

Queering the Curriculum. Reflections on LGBT+ inclusivity in Higher Education

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Higher education (HE) is fairly accommodating of sexual diversity in many countries. However, lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans and other sexual minority (LGBT+) students and staff still face many challenges regarding acceptance and integration which may impact learning and teaching experiences. This article discusses the relevance of LGBT+ inclusivity in pedagogy and the ways by which it can be incorporated into HE with examples from teaching in Psychology. It also discusses some of the advantages and risks associated with 'coming out' for LGBT+ academics to broaden visibility at university. Queer pedagogical perspectives, which question the use of identity-based LGBT+ representations in education and propose alternative ways of queering the curriculum, are also reviewed. The article concludes by attempting to bridge identity-based and critical perspectives to positively contribute to LGBT+ inclusivity in HE, and by affirming the importance of joint work from universities' senior leadership and academics to achieve that aim.

Keywords: LGBT, pedagogy, inclusivity, higher education, psychology.

Introduction

THERE IS no full account of what proportion of university students in the UK identify as non-heterosexual, as monitoring for students' sexual orientation is not consistently done across the sector (Grimwood, 2017). However, some estimates place the figure at around 11 per cent (Vielma, 2013), which compared to the estimates for the national lesbian, gay and bisexual population (2.7 per cent; Office for National Statistics, 2021) suggests that there may be a disproportion of sexual minority students in higher education. While it is currently impossible to ascertain if such discrepancy exists, the very presence of any sexual minority students in higher education supports the case for the inclusion of lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans and other sexual minority (LGBT⁺) issues in campus life and education, particularly in Psychology, a discipline with historical connections to the topic of sexual diversity (Ellis et al., 2019). However, this may not be happening, as suggested by a UK survey which

indicates that LGBT students are unlikely to have seen LGBT experiences and history reflected in the higher education curriculum (National Union of Students, 2014).

On the other hand, although there has been increased LGBT+ inclusivity and awareness at university with the production of explicit anti-discrimination policies and regulations (cf. The Open University, 2021; University of Oxford, 2022), this has not necessarily translated into their immediate or effective implementation or enforcement across the sector. In fact, while policies are put in place and readily applied to ensure that sexual minority members of staff are not discriminated against, LGBT+ students continue to experience prejudice and sometimes violence, mostly originating from other students (Ellis, 2009; National Union of Students, 2014; Stonewall, 2018).

From a pedagogical perspective, it has been shown that for students from minority backgrounds the perception of campus climate (i.e. perceptions of openness and inclusivity)

¹ The acronym LGBT+ is used throughout this article, except when referring to sources where LGBT or LGB have been used, in which case the original use has been kept.

impacts on engagement with the learning environment and affects learning outcomes (Rakim, 2006). Evidence suggests that LGBT+ students who experienced homophobic or transphobic harassment are more likely to consider dropping out of university (National Union of Students, 2014). Even though more research is needed on the impact of homophobia, biphobia and transphobia on the academic performance of sexual minority students in higher education, it is expected that their experiences and perceptions on campus will have an impact on their ability to pursue their studies without unnecessary disruption (Sanlo, 2004). Conversely, for the wider student population diversifying exposure to varied identities and contents will challenge privilege and may also increase preparedness to the diversity that is expected to be experienced in future professional and life contexts.

This article therefore examines ways in which universities could become more accommodating of LGBT+ students so that they can thrive in higher education, and so that non-LGBT+ students can be exposed to more diverse representations and perspectives during their education. I will start by briefly providing a background to the reality and role of universities in respect of LGBT+ inclusion from an institutional point of view. I will then highlight the relevance of exposure to positive identity representations in education by using Style's (1996) metaphor of 'curriculum as a window and a mirror' (p.35) and examine how it may apply to LGBT+ inclusivity in higher education. I then discuss the role of LGBT+ academics and how the process of 'coming out' may contribute to this agenda, but also the pitfalls that such a decision might carry. As a final point of reflection, I review queer pedagogical perspectives in their criticism of identity-based LGBT pedagogy.

