

Breaking the Silence: Toward Improving LGBTQ Representation in Composition Readers

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Abstract: Lesbian-Gay-Bisexual-Transgender-Queer (LGBTQ) representation in composition readers remains limited and is frequently nonexistent. In addition, the LGBTQ-related materials that do find their way into composition readers are often problematic. In this essay I explain why WPAs and composition teachers should be concerned about LGBTQ representation in composition readers, and offer suggestions as to the kinds of LGBTQ content to include in readers that might then be used as part of an anti-homophobic pedagogy. I argue that WPAs and composition teachers can take specific steps—both within their composition programs and without—to move us, along with publishers, toward improving LGBTQ representation in our textbooks and in our classrooms. By doing so, we can help shape composition readers that are more inclusive and more representative of LGBTQ subjectivities, while also creating more inclusive and welcoming classroom environments for our LGBTQ students.

In 1997, Lynn Bloom, in accounting for the increasing popularity of the edited composition reader, claimed that “nearly all contemporary essay collections for composition courses reflect a range of multicultural authors, balanced according to gender, ethnicity, class, religion, and sexual preference” (136).^{1} [\[#note1\]](#) I doubt that I’m the only reader who would question Bloom’s use of the term “balanced.” Indeed, a persistent problem for those instructors who turn to their assigned composition reader for Lesbian-Gay-Bisexual-Transgender-Queer (LGBTQ)-related selections is that LGBTQ representation in composition readers has been historically—and indeed remains—very poor. For example, in 2000, as part of a graduate seminar project, I conducted a brief survey of LGBTQ representation in composition readers published in the 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s. I set a very rigid criteria for determining whether or not I would consider a selection in a reader to be LGBTQ-related whereby the selection had to focus specifically on an LGBTQ-related topic, or on an LGBTQ individual specifically as a gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender, or queer person. Using these criteria, out of sixty-two books surveyed for the years 1990 through 2000, only eighteen—less than thirty percent—contained any LGBTQ selections at all. To put this low level of representation in better perspective, the total number of individual reading selections for this period was thirty-six out of what must surely have been several thousand total selections. This is a small number. To put this number into greater perspective, consider that only a handful of readers accounted for a large proportion of the thirty-six LGBTQ selections. For example, of the three readers in the survey published in 1998, two contained a combined eight LGBTQ selections. It was surprising that more than seventy percent of readers for this period contain no LGBTQ selections whatsoever, and this in an era when publishers used multiculturalism and diversity—though overwhelmingly a “weak multiculturalism” in Newfield and Gordon’s terms (qtd. in Edelstein 23)—as selling points for their readers.

More recently, Marinara et al. conducted a very thorough survey of LGBTQ representation in commercial readers beginning in 2006. Their results were quite similar to mine, and yet surprising, as

well: out of 290 readers they examined, only 73—just over 25%—contained “explicit LGBTQ content and/or authors” (275).^{[2] [#note2]} Some observers might have expected improvement in LGBTQ representation by 2006, given the popular narrative of social progress within the LGBTQ community,^{[3] [#note3]} the notion that “things are getting better,” that we are steadily moving toward greater and greater equality.^{[4] [#note4]} Yet the results are stark: in my survey of readers published from 1990 through 2000, LGBTQ people and issues are invisible in just over 70% of the readers; in Marinara et al.’s survey of more recently published texts, LGBTQ people and issues are invisible in nearly 75% of readers. Even more disappointing, elsewhere I show that readers billed as “diverse” and/or “inclusive” in editions published in the 1990’s *still* lack LGBTQ representation in editions published after 2000 (“Reading Readers Against the Grain” 134).

The only other extant study of LGBTQ representation in composition readers is a 2006 graduate thesis by Travis Duncan, who examined twenty readers—a small sample—that were currently in use at his university at the time of his research. Duncan looked to the tables of contents of the readers “for the presence or absence of queer identity,” finding that “[a]lmost half of the readers did not mention queer identity in their tables of contents; only five of the eleven readers that included queer readings had more than one reading about queer identity,” that four of those five had “only two or three” such readings, and that two readers had “five and nine queer identified readings” (44). In total, Duncan found that “only 29 readings among the 1,725 total readings in the twenty composition readers indicated significant queer content—only 1.6% of all reading selections” (44).

Those readers that do indeed offer LGBTQ-related selections frequently and unwittingly present problems in terms of the selections themselves, how they are placed and/or paired in the reader, and the apparatus that accompanies them. It was not uncommon in the 1980’s and early 1990’s for the relatively rare LGBTQ selections that did make it into composition readers to actually perpetuate homophobic stereotypes (Hudson, “Silent Readers, Silenced Readers” 72-73, 74-75). In contemporary readers, the selections that do appear frequently elide the diversity of LGBTQ people with an “overwhelming focus on gay men as if this group represents all nonnormative sexual identity” (Marinara et al. 278). In addition, Marinara et al. found that LGBTQ representation in contemporary readers is most commonly presented through argumentative essays concerning gay marriage (277). Duncan also noted a focus on gay marriage among the queer-identified readings he found, accounting for 43% of all queer-identified readings in his study (51). This reliance on gay marriage as a vehicle for LGBTQ inclusion in readers can actually be dehumanizing as LGBT people are presented “not as full citizens in a democracy and members of families with rich and diverse experiences, but primarily as a minority group that the majority can consider only in arguments about ‘rights,’ a minority group that must be rescued by the straight majority to succeed” (Marinara et al. 279).

