

Sex-Ed Curricula Should Include the LGBTQ+ Experience

EN211: College Composition II

Zoa Coudret

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Abstract

As we reach new heights in regards to LGBTQ+ rights and awareness, it becomes clear how the previously employed “single story” of heteronormativity can be damaging to the upcoming generation as they navigate through the trials and tribulations of adolescence.

Heteronormativity and the “single story” are critiqued through the lens of successfully and properly informing our young population of the diversity of the human experience. Not only are these concepts detrimental to society, they also breed a mindset of “this is the way things are meant to be.” To help curb this mentality, the text goes over the benefits of implementing an LGBTQ+ curriculum into sexual education, such as creating a safer school environment, providing different perspectives, and promoting empathy and acceptance. This paper also reviews the methods a school could use to execute the implementation, the importance of such an undertaking in this day and age, the impact it could have on the kids, and how it may be received by those who may not understand.

Keywords: LGBTQ+, sexual education, heteronormativity

Heteronormativity is the term used to explain our society and how it “is based around the idea that everyone is heterosexual and cisgender (identify with the gender they were assigned at birth), and anyone who is not is deviating from what is considered normal,” as defined by Summer Pennell in her journal article, “Training Secondary Teachers to Support LGBTQ+ Students.” This model of society is obviously false, as over the years, the amount of LGBTQ+ visibility and awareness has risen to new levels, providing us with the best representation yet, even if it may still be a bit off. This assumption that all people are the same perpetuates a narrative of “single story” (Dodge and Crutcher, 2015) that irresponsibly represents the true diversity of society. This presents a multitude of problems such as misrepresenting our population, maintaining a heterosexist social order, and confusing the LGBTQ+ youth growing up when they see no representation of themselves in local media or the classroom. A way to combat this hegemonic single story is by providing LGBTQ+ studies and/or including LGBTQ+ issues in critical discussion within a safe space: the classroom. In my opinion, the best way to address these topics is to introduce them along with sexual education.

Adding LGBTQ+ concepts to sex-ed would clarify and define the healthy ways of being in *any* kind of relationship, and would provide LGBTQ+ students with a resource to look to for sexual health. In previous years, the heteronormative single story has leached into almost every aspect of our lives, dictating the rules of what is normal or acceptable. These rules have unfortunately reached our school systems and more specifically, affected the sexual education curricula. In my experience, my school district had no obligations to include the LGBTQ+ experience in sex-ed. Knowing that there were LGBTQ+ people, but not hearing about them in sex ed class was odd to me, I wondered why they wouldn’t teach us about how to make healthy sexual choices in an LGBTQ+ relationship. Some subconscious part of my brain knew this was wrong and that I would eventually need this knowledge someday, so I asked my health teacher. She touched on it, but then moved on quickly. In Robert McGarry’s article, “Building a Curriculum That Includes Everyone,” he touches on how detrimental this refusal can be:

“Excluding LGBT people in a sex education curriculum is obviously problematic for LGBT students and can, among other negative health outcomes, lead to limited knowledge and a lack of skill development in terms of negotiating healthy sexual relationships” (2013, p. 28). Without providing this lesson to our students, it is denying them the proper knowledge on how to safely navigate an otherwise foreign concept that can be quite dangerous. Decidedly, it is very important that we make efforts to include LGBTQ+ concepts into sexual education to accurately provide every student with the information they need to make their own healthy, informed decisions.