The role of the university

The higher education sector has come a long way regarding LGBT+ awareness and inclusion. It was not uncommon for students who were 'caught' in same-sex activities on campus to be quietly expelled during a large part of the 20th century (Renn, 2010), suggesting that these were uncomfortable situations for universities to manage, preferring not to draw attention to them. It was only approaching the turn of the century that higher education institutions started to become more aware of the need not only to include, but also to actively ensure that sexual minority students feel safer on campus (Renn, 2010). However, as mentioned earlier, LGBT+ students continue to experience appalling levels of harassment and violence on campus (Ellis, 2009; National Union of Students, 2014). For example, research conducted in the UK indicates that seven per cent of trans students have been physically attacked by other students or staff due to their gender identity (Stonewall, 2018) and evidence from the US revealed that LGBT university students are at greater risk of being victims of sexual assault than their heterosexual and cisgender peers (Coulter & Rankin, 2020). This means that much still needs to be done to address these issues at institutional levels. Grimwood (2017), for instance, based on data collected from a large survey of UK LGBT university students identified a need to challenge homophobia, biphobia and transphobia in higher education as well as to provide the conditions to minimise the effects of discriminatory practices on campus.

Some universities attempt to create more inclusive spaces by organising activities such as inviting external guests to address sexual minority issues, providing 'safe zone' training² as well as other targeted and extra-curricular

² Safe zone are programmes which aim at 'improving the campus climate, increasing awareness, enhancing conversations around LGBT issues, providing safe space, educating and providing skills to members to confront homophobia, transphobia, biphobia or heterosexism' (Poynter & Tubbs, 2008, p.122)

activities. These activities, albeit positive, may end up attracting those already aware and sensitised to these issues, therefore having the effect of 'preaching to the converted' but not effectively addressing deeper issues of prejudice and discrimination within higher education settings. Therefore, more systemic and strategic actions need to be put in place to address these issues.

Ellis (2009) put forward a few recommendations for universities to address lingering issues of discrimination and harassment on campus, with the intention of establishing a climate of zero tolerance in relation to these issues. These recommendations were:

- Embed LGBT issues in the curriculum
- Implement policy and monitoring practices
- Instigate sanctions for prejudiced behaviour
- Embed LGBT issues within the wider practices around inclusivity.

Considering the pedagogical angle of this article, in the following sections the focus will be on the first point, as the other ones, while intersecting with pedagogical practices and the curriculum, are not strictly pedagogical in nature. Therefore, I will argue for the need to increase LGBT+ inclusivity via the curriculum and through a range of pedagogical strategies.

Embedding LGBT+ Issues in the Curriculum

Curriculum as a window and a mirror

Style (1996) provides a useful metaphor for considering the need to include LGBT+ representation in education, which is that of 'curriculum as window and as mirror' (p.35). According to the author, the curriculum serves an important function of opening different ways of seeing the world. This is accomplished by way of exposing students to different academic disciplines, but also by providing them with various identity windows and mirrors (e.g. by way of a multicultural staff), so that they feel recognised in the higher education context and get glimpses

into the realities of others that are different from them. This serves the important purpose of contributing towards the recognition of those typically absent and therefore invisible in traditional and mainstream higher education, such as those with a disability.

Although Style (1996) discusses this in respect of ethnicity and gender (the 'universal' white male having 'many mirrors to look in, and few windows which frame others' lives', p.37) it can easily be applied to the gay, lesbian, bisexual, trans or queer student who is typically confronted with many heterosexual and cisgender representations in higher education and very few of people who they may identify with. At the same time, heterosexual and cisgender students need to have windows into the identities and realities of others opened to them if we are to prepare students to face the 'vast (human) differences and awesome similarities' they will deal with in the real world (ibid, p.38).