Clearly, little scholarly attention has been paid to the lack of LGBTQ representation in our composition readers that these very few studies document. Marinara et al., in particular, provide a very thorough study and analysis of the problem, yet fall short of giving concrete steps that we can take to challenge and possibly to change the status quo. My purpose in this essay is to make a preliminary effort to address this need for direction. In what follows, I argue that, while there are steps we can take directly with publishers to address the lack of LGBTQ representation in composition readers, our efforts must also be directed at the many things we can do within our own composition programs not only to improve LGBTQ representation in our textbooks, but also to improve the climate for LGBTQ students in our classrooms more generally. I begin by making a case for why LGBTQ representation matters in the first place. While, for many, the importance of this problem might seem to be self-evident, for others it is not. I continue by discussing the role of publishing itself

in the problem, identifying both impediments to meaningful change as well as opportunities for WPAs and teachers to exert influence. Finally, after making suggestions regarding the kind of LGBTQ content to include in readers and how readers might then be used as part of an anti-homophobic pedagogy, I offer some specific steps that WPAs and teachers can take, within our programs and without, to move us toward improving LGBTQ representation in our textbooks and in our classrooms, and thus to create a more welcoming and inclusive atmospheres in our classrooms for LGBTQ students.

Why Representation Matters

I generally see a sincere desire by other teachers to make LGBTQ students more welcome and comfortable in the classroom. However, I'm fully aware that my call for greater inclusion of LGBTQ representation in readers may encounter some resistance. What, then, are some reasons why we should work for greater inclusion in composition readers?

First, we need to consider the message that the absence of LGBTQ selections in readers sends to students, and particularly to LGBTQ students. At best this silent message is an affirmation of our culture's heterosexism. At worst, it is an expression of our culture's homophobia, a message of exclusion and delegitimation which, along with the steady stream of other messages of exclusion heaped upon LGBTQ individuals by our culture, can do harm to a student's self-esteem as it reinforces heterosexist assumptions in general. Whether messages of exclusion are delivered subtly, as in the absence of LGBTQ representation in textbooks, or whether such messages are delivered as overt hate speech—through the words of a virulently homophobic campus preacher shouting about the flames of hell awaiting homosexuals as one walks from one class to another, for example—an LGBTQ individual more often than not suffers in silence.

The importance of LGBTQ exclusion in our composition readers should not be underestimated. Textbooks, and what appears in them, send powerful messages to students as well as to society in general. To begin with, textbooks are much more than what they appear to be. Education theorist Michael Apple argues that textbooks are

the simultaneous results of political, economic, and cultural activities, battles, and compromises. They are conceived, designed, and authored by real people with real interests. They are published within the political and economic constraints of markets, resources, and power (Luke, 1988, pp. 27-29). And what texts mean and how they are used are fought over by communities with distinctly different commitments and by teachers and students as well. ("The Text and Cultural Politics" 4)

Neither textbooks, then, nor the curriculum represent "neutral knowledge" (Apple, "The Text and Cultural Politics" 4). Instead, textbooks present what Apple and others have called "legitimate" or "official" knowledge ("The Text and Cultural Politics" 4). Of course, there is no guarantee that all of the "official" knowledge within a textbook will be taught completely. If it is actually taught, there is no guarantee that it will be learned; after all, students may resist the official knowledge of the textbook. Even in such a case, however, the textbook and its content has power, as Sleeter and Grant conclude: "Even if students forget, ignore, or reject what they encounter in textbooks, textbook content is still important because it withholds, obscures, and renders unimportant many ideas and areas of knowledge" (97). Textbooks, including composition readers, send messages by virtue of their content about what and whom is worthy of study and consideration in the academy.

Sandra Jamieson identifies as “[a] more insidious problem . . . the image presented in readers of who writes and what they write about and the potential effects this image has on our students” (150). In a composition classroom, these messages can serve subtly to construct a range of possible student writers. But given the dearth of LGBTQ representation in composition readers, the LGBTQ student writer would not be one of the writers constructed by many texts on the market today. Such readers silence LGBTQ student writers, not as writers in general, but *as LGBTQ writers*. Thus, the “official knowledge” modeled in such a reader excludes consideration of sexual identity and its intersection with other aspects of identity, foreclosing rich opportunities for exploration through writing that such consideration would offer. Teacher educator Rita Kissen reminds us that “[s]ilence . . . is never neutral (Patai 1991), and the dominant culture—religious, political, economic, legal—is always sending a message of inferiority to the silenced” (6). There should be no place for such messages of inferiority in our composition classrooms.

Conversely, a message of inclusion and legitimacy could go a long way toward helping LGBTQ students to accept and be at peace with themselves, as well as helping heterosexual students not only to become more accepting, but also to understand that their lives, too, are impacted by homophobia and heterosexism. An inclusive reader can be of great benefit to LGBTQ students even when LGBTQ selections are not explicitly covered in formal class assignments as the visibility that the selections provide show that LGBTQ concerns are relevant and valued within the academy. More importantly for the composition classroom, such inclusion can open up rich opportunities for exploring these topics through writing.