The importance of such an implementation to the curricula of sex-ed is reflected in many prior texts on the subject. As McGarry relays the gravity of the topic, he states something we all share: “sexuality is an integral part of each person’s identity” (2013, p. 31). It is a disservice to students by not educating them on all the encounters they may come across. Incorporating and including the different sexualities and identities that exist in our world provides students with a base knowledge of LGBTQ+ diversity and the types of people they can become. The National Sexuality Education Standards (NSES) dictates that a course must have “essential minimum, core content for sexuality education that is developmentally and age-appropriate for students in grades K-12” (as cited in McGarry, 2013, p. 29). Notice the word choice of “sexuality” instead of “sexual” in regards to the education. This indicates that a broader range of the topic must be included. When one hears the word sexuality, the mind usually thinks of sexual orientation, and of these include lesbian, gay, bisexual, pansexual, etc. So, as dictated by the NSES, the sex-ed curricula must include the topics related to LGBTQ+ people. The course curricula taught in school should reflect the skills and knowledge the students need, to be able to apply them in the future. With the recent steps taken in the legalization of LGBTQ+ rights, they should learn of these topics in school.

The legalization of same-sex marriage, legal adoption by same-sex couples, and the military’s inclusion of openly gay and lesbian recruits (Moorhead, 2018) are just the first strides

we have taken to provide LGBTQ+ rights in America. A next possible step is to educate children of the existence of this population. Kids learn in school about different religions, different cultures and customs, so why can't they learn about different relationships? In fact, "health classes were the third most likely place for students to learn about LGBT people" (McGarry, 2013, p. 28), after social studies or history and English. While I congratulate such schools for teaching about LGBTQ+ people, I believe this likelihood should be shifted from social studies to health class for being the most likely place to learn of this population. Considering the information taught in the health/sex-ed class could be directly employed by students in their coming future to keep them from negative health outcomes, the health class should be the first place a student should learn more of LGBTQ+ topics. They may have heard of them before in a separate class, but the clarification of the population should be made in health class or one-on-one with a trusted teacher or guardian, given the student is interested enough to ask. In addition to easing the LGBTQ+ student's mind, it also provides a look into a different perspective for the cis-gendered heterosexual student. Informing them of this community encourages acceptance, teaches diversity, and discourages bullying.

Robinson and Espelage (2011) conducted a study based on a large sample of middle school and high school kids in order to explore the differences in mental health outcomes, victimization, school connections, and truancy between straight-identified youth and LGBTQ-identified youth. They found two patterns within the results: most LGBTQ+ youths are *not* at risk of these factors (they are not suicidal, not attempting suicide, not being victimized, and not skipping school) and yet, compared with straight-identified youth, an unusually large percent of LGBTQ+ youths are at a significant risk. In response to this, Robinson and Espelage suggest that "more effort should be placed on reducing the disproportionate concentration of LGBTQ youth still at risk [...]" (p. 326). The reduction of this gap would result in a more diverse population, a less hostile school environment, and happier students. Though, these are not the only benefits of including LGBTQ+ topics in school curricula.

Those students who may be at risk from the factors measured by Robinson and Espelage also tend to lose a sense of belongingness in their school community. This loss can be counteracted with the incorporation of such subjects to the curricula. A study by the Gay, Lesbian, and Straight Education Network (GLSEN), quoted in McGarry's article, suggests that teaching LGBTQ-inclusive curricula is related to a less-hostile school setting and "increased feelings of connectedness to the school community" (2013, p. 27). This statistic makes sense, as the students who feel represented and appreciated in their school would be more willing to participate in school activities. Another great benefit would be the reduction of bullying targeted at LGBTQ+ students. The deliberation of sexual orientation and sexual identity in anti-bullying programs can assist in the creation of "safer environments and more positive outcomes for LGBTQ youth" (Robinson & Espelage, 2011, p. 326). The discussion of LGBTQ+ people in any classroom would contribute to the normalization of their existence and would decrease bullying, considering bullies usually target those who "aren't normal."

In a text designed to provide lesson plans that include LGBTQ+ topics by Dodge and Crutcher, they endorse providing material that reflects LGBTQ+ experiences, as it "helps students question, discover, and discuss the multiple experiences of people in our society, creating a curriculum that promotes empathy and social justice" (2015, p. 97). Social justice should always be reflected within course material, pushing students to consider the injustices within our society, and hopefully motivating them to change these policies in the future. There is a large body of evidence and research proving that inclusive sexual education "can positively shape the kind of attitudes and behaviors that support healthy sexual development and overall well-being" (McGarry, 2013, p. 31). Every parent should want the healthy development of their child, so why not take the steps to bring these discussions to the classroom? Well, here are some examples and techniques that have been used by real teachers and schools.