Inclusivity of sexual minorities in the curriculum may also function to counter-balance the 'discursive violence' to which LGBT+ people are exposed to via 'words, tone, gestures, and images that are used to differentially treat, degrade, pathologise, and represent lesbian and gay [and bisexual, trans, queer and other] experiences' in everyday life (Yep, 2002, p.170). The effects of such violence are demonstrated by research into minority stress, which indicates that LGBT+ people experience disproportionate levels of stressors and mental health issues compared to cisgender and heterosexual people (Fulginiti et al., 2021; Shenkman et al., 2020).

In my teaching in Psychology, I aim to provide identity mirrors and open windows in two main ways. One of them is visually, via the inclusion of images representing a diverse range of people to illustrate lecture presentations and handouts. I put considerable effort looking for images that may represent a variety of identities in respect of ethnicity, age range, gender and sexuality. Subtle as this may be, it allows for students to be exposed to imagery that reflects some

of them and that exposes others to less visible identities. Although research on this in academic settings is lacking, evidence from media representation studies seems to support the relevance of diverse and positive representations of minorities for those belonging to those minority groups (Garretson, 2015; Marrero, 2021).

My other approach to this is to include sexual minority authors and to incorporate research and theory that centres on LGBT+ people and topics in my teaching. For example, on an optional third year undergraduate module I cover LGBT+ identity development, including specifically those about bisexual and transgender people, groups often forgotten even when covering LGBT+ issues. On a post graduate lecture on adult sexuality and wellbeing, I included a reference to Magnus Hirschfeld as a same-sex-attracted academic and activist who actively sought to change the draconian laws which weighted on the lives of sexual minority people in 1930s Germany. I also teach about some high profile but less well-known non-binary academics like Judith Butler, a key author in the field of critical gender and queer theories (Butler, 2011; Jagose, 1996).

For LGBT+ students, these positive role models within psychology and cognate fields might inspire them to focus on academic topics which are relevant for the LGBT+ community. Academic and applied Psychology have much to contribute to LGBT+ activism when centred on key and topical issues, with important potential to influence social and legal changes. By being exposed to such role models, the next generation of sexual minority psychology graduates and the future practitioners and researchers may take an interest on such topics, and therefore pursue work that can be used for the improvement of the LGBT+ community.

In addition, sexual minority representation in the curriculum will provide students with a sense of history and process regarding the fight for LGBT+ rights, which started with pioneers such as Hirschfeld many decades ago and is still on-going (Ellis et al., 2019). It

may indeed help students to understand how science is not disconnected from politics and how it can have important political consequences, both positive and negative.

For non-LGBT+ students, exposure to these ideas, historical circumstances, and key figures may contribute to the opening of windows and bringing in 'fresh air', by introducing difference in the form of representations that they are less used to being exposed to in academic settings. It may also disrupt a possible sense of 'ownership' of the academic area of their choice by understanding that some key figures in their field have been LGBT+ identified. These challenges to heteronormativity may therefore lead them to an awareness of their privileges and an understanding of how sexual hierarchies have a detrimental effect on things like creativity, individual freedom and expression (Yep, 2002).

Coming out at university: Opportunities and risks

A discussion about LGBT+ representations in education raises questions about the role of sexual minority members of staff in making higher education settings more inclusive and diverse for students. Due to universities overall being accommodating of sexual diversity in relation to the professionals working there, it is at university that many young people will be exposed to (positive) role models of LGBT+ professionals for the first time (Ellis, 2009). This may be because academics are 'out' or because of their presumed sexual orientation due to their research interests or academic areas of expertise (Clarke, 2016).

The act of coming out or being out in the workplace is an effective way of promoting visibility and therefore of potentially changing attitudes about sexual minorities (Banas et al., 2020; Sink & Mastro, 2018). However, there are also risks that need to be considered when contemplating that decision (Embrick et al., 2007; Marrs & Staton, 2016; Rees-Turyn, 2007). Such risks range from having one's career progression compromised to the possibility of violence

due to such disclosure. Describing their own experience, but one that is applicable to many sexual minority academics, Maritz and Prinsloo (2015) discuss how entering academia later in life required them to 'negotiate the meanings, responsibilities and the penalties of being queer and performing supervision' (p.699). As these and other authors point out, this is further complicated when teaching in culturally diverse and therefore often heteronormative environments (Bennett et al., 2015). These complex personal and institutional circumstances experienced by sexual minority academics may help explain why less than half (45 per cent) of UK LGBT students indicated that they were aware of 'out' members of staff in their university (Grimwood, 2017).