But even more is at stake; there is also the challenge of making the classroom a safe space for all students. Teachers indeed have a responsibility to make the classroom a safe and welcoming environment for students, but this is decidedly not the kind of classroom or school environment that many LGBTQ students have generally experienced, particular in their pre-college years.^[5] [\[#note5\]](#) The national spate of youth suicides linked to homophobic bullying is evidence enough that the climate for LGBTQ young people at the K-12 levels is all too often—depending on the school district and community—toxic. We might expect conditions for LGBTQ students to be better on college and university campuses than in high schools. But this is not always the case, as Sanlo et al. remind us by invoking the memory of Matthew Shepard, whose “story is an extreme version of what many LGBT students face each day: discrimination, harassment, verbal abuse, and, all too often, physical violence. . . . All students, LGBT or not, deserve access to safe and respectful educational environments where they can reach their full potential” (xv). Further, there is an abundance of research showing that American college and university campuses remain difficult environments for LGBTQ students (see Drughn, Elkins, and Roy 11-12; Eddy and Forney 135; Ivory), with “out” students describing campuses “more negatively than closeted students” (Gortmaker and Brown). In addition, the traditional college years—18 through twenty-something—figure prominently in homophobic violence, with almost half of all homophobic attacks carried out by attackers 19 to 29 years of age (National Coalition of Anti-Violence Programs 28); at the same time, this very same age group accounts for almost 40% of victims of homophobic violence (National Coalition of Anti-Violence Programs 19). No other age group approaches this appalling level of homophobic violence as either perpetrators or victims. This data includes only *documented* incidents of homophobic violence; it does not include verbal assaults or other forms of discrimination, which would surely be higher. The college campus—and indeed the composition classroom—thus can be seen as a key site for confronting and challenging homophobia.

Finally, another reason for greater inclusion of LGBTQ selections in composition readers is the opportunities such inclusion presents for discussing and writing about homophobia and heterosexism,

how they work, their function in society, and their impact on *all* students. Homophobia and heterosexism, while directly harming LGBTQ people, impact heterosexuals, as well. Readings that explore the intersections of LGBTQ identities, homophobia, and heterosexism, with race, ethnicity, gender, class, and faith can offer especially rich opportunities for exploration through writing.

The Role of Publishing

What is the role of publishers in the dearth of LGBTQ representation in composition readers? Publishers, of course, are driven by economic rules that those of us who actually choose textbooks for our classes do not have to follow: the publishers produce what they believe the market will buy; our students must read what we assign (or choose not to read and bear whatever the consequences may be). It is obvious from the vast number of readers available and the high prices students must pay for them that textbooks are a big business. There is money to be made in the market for readers, or else publishers wouldn't be very much interested in producing them. Maximizing shareholder value is what publishers are after, and if they could do so by producing a reader entirely made up of LGBTQ-related selections, we could be sure that such a reader would be available. Publishers respond to the needs of their markets as they perceive those needs; it is not up to them, publishers might say, to shape those needs even if it were possible for publishers to do so.

But many in the field would argue that publishers do indeed shape the “needs” of the market and have been doing so for a long, long time. Writing in 1986, Robert Connors observed in “Textbooks and the Evolution of the Discipline” that “composition textbooks as they developed between 1820 and the present have always responded to the preferences of the teachers cast up by the culture, meeting their perceived needs and recreating these and other needs in later teachers shaped by the texts (178).” As Connors explains, the college-building boom in the United States, which began in approximately 1815, led to “a sudden serious shortage of trained college rhetoric teachers” (183):

The solution: many of the newer and less established colleges were forced to turn to less skilled and less highly trained teachers. The pedagogy: highly inflexible recitation techniques The tools: question-answer textbooks . . . that featured . . . mindless catechetical questions Thus were rhetoric textbooks born: out of a paucity of new rhetorical material, out of the weakness and ignorance of undertrained teachers, and out of the increasing power of a newly technologized publishing industry that was quickly gaining the ability to control the content of textbooks by the exertion of market pressure. (183)

Publishers during this period shaped the needs of teachers and controlled the content of textbooks because most composition teachers learned to teach composition *from the textbooks*. As Connors shows, this pattern continued for well over one-hundred years—a textbook-disciplinary relationship exacerbated by the lack of scholarly publishing in the field as well as by the continued devaluation of composition teaching. Writing in 1986, Connors notes that at last there were perceptible changes in this relationship, made possible by the growing professionalization of composition: “For the first time in this century, more textbook adoption decisions are being made by rhetorically-trained persons than by rhetorically ignorant persons. . . . and the intellectual discipline of composition can finally start to take control of its tools once again” (192). Publishers, Connors claims, based on the changes in textbooks he observed at the time, were reacting to “the changing qualifications of the teachers in the composition classrooms,” few of whom “are willing to surrender their teacherly autonomy to the master-teacher behind the textbook” (192).

Others have been more pessimistic about composition textbooks in the modern era. Richard Ohmann, for example, exposed in his 1976 book *English In America: A Radical View of the Profession* the ways in which freshman rhetoric textbooks—specifically the widely-used and long-surviving *Writing With a Purpose*—reinforce corporate ideology and construct a conspicuously classed (and gendered, depending on the edition) student writer with particular class interests. What results, according to Ohmann, is a composition classroom perpetuating “the politics of the establishment, which are now implicit in the course and made to look like no-politics” (160). Lester Faigley, writing in 1992, draws attention to what he calls “The Conflicting Rhetoric of Writing Textbooks,” which serves as the title of a chapter in his *Fragments of Rationality: Postmodernity and the Subject of Composition*. Faigley shows that even textbooks that are billed as “innovative” nevertheless “embody but a few of the many relations of power in a writing classroom” and “contain descriptions of idealized practices and codifications of power relations in specific discourses” (151) that serve the status quo and are anything but innovative.

