went silent for several possible reasons. One, the students were shocked that she would admit her feelings, or two, they felt the same thing that she had just said.

During this discussion, the students were dealing with their feelings about gays and lesbians and sharing their emotions with the classroom audience. The discussion led students to vocalize their thoughts. Through the combination of journaling and discussing this culturally sensitive issue, students used their critical thinking and analysis skills. By developing these skills, students are enhancing their reading and writing strategies.

An additional example which demonstrates the importance of the inclusion of gay and lesbian literature in the curriculum relates to another group of very homophobic students. As the students entered

the classroom, they were discussing stickers they had seen strategically placed around campus on walls, door knobs, and/or hand railings. The stickers read: "Someone with AIDS touched this spot." The students were abuzz with this concept and were under the impression that only gays or lesbians could have AIDS. One 18-year-old male student stated, "I would never, ever talk to anybody who was a gay or lesbian person. I would never!"

Since I knew that my developmental writing colleague and this student's writing professor was gay, I used this opportunity to discuss the importance of audience with this student. Britton, Martin, McLeod, and Rosen (1975) addressed the concept of students writing for an internalized audience. This student, as well as all students, needs to be aware of internal and external audiences.

Conclusion

Based upon my experiences as a developmental educator, I believe it is necessary for all educators to consider integrating gay and lesbian texts into their curriculum. As we prepare students for a more culturally diverse society, we need to expose them to literature dealing with racism, sexism, feminism, culturalism, and homophobia. A culturally enriched curriculum may help students develop an awareness of stereotyping and discrimination and aid in survival in a culturally diverse society.

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