For those LGBT+ academics who aim to increase LGBT+ visibility in their workplace by coming out, the challenge is whether, when, how and to whom they should make explicit their sexual orientation or identity as gender diverse. These already strike as fairly important and daunting questions to ponder and eventually act upon, which typically non-LGBT+ university staff need not worry about. Additionally, coming out at university is potentially an on-going process, as interactions with new colleagues, students and administrations will renew the prospect of having to again make clear one's sexual orientation or gender diversity. Therefore, the decision on whether to come out needs to be negotiated on a regular basis by LGBT+ academics in their daily professional life taking into account the potential recipient of the message, often strategically and at some emotional cost.

Clarke (2016) conducted an experiment as a queer academic in a British university, which informs the above point. For one undergraduate lecture delivered, she wore a t-shirt with the logo 'some people are gay, get used to it'. She did not mention the t-shirt during the lecture, nor did the topic of the lecture relate to LGBT+ issues. She also did not at any moment during the lecture or in another context with those

students, come out as a lesbian, even though she has much academic work published on LGBT+ issues and otherwise is 'out' in her professional life. Reactions to her choice of clothing were collected by a qualitative survey after the lecture. Some students considered the t-shirt as a provocation of sorts and others viewed it in rather negative terms, leading Clarke (2016) to conclude that 'if a lecturer wanted to be liked by students or receive positive student evaluations, the data suggest that they should avoid wearing such t-shirts' (p.7). This finding also applied to some of the few LGBT+ identified students in the cohort who considered the lecturer's act as compromising of the positive visibility of other LGBT+ people. Some students were confused as to why the t-shirt was not addressed or discussed during the lecture, and others imagined that it was part of some sort of experiment (even though Clarke made it clear that was not her intention when choosing to wear that specific t-shirt in the first place). Interestingly, not all students assumed that the t-shirt meant that Clarke was gay. Indeed, many thought that she might have strong views about the topic or have friends or family who are gay, but that she might not be gay herself.

Clarke's (2016) experience is a cautionary tale. She warns that while her decision to wear that specific t-shirt clearly seems to have disturbed the heteronormative environment of the lecture room, it seems unlikely that it contributed to reducing heterosexism or hostility towards sexual minority people among students. If anything, it may have had the opposite effect, even if it remains unclear if addressing and discussing the t-shirt in the lecture would have made a difference in this respect, or if effectively coming out in the lecture would have.

While coming out in the workplace (or other acts disruptive of heteronormativity, such as the above example) may carry a political weight, evidence from pedagogical research does suggest caution. For instance, work by Russ and colleagues (2002) indicates that knowing that a teacher is gay affects

students' perceived credibility of the teacher and leads them to learn considerably less than students of a teacher identified as being straight. Another study found that the effects on learning from sexual minority lecturers may be nuanced by gender, with male, but not female student ratings of their own learning being lower when having a gay rather than a heterosexual male instructor (Oberle et al., 2011).

My position as a gay academic in Psychology is dual. Some of my research interests and track record of publications (Nodin, 2016; Nodin et al., 2011, 2015) is suggestive of a gay identity and I am out to most of my colleagues. On the other hand, I have not yet come out while teaching, as this would seem out of place in most of my lectures unrelated to topics of sexuality. However, I find myself often debating whether I should or not come out to my students and what impact that would have on them and on our academic relationship. While I believe that by coming out, I would be contributing to the provision of positive role models to my students, anxiety about possible student reactions often holds me back. I have nevertheless been able to overcome such anxieties in the context of small group supervision where the topics being studied are related to LGBT+ issues and therefore the act of coming out to students presents as more relevant contextually and feels safer.