David Bleich is also pessimistic about textbooks, as the title of his 1999 essay indicates: “In Case of Fire, Throw In.” Bleich warns that “[t]he authors of textbooks are teachers of the subject matter who enter the classroom of *this* teacher in order to help teach the subject” (17), doing so through the use of language that is “declarative and directive” (16). This is related, Bleich argues, “to the lack of experience of most writing teachers” (18):

Most teachers of writing have been graduate students in English who have had little or no preparation to teach writing. They are asked to teach the subject because of the language basis of literature, but writing pedagogy has not been a part of their graduate curriculum. There has been no more attention to writing pedagogy for graduate students in English than for graduate students in psychology. Each set of graduate students has had to write, but these responsibilities do not add up to experience in writing pedagogy. (17-18)

Thus, conditions under which composition is generally taught persist, which can perpetuate a tradition of reliance on the textbook in the writing classroom, of the textbook shaping pedagogy, of the continuing needs of inexperienced composition teachers (re)producing similar directive textbooks, and, therefore, of publishers having a stronger role than they realize—or care to admit, perhaps—in shaping the market.

Examples of how publishers shape the market are exposed by Libby Miles in “Constructing Composition: Reproduction and WPA Agency in Textbook Publishing.” Miles critiques, among other aspects of reproduction, “physical reproduction” (33), by which “only minor changes mark revisions of the most successful textbooks, and that those frameworks most antithetical to current composition theories are those that persist through editions, reproduced over and over through decades of revisions” (33). Worse, though, is that “not only do individual textbooks reproduce themselves over time, but they also create a paradigm that is then enacted in competing books. . . . [R]eproduction is why so many of the books are so depressingly similar” (34). Miles identifies aspects of the review process itself as one of the culprits in this process of reproduction, offering an example of a review request in which the publisher requires that, in order to review, the reviewer must have used at least one of a short list of readers with which the book under review will compete. Miles argues that “this call for reviewers has already determined the nature of the response” and “implements the reproductive function by requesting that I use one of the competing books (and can therefore do a comparison/contrast with the prospective book and help them replicate what seems to work well for me)” (46). Miles warns that “[w]hen new books are already defined *through* their competitors, we have a problem. And when our reviews are shaped primarily in response to the competition, we dig the hole ever deeper” (46).

We need to be alert, then, to the roles textbooks play in our classrooms and in our pedagogy, and be watchful, as well, of the processes involved in textbook production so as to minimize the tendency toward reproduction. As Connors reminds us, “Texts can be powerful servants, but only our own pride in and knowledge of our subject will keep them from turning on us and becoming, as they have in the past, oppressive masters” (192).

The move toward “custom” readers is a way of responding to the needs of the market by offering a substantial list of choices which will have something for everyone without the cost of planning, developing, marketing, and producing a number of totally separate and probably competing texts. It would seem that custom readers place responsibility for LGBTQ inclusion squarely on the shoulders of the teachers ordering a custom text, or on WPA’s to insist on diversity and representation. By moving toward custom readers, however, I believe the publishers do have a responsibility to at least make sure that a number of quality LGBTQ selections are available on their list of available choices. The number of selections available should be large enough both to be combined as a distinct section of a custom reader, if a teacher chooses such an approach, and to represent a variety of current LGBTQ experiences, issues, struggles, and voices. Granted, there are problems of representation when putting together a multicultural anthology. For example, one obvious goal in increasing LGBTQ inclusion is to create more “tolerance” for LGBTQ people. But problems may lie in the assumptions which support inclusion for the sake of increasing tolerance:

Ironically, to legitimate one must first delegitimize—in other words, aiming for tolerance presupposes intolerance. Only two possible positions are created—to be either tolerant or tolerated. Thus an emphasis on including minorities can serve, however unintentionally, to reinforce their minority status. (Nelson 377)

Indeed, there is something uncomfortable about thinking of oneself as merely “tolerated,” particularly since people typically show tolerance for that which they don’t really care for in the first place; hence, the *need* for tolerance. A second, and more practical, concern about poorly-considered inclusion is that it “renders impossibly simple the experience of the margin, which is a site both of annihilation and actualization, of disempowerment and electrifying resistance” (Malinowitz 251). How can one be sure that the handful of selections included in a custom reader—in any reader, for that matter—or even on the entire list of available selections accurately and fairly represent even a portion of the diversity of LGBTQ life? Might LGBTQ issues and concerns simply be too complex to be presented as one unit among many in a course attempting to celebrate diversity? These concerns were serious enough to lead Harriet Malinowitz to reject a typical multicultural approach and to instead develop an LGBT-themed writing course that is described in her *Textual Orientations: Lesbian and Gay Students and the Making of Discursive Communities*. I, too, am in favor of an LGBTQ-themed writing course, but such a course is a rare jewel. Since LGBTQ students are already present in all of our writing classrooms, and since *all* students are impacted by homophobia and heterosexism, my concerns lie in LGBTQ representation in typical writing courses. In choosing a text for such a course, whether it is a custom or off-the-shelf reader, accurate and fair representation is a worthy ideal for which to strive, though in practice such an achievement would be exceedingly rare. But any improvement would be a positive step in light of the current state of LGBTQ representation, marginalizing as it does non-heterosexual students in our classrooms.

What of the editors themselves? What responsibility do they bear for LGBTQ inclusion—or exclusion—in readers? My impression is that most probably agonize over what selections to include in a reader and how to present them. I imagine inclusion is very much on the minds of editors. In the case of LGBTQ selections, it may very well be that editors simply don’t know what stories, essays,

and articles might be available. A heterosexual editor cannot be faulted for not being conversant in the journals, magazines, anthologies, and other publications of the LGBTQ community. However, if an editor wants to include LGBTQ selections but doesn't know where to find them or which to choose, there are places to turn to for help. Most medium to large colleges and universities have student LGBTQ organizations which can be tapped as sources of information on available publications. A decided advantage of seeking suggestions from a student organization is that one is more likely to come up with a list of recommendations that will appeal especially to undergraduates in terms of being relevant to their concerns, problems, and experience. "Out" faculty members and/or those who teach and do research in LGBTQ-related issues can also be asked to provide recommendations. Libraries and large bookstores are another source of materials. And of course the World Wide Web (WWW) can be used to gather ideas for selections. For example, doing a search for LGBTQ topics on the Amazon.com site yields not only extensive lists of available books, but very often detailed reviews of those books. These are just a few suggestions for finding materials that readily come to mind; there are certainly other means, as well. Thus, for those editors who wish to include LGBTQ selections but simply don't know where to find materials or which ones to include, abundant help is available. It becomes a matter of priorities. How important is it to the editor that LGBTQ selections are included? If LGBTQ voices and issues are important enough to an editor to merit inclusion in a reader, he or she has ample resources to turn to for help.