Mollie Blackburn and Summer Pennell present an article (2018) about their success in addressing LGTBQ+ topics in the classroom. They go over the different activities employed in

the classroom and how the students received them. The students thought of the subject matter through a critical lens, and expanded upon ideas mentioned by other students in the class. They were engaged and interested. Though this may be an elective class, it still shows that there is a population of people who would benefit from the inclusion of an LGBTQ+ course or at least the mention of the group within a school setting. In Dodge and Crutcher's article, they provide sets of text that challenge students to think of the experiences and struggles of LGBTQ+ people in multiple classes: social studies, history, and English language arts. They go through how the linked text sets (LTSs) disrupt the single story of heteronormativity and the classroom practices based on them. Any teacher who may be considering adding LGBTQ+ topics to their course could reference these papers and find great examples on how to include the subject. Lastly, in Moorhead's article, "LGBTQ+ Visibility: in the K-12 Curriculum" she goes over "Banks' tiers of integration," a flexible, four-tiered system to integrating multicultural content into curricula (2018, p. 24). The levels start with Contributions, which "focus on heroes, holidays, and discrete cultural elements," and how they may be included in the existing material of a course. These may be superficial, but remember, this is only the first level, they get more complex as the levels rise. The next is the Additive level: "adds content, concepts, themes, and perspectives to the curriculum without changing its structure." The third level is Transformation. It "alters the structure of the curriculum to encourage students to view concepts, issues, events, and themes from multiple perspectives." At this point, the instructors will be making a substantive change in the curriculum. The last tier is Social Action: "encourages students to make decisions about important social issues and take actions to help address them" (p. 24). Moorhead delves further into these topics, describing how they build up to accommodate for higher level discussions, using critical thinking to examine how the LGBTQ+ community is disserved by the single story. These steps are flexible, as mentioned by Moorhead, making them accessible to any teacher willing to put in the effort to reflect this community in the classroom. Though, for any

controversial topic, there are people who may not agree or understand the reasons or importance of integrating LGBTQ+ subjects in the curriculum.

Hopefully the decision to include these topics in the curriculum will be made at the higher level, along with the restrictions for such a curriculum. If they are not, hopefully the majority rules for the inclusion. Those who do not approve of this may have the right to transfer their children out of the program or “deal with it.” Another approach may be to educate the community on the topic that is being introduced to the school district. This could help them understand the basics and motivation we have to include the subject. We must remind them that it is not a “gay agenda” nor are we trying to turn every student into an LGBTQ+ student. We are simply informing them of this population, giving it a moment in the limelight, and it is up to the students to identify themselves either with or without the LGBTQ+ community. The simple mention of them will not drastically turn the children gay, at most it will help them understand who they are and that those in the community are normal and don’t deserve to be cloaked in fear anymore.

Heteronormativity and its single story have ruled for too long. The inclusion of LGBTQ+ topics in, not only sexual education, but in any class should be a priority for schools which are dedicated to promoting social justice and equality. With the rising acceptance of the community in America, it has become increasingly important to provide these students with the knowledge they need of the world they live in. Not only does this inclusion in the classroom encourage empathy, acceptance, and understanding, it also provides LGBTQ+ youths with a reliable resource to turn to and the clarity they may need to discover themselves. The impact it could have on the school would be beneficial to all: creation of a safer school environment, positively shaping the attitudes and behaviors needed for sexual development, and discouraging bullying. With multiple texts providing techniques to include LGBTQ+ topics, there should be no excuse for not including this misrepresented community within the curricula. We must provide our students with the knowledge they need to enter the ever-changing, diverse society we inhabit.

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