I find additional ways of contributing to positive changes in students about issues of sexual diversity via the introduction of LGBT+ topics and examples in my lectures where they are missing (e.g. research about the developmental effects on children of same sex parenting, or about the intersectional experiences of LGBT+ people who are also from minority ethnic backgrounds). This is something that can be done as part of the routinely updating and auditing of teaching materials, in some ways similar to what many academics and departments have been urged to do following calls to

'decolonise the curriculum' (Arshad, 2021; Muldoon, 2019).

At post graduate level, I make use of my role as supervisor for research projects to offer LGBT-focused topics. Contrary to my expectation that this would attract the LGBT+ students in the cohort, I was surprised that the students who chose me as supervisor seemed to be mainly heterosexual. Some indeed struggled to spell out the very 'LGBT' acronym in conversations about the research. This created the opportunity to help these (assumed to be cisgender and heterosexual) students to become more aware of important aspects of sexual minorities' realities, such as their higher rates of mental health (Nodin et al., 2015; Chakraborty et al., 2011) and the societal pressures often associated with those outcomes.

For many of these students I had to explain the difference between sexual orientation and trans experiences, often conflated in their minds, and the methodological and political implications this distinction has. I also explain why the medical term 'homosexual' should be avoided and the more contemporary and empowering 'gay' or 'queer' should be used, despite the latter still holding negative connotations for some people mostly outside of the LGBT+ community but sometimes also within it. Small but important pedagogical moments such as these and the larger involvement of these students with LGBT+ research projects hopefully multiply when the students later become the pedagogues in their daily lives with their families, partners, friends and colleagues.

Criticisms to an identity approach to LGBT+ curriculum inclusivity

The approaches to embedding LGBT+ issues in the curriculum that I have discussed here are not without its critics. I would like to focus on those that derive from pedagogical applications of the paradigm known as Queer Theory (Jagose, 1996; Turner, 2000). Queer Theory emerged towards the end of the 20th century as a development from

ideas initially put forth by Foucault (1981) on the socially constructed nature of the categories of sexual orientation. Foucault described how in the 19th century the concept of homosexuality was created by emergent scientific fields; while prior to that men engaging in same-sex activities were seen as succumbing to a sin undefining of their identities, with the advent of psychiatry and sexology these men started to be seen as a new 'species'; that of the homosexual. Foucault's insight highlighted the ways by which knowledge may be used to categorise and control people and their desires.

By extending such approach to any essentialist ideas of identity, Queer Theory became a criticism of the idea that identities are stable, and aimed at 'disrupting and politicising all presumed relations between and among sex, gender, bodies, sexuality, and desire' (Pramaggiore, 2013). Because of this, Queer Theory clashes with the dominant concept of 'gay' as defended by the LGBT+ movement, whose agenda is defined by identity politics³. For Queer Theory, identity politics can only happen at the expense of excluding marginal, non-conforming and resistant expressions of identity and sexuality, and therefore it is not fully accommodating of human (sexual) diversity.

Queer Theory became one of the most influential conceptual frameworks to emerge in recent decades in the humanities and social sciences, with far reaching impact in many areas. It is therefore unsurprising that the paradigm has also been applied to pedagogy from its early days (Britzman, 1995; Luhmann, 1998). Indeed, Queer Theory's elusive and critical nature allows for several possible interpretations and applications when questioning pedagogical contexts, topics and methodologies (Allen, 2015).

However, queer pedagogical perspectives are not necessarily concerned with

how queer (or LGBT) topics and subjects can be included in teaching in a way that is agreeable to the students (Luhmann 1998). Within queer pedagogy, 'curricula that purport to be inclusive may actually work to produce new forms of exclusivity if the only subject positions offered are the tolerant normal and the tolerated subaltern' (Britzman, 1995, p.160). In other words, the inclusion of sexual minority identities in the lecture room - for instance, gay and lesbian representations or role models as I and others have suggested - can only be accomplished at the expense of excluding others which remain invisible, for example, bisexual, asexual, transgender people or anyone who does not conform to conventional categories of sexual orientation or gender. Therefore, queer pedagogy actively refutes this approach on basis of the need to engage with difference ethically, including but not limited to sexual and gender difference, in pedagogy.