By now it should be clear that complex market forces play an important role in shaping composition readers. These market forces are complex in that the composition reader is not simply the result of publishers responding to the demands of the market; publishers, through their methods of development, production, and marketing, also play a role in shaping and constructing that very market. Indeed, as Robert Connors shows, textbook publishers have played important roles in shaping and constructing the field itself. We, therefore, need to use every opportunity we have to "push back" against corporate interests in the textbook market—and in the field—and exert our own influence in the development of composition textbooks. But what sort of LGBTQ content might best serve the needs of our students?

LGBTQ Content for Composition Readers

Marinara et al. recommend a movement away from a focus on controversies—gay marriage, in particular—and an avoidance of commonly used categories—such as race, gender, class, etc.—as a means of organizing selections in a reader. Instead, Marinara and her co-authors propose a queer approach that would offer "essays, narrations, visuals, and other 'texts' that explore how people come to identify in the first place, how they assume and assert particular complex identifications" (287) and that include "considerations of how queer voices are never just 'queer voices'; they are also voices of people of varying races, ethnicities, class backgrounds, ages, generations, geographies, and nationalities" (287). One possible way to begin to enact these suggestions in composition readers is through the inclusion of coming-out narratives. Coming-out narratives hold great promise and potential as selections in composition readers. They are adaptable; they can be used in first-semester composition courses that offer opportunities for personal and reflective writing, and in research-oriented composition courses when paired or grouped with relevant analytical readings. They are accessible and easy to read; they allow for easy connection between reader and writer or reader and narrator. As Sandra Jamieson notes, "The power of the personal narrative is its realism; a successful personal narrative engages its readers in a one-to-one correspondence with the narrator" (155). They offer an opportunity for readers unfamiliar with LGBTQ experience to gain access through reading to one of the defining experiences of LGBTQ life. Such narratives have the potential to increase sensitivity, raise awareness, improve understanding, and push further beyond the bounds of tolerance

and into the realm of acceptance. Coming-out narratives also have the virtue of being abundant. There are numerous anthologies of such narratives currently in print, not to mention an ever-increasing collection of coming-out narratives that are regularly posted online. With such an abundance of available narratives to choose from, and from so many sources, editors and publishers should have no trouble gaining access to sets of them for their composition readers. And with so many out there, permission costs should not be a barrier to interested publishers.

A key to using coming-out narratives successfully would be to use them in sets, striving to offer coming-out narratives that foreground the intersections of diverse sexual identities with other aspects of the writers' diversity. Such an approach casts a wide net, so to speak, among student readers. Students reading a set of narratives foregrounding intersections of diversity and sexual identity gain opportunities to recognize aspects of their own experience and identities in such narratives, rather than "misrecognizing" themselves, to use Jamieson's (Althusserian) term, in the reader that, say, Andrew Sullivan constructs through his (unfortunately) widely anthologized "Virtually Normal," a narrative that erases rather than foregrounds difference.

But to simply read and enjoy such narratives as glimpses of the human experience would be merely to scratch the surface of their potential. To delve more deeply into what these narratives have to offer, they should be grouped with readings that offer introductions to and analyses of homophobia, heterosexism, and of their operation and circulation within society, along with analyses of identity construction, as Marinara et al. suggest. Many such readings are available, from the highly accessible to the highly theoretical. Even the most accessible and general readings of this sort offer perspectives, insights, and tools for deeper analysis of coming-out narratives, enabling students more easily to unpack the layers of social, cultural, and ideological meaning and phenomena revealed and highlighted by the coming-out process. Thus, the inclusion of readings elucidating homophobia and heterosexism in conjunction with coming-out narratives becomes a key to potentially unlocking the personal as political both in the coming-out narratives to be read, but also in the experiences of the students in the class, each of whom, like the writers of the coming-out narratives, live and move in a society and culture steeped in the politics of sexuality. This approach, then, enables us to ease students *from* the personal *to* the political.

The apparatus supporting this approach is crucial. Initial discussion questions and suggestions for writing accompanying the coming-out narratives must keep discussion and writing engaged directly with issues raised within the readings. Students must not be given an escape route by which they can opt out of engaging with what might be difficult or uncomfortable concepts and issues. Further, as Jamieson warns, assignments must not "ask students to step back from the text and discuss it from another perspective or identity" (162). Students should instead be challenged to respond from the perspective and/or identity of the writer wherever practical. As a unit or chapter progresses to the readings on homophobia and heterosexism and then to a reconsideration of the coming-out narratives in light of the new perspectives, insights, and tools for analysis gained from non-narrative selections, questions for discussion and suggestions for writing become more challenging. Students should be asked to apply these new tools to begin unpacking individual narratives, to unpack common themes and issues across narratives, and to seek additional sources from outside the textbook to assist and expand their exploration. Thus, what begins with an encounter with accessible narratives progresses to deeper considerations of the intersections of the personal with sexual and cultural politics, offering rich opportunities for exploration through writing, and aiding in the implementation of anti-homophobic pedagogies.

The Composition Reader as a Tool of Anti-Homophobic Pedagogy

Composition readers can be powerful tools for teachers in creating anti-homophobic classroom environments and indeed in enacting anti-homophobic pedagogies. The LGBTQ narrative-based approach that I suggest offers much in this regard for both LGBTQ and heterosexual students. By the very inclusion of a carefully considered and well-crafted arrangement of LGBTQ-related selections in a composition reader, LGBTQ voices, issues and concerns are made part of the curriculum. To use Apple's terms, they become part of "official" and "legitimate" knowledge, and thus worthy of study, discussion, and exploration in the academy.

For LGBTQ students in the composition classroom—and particularly for closeted students—this "official" inclusion can be an encouraging message of affirmation. Based on my findings in previous research, we can predict that LGBTQ students will read many of the selections whether they are assigned or not and will find the narratives to be high-interest readings ("Silent Readers, Silenced Readers"). Follow-up analytical readings exploring and analyzing the function and circulation of homophobia and heterosexism in society—as well as the intersections of homophobia, heterosexism, and sexual identities with race, ethnicity, gender, class, and faith—can offer LGBTQ students tools and insights for examining, analyzing, and understanding through writing their own experiences as sexual minorities living in a homophobic society. At the same time, such readings offer heterosexual students opportunities to explore how these same issues, identities, and intersections impact everyone, not just non-heterosexuals.

The arrangement of selections that I suggest can be used to challenge heterosexual students to think about sexual identity and the sexual status quo as they understand it in new ways. Narratives offer the opportunity to learn about and explore LGBTQ lives and issues from perspectives that may be completely new to them. More importantly, the follow-up analytical readings can challenge them to consider—probably for the first time—their privileged positions as members of the sexual majority in a homophobic society. They can discover and explore how they, too, are caught in a web of homophobia and heterosexism, a web that constrains and even determines their attitudes and actions much as it impacts the lives of LGBTQ people. They can consider—again, probably for the first time—how they are implicated in the perpetuation of homophobia and heterosexism. Well-chosen readings may also offer visions of how all of us who are interested in a more just society can work for positive change.

Finally, for teachers who wish to encourage discussion and exploration through writing of issues related to sexual identities, such readings offer rich opportunities. The juxtaposition of narratives with readings that analyze and trace the operation and circulation of homophobia and heterosexism in society subverts the status quo by calling into question many of the heteronormative assumptions of our culture. This is not an approach that aims for tolerance, which, as noted earlier by Nelson, is a notion that creates a dangerous binary: tolerant/tolerated (377). Nor does this approach aim for acceptance, which also creates a binary: those who accept/those who are accepted. Rather, this approach aims for an understanding of how all of us are affected by homophobia and heterosexism, an understanding that comes best, I believe, by readings which give students the chance to peek behind the curtain, so to speak, of our homophobic culture, and consider and explore through writing how homophobia and heterosexism direct much of the action that takes place on stage. The composition reader can be a valuable tool—even a classroom centerpiece—in these efforts.

But even a composition reader that has little, problematic, or no LGBTQ representation can offer opportunities for enacting anti-homophobic pedagogies. Elsewhere I argue that in any composition classroom in which a reader is used teachers can

encourage students to critically analyze their textbooks and to understand them as the material end products of a textbook production process that necessarily involves real people (editors) making choices about what to include and what to exclude, choices that reflect their own biases and worldviews—frequently heterosexist—and that necessarily have consequences for the students who ultimately use the textbooks. (“Reading Readers Against the Grain” 133-34)

Such analysis can begin with elements of a reader as mundane as titles and opening commentary contained in prefaces, forwards, and introductions—elements which can prove to be disappointingly ironic when the actual inclusivity of a reader fails to live up to the lofty claims of inclusivity that may be present in the title and opening commentary. Students can also be challenged to analyze the topical divisions of readings within a textbook. For example, if a reader has a chapter on “Family,” “how do the editors’ choices of selections construct a particular notion of . . . family . . .” and “[w]hom do these constructions exclude?” (Hudson, “Reading Readers Against the Grain” 135). Of course, students can also analyze LGBTQ selections themselves, including their accompanying apparatus. Analysis of apparatus can be especially revealing as students uncover unstated assumptions and examine the various constructions of readers, writers, and authors implicit in the apparatus accompanying LGBTQ-related selections. Even in the case of readers with no LGBTQ representation, a textbook’s silence—particularly when students attend closely to what editors have chosen to include *and* exclude—may speak volumes.

What Can WPAs and Teachers Do?

What can WPAs and teachers do to work for positive change in composition textbooks generally, but also specifically, in terms of improving LGBTQ representation in readers? First, it is clear that sales figures do matter, so there is an obvious opportunity to impact the textbook production process through the textbook choices we make. WPAs and interested teachers must take responsibility to ensure that their programs take steps to educate composition teachers—all teachers, not just new teaching assistants—about the importance of textbook selection. Teachers must be challenged to consider the pedagogical and ideological messages their textbook choices send. Textbooks should be chosen as tools to serve teachers and students, not as “master teachers” to guide the inexperienced. Readers, then, must be chosen—or constructed—with an eye toward serving and representing the identities and experiences of our students. If writing programs make more carefully considered choices in textbook selection, it is very possible to “use the system,” so to speak, and push for positive change through the sales that we generate. In addition, we need to take advantage of opportunities to serve as reviewers, mindful that Miles chides reviewers for “not mak[ing] the most of the opportunity when it presents itself. . . . we don’t always practice what we preach” (41). The opportunity to review should be considered an opportunity to influence. We should welcome these opportunities and approach them seriously. In addition, WPAs and teachers must lobby publishers strenuously at every opportunity. If publishers believe the composition market wants something—in other words, that there is a large enough market for a certain kind of textbook—we can be fairly sure that they will attempt to provide that kind of textbook. WPAs and teachers can play an important role in educating publishers both as to the desire for this kind of inclusion and as to its possible structure and format. WPAs and writing teachers can help bring about more inclusion by writing to publishers and talking to publishers’ representatives, asking them some tough questions about the lack of LGBTQ inclusion

in their readers, sharing with them the research regarding LGBTQ representation in composition readers discussed earlier, explaining what impact such exclusion may have on LGBTQ students in our classrooms, and urging them to implement greater LGBTQ inclusion in the future.

But we cannot wait for publishers—nor depend upon them—to address the problem and answer our calls for greater inclusion; we must also take steps toward greater inclusion within our own programs. For example, much remains to be done in terms of making our composition classrooms welcoming and inclusive places for our LGBTQ students. Everything hinges on a clear commitment on the part of WPAs and teachers to serving the needs of these students, students who have been underserved for far too long. An initial step is providing teacher training and resources so as to equip teachers to better serve LGBTQ students. Many writing programs offer or require diversity training sessions of various kinds. A fairly typical arrangement for such a session is a one- or two-hour event prior to the start of the academic year featuring speakers on minority, women's, faith, counseling, disability, and LGBTQ issues and concerns. While these sessions can be quite helpful, by themselves they may be insufficient on a number of levels. For one thing, they are rarely interactive; as a result, attendees seldom get to ask the questions they need to ask, or suggest the scenarios for which they would like recommendations. WPAs might arrange for more than a single diversity session. Instead, diversity training, perhaps in the form of “brown bag” sessions, should be an ongoing process for writing programs throughout the year. A variety of LGBTQ sessions could be offered featuring speakers' panels from campus LGBTQ student organizations, staff from campus LGBTQ concerns offices, professors and graduate students presenting classroom-based and other relevant LGBTQ-related research, representatives of LGBTQ community organizations, as well as panels of students who have completed their writing requirement(s) on campus. Reading lists and resources can be made available within the program—and with the assistance of some of the people and organizations just mentioned—to assist interested teachers to learn more on their own outside of these sessions.

Such a program of training and education is sorely needed in writing programs across the nation. Consistently over the years other composition teachers have asked me variations of some of the same questions: How should we deal with homophobic and heterosexist speech during classroom discussion? How should we address homophobia and heterosexism in student essays? How can we structure assignments so as to encourage interested students to write on LGBTQ-related topics? How should we go about selecting LGBTQ-related readings for course packets or to supplement readers with little or no LGBTQ representation? How can we make our classrooms welcoming spaces for LGBTQ students? A program of teacher education and training on LGBTQ issues, such as what I suggest above—one that is ongoing and implemented cooperatively with campus and community LGBTQ students, staff, faculty, and resources—would go far to address these questions and many more. Composition teachers interested in better serving LGBTQ students and in confronting homophobia and heterosexism in the classroom should not have to search independently for such information; it should be provided as an integral part of writing program orientation and training.

WPAs in programs that use a common textbook or a common textbook list should endeavor to ensure that approved composition readers are as free as possible of the shortcomings in representation discussed earlier in this essay. Even if the selection process is limited to WPAs and/or a textbook selection committee, this can be an imposing task. Thoroughly examining LGBTQ representation, if any, in a composition reader is a much more complex task than simply determining whether or not a particular reader includes LGBTQ-related selections. This is not a matter of bean counting; we need to carefully attend to the dynamics of the representation in any given selection. This is a serious and time-consuming task. WPAs must take responsibility for ensuring that those involved in the textbook selection process are aware of the complexities of representation in LGBTQ-related selections by

providing training for textbook-selection committee members, perhaps including practice analyses of actual LGBTQ-related selections. We should, of course, always take the same care in considering the diversity of representation during the adoption process so as to best serve all our students. Thus, the composition reader selection process is an enormous responsibility, one that deserves serious and ongoing attention.

For programs that allow teachers to select their own textbooks, the WPA's job becomes more difficult, as he or she now has the responsibility of ensuring that all teachers in the program are informed about the dynamics of LGBT representation in composition reader selections. Educating teachers about LGBTQ representation issues in composition readers and providing guidelines for selecting readers to adopt for classroom use are challenges in themselves; implementing means for verifying compliance only adds to the difficulty. Again, though, these are worthwhile efforts to undertake.

While brown bags, diversity training sessions, speakers, and the like have their place and are a step in the right direction, it's not enough. Worse, it's not practical in terms of reaching everyone in the program or department. Let's face it: writing teachers are busy people. Brown bags and other scheduled events will never be convenient for all, or even for a majority, of the teachers in a program. WPAs therefore need to take advantage of technology to educate and inform their teachers in the most practical and efficient ways possible.

WPAs on campuses that utilize Blackboard or other course delivery software packages can open a "course" entitled "Diversity," "LGBTQ Issues in the Writing Classroom," or the like and include the entire program so that all teachers have access to the "course." (At campuses lacking such software, a website could be set up to provide many of the features that I will describe here.) The WPA, members of the diversity committee (if any), or interested volunteers could then administer the site. The website that I envision—whether through Blackboard (or similar software) or as an independent website—should be both informative *and* interactive.

The need for such a site to be informative is obvious, and I offer here an incomplete list of suggested materials to include:

- Bibliographies – Bibliographies should be of at least two types. One should be a bibliography of materials regarding LGBTQ issues in education generally, but specifically regarding LGBTQ issues in the classroom and particularly in the writing classroom. The second bibliography should provide a listing of readings that might prove useful for students in composition courses and that could supplement readings in course packets or assigned textbooks. A third type of bibliography that could be provided might be more general, covering LGBTQ-related topics outside of education and beyond the scope of the second type of bibliography that I just described. Interested faculty could participate in adding to and otherwise maintaining these bibliographies.
- Essay Assignments/Lesson Plans – This section would allow teachers to share and distribute successful essay assignments and lesson plans that feature LGBT-related topics, that specifically create a space for LGBTQ students and concerns, or that deal with issues of sexual identity more generally. Contributors could also provide commentary, suggestions, and caveats to help others make productive and successful use of materials.
- FAQ List – This section could provide a list of potential answers—informed by department and program policy, research, and practical experience—to a selection of common questions on

LGBTQ-related issues, particularly as they pertain to the writing classroom. These would include questions such as those I mentioned earlier: How should we deal with homophobic and heterosexist speech during classroom discussion? How should we address homophobia and heterosexism in student essays? How can we structure assignments so as to encourage interested students to write on LGBTQ-related topics? How should we go about selecting LGBTQ-related readings for course packets or to supplement readers with little or no LGBTQ representation? How can we make our classrooms welcoming spaces for LGBTQ students?

- Useful Web Links – A Web Links section on the site could link to various on-campus and local community LGBTQ-related offices, organizations, and services. Links to campus student and local youth-oriented LGBTQ organizations would be particularly good to have available so that faculty could share them with interested students. Other suggestions for links include the Gay, Lesbian & Straight Education Network (GLSEN), the Safe Schools Coalition, the Human Rights Campaign, the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force, and The Trevor Project, just to name a few. WPAs, committee members, and other interested faculty could suggest other helpful off-campus links, depending on the particular needs of students, the program or department, and the college or university community.

In addition to providing informational resources, however, an LGBTQ concerns website as I envision it should also provide a high degree of interactivity so as to encourage and promote faculty participation in what should be an on-going, program-wide discussion of LGBTQ-related concerns. The site should provide an email feature that allows participants to email individuals who are part of the site, as well as all-users and, if needed, sub-groups of all-users. A moderated discussion board could provide a means of discussing specific questions, concerns, and problems as they arise, and may also lead to new material for the FAQ page described above. Other interactivity features can be considered depending on the software package(s) used and the needs of the program. The goal, however, should remain the same: to encourage and promote an on-going, collegial, and program-wide discussion.

Conclusion

Michael Apple argues that “to ignore it [textbooks] as simply not worthy of serious attention and serious struggle is to live in a world divorced from reality” (“The Culture and Commerce of the Textbook” 36).^{6} [\[#note6\]](#) When editors and publishers produce composition readers—and particularly readers billed as inclusive—lacking in LGBTQ representation, they construct a vision of diversity that erases diversity in sexual identities. By making the most of our opportunities to influence publishers and the textbook production process, we can help shape composition readers that are more inclusive and more representative of LGBTQ subjectivities, and more comprehensive in their coverage of diversity in general. At the same time, these efforts should be combined with steps within our own programs to improve inclusivity and classroom climate for LGBTQ students. If there is any course in which all students should be made to feel welcome and accepted, it is the first-year writing course. Making the composition reader—one of the “tools of our trade”—more inclusive is a positive step in this direction.

Notes

1. Bloom’s use of the term “sexual preference” here is odd, since by 1997 “preference” had been thoroughly discredited and replaced by the more neutral term “orientation.” ([Return to text.](#) [\[#note1_ref\]](#))

2. Using the criteria from my survey, the representation documented by Marina et al. may be even lower since I only counted a selection if it was explicitly written on an LGBTQ topic or if it was written by an LGBTQ writer writing *as* an LGBTQ person. Some of the explicitly LGBTQ authors in the Marina et al. study may not have been writing on an explicitly LGBTQ topic or may not have been writing *as explicitly* LGBTQ authors. ([Return to text. \[#note2_ref\]](#))
3. I use the term “community” with some reluctance, since a coherent “LGBTQ community” is so difficult to pin down that one is forced to conclude that such a general “community” doesn’t exist in the ways that we typically consider communities to manifest themselves. It’s easier to speak of the existence of numerous and fragmented LGBTQ “communities.” The term “community” here is used to loosely refer to LGBTQ individuals as a collective whole only for lack of a better term. No essentialization of LGBTQ people is intended. ([Return to text. \[#note3_ref\]](#))
4. LGBTQ activist Urvashi Vaid criticizes such assumptions, noting that frequently what we see as “progress” represents not hard-won freedom but a state of “virtual equality,” a condition “which simulates a genuine civic equality but cannot transcend the simulation” (4). Vaid explains that:

In this state, gay and lesbian people possess some of the trappings of full equality but are denied all of its benefits. We proceed as if we enjoy real freedom, real acceptance, as if we have won lasting changes in the laws and mores of our nation. . . . But the actual facts and conditions that define gay and lesbian life demonstrate that we have won ‘virtual’ freedom and ‘virtual’ equal treatment under ‘virtually’ the same laws as straight people. (4)

[\(Return to text. \[#note4_ref\]\)](#)

5. “Safe” can be a difficult concept for many teachers to grasp, particularly if they lack experience feeling “unsafe.” ([Return to text. \[#note5_ref\]](#))
6. Peter Mortensen observes: “And yet we continue to do so. The MLA’s recent survey of tenure/promotion processes across the country shows (not surprisingly, I think) that publication of anything other than scholarly monographs isn’t considered intellectual effort at most institutions” (Mortensen). ([Return to text. \[#note6_ref\]](#))

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