As a consequence, Britzman (1995) suggested that the aim should be that of approaching pedagogy by using queer (i.e. critical) methodologies, thus effectively queering the curricula in the strictest of senses. Or, as put by Renn (2010), '(t)here is much to be learned from studies that use queer theory and studies that theorise on the nature of gender identity and sexuality as constructed in - and constructing - higher education organisations and the experiences of people in them' (p.137).

Some have taken on this challenge to highlight how traditional views of teaching (i.e. the teacher as 'the holder of knowledge' and the learning process as passive) are hardly accurate in reflecting the dynamics of learning. Reading a text or attending a lecture, for example, imply processes of resistance (to knowledge) and of identification, which bear an effect on

³ Identity politics: 'Political positions and activism based on an aspect of identity (e.g. ethnicity, religion, sex, or sexual orientation) shared by a group which feels that its concerns are not adequately represented' (Chandler & Munday 2011).

what is effectively learned (Luhmann, 1998). Furthermore, this approach to pedagogy also questions the ways by which the teacher understands, reacts to and manages resistance to the learning process. In sum, this approach to queering pedagogical theory is concerned with dissecting the dynamics of learning, more than with inserting queer subjects in the curriculum.

This view has close ties and can indeed be seen as part of the tradition of critical pedagogy inaugurated by Freire (1972), by asking questions more than providing answers on the 'how to' in the teaching and learning experiences, for instance, by applying a critique to issues such as the distinction between theory and practice in learning environments (Garcia, 2010). However, it also started a relevant discussion about issues of sexual identity, sexual orientation and gender in pedagogy where these were not yet fully taken into account. For all these reasons, queer pedagogy becomes relevant not only to those identifying as LGBT+ or even to those who identify as queer, but to all students and to all teachers, by offering ways of thinking reflexively and critically about the (higher) educational system.

Conclusions

Many of the approaches to creating a curriculum more inclusive of sexual diversity that were discussed focus on representation and reflexivity. However, this clashes with queer pedagogical perspectives according to which including LGBT+ representations in academia only reinforces models which do not accurately represent the full range of human (sexual) diversity and therefore perpetuates the exclusion of other representations. The queer project when applied to teaching and learning becomes a more radical and political one focusing on questioning boundaries and practices in pedagogy (Britzman, 1995; Luhmann, 1998).

However, it can be argued that these two perspectives are not mutually exclusive. Indeed, both have coexisted to a certain extent in modern academia in recent

decades and brought important contributions to pedagogical practices and to the experiences of teachers and students alike. While offering a potent critique of disciplinarity and pedagogy (Halberstam, 2003) and highlighting the need for a theoretical, ethical, and political approach to the delivery of knowledge (Milton, 1997), the queer understanding of identity remains of difficult incorporation into higher education. Eliminating identity representations from teaching altogether does not seem feasible, and opening windows to fluid and non-conforming identities, albeit not impossible, remains challenging in a world where identity politics set the tone to many of the discussions being had in activism, politics, the media and indeed in academia, for instance in relation to issues of gender, ethnicity, nationality, or political affiliation.

Psychology can have an important role in understanding some of these challenges and contributing to these discussions, for instance via research into the effects of measures to diversify representation in the lecture room (Oberle et al., 2011; Russ et al., 2002). Furthermore, those who teach psychology have an important role in diversifying representations in their teaching, especially considering the historical connections that the discipline has with the study and at points with the oppression of sexual minorities (Ellis et al., 2019). This may require critical auditing of curricula, lecture materials and reading lists, in order to assess, review and if necessary replace existing contents with more inclusive ones.

Diverse (LGBT+) representations therefore remain important at university inside and out of the lecture room. The LGBT+ lecturer is faced with the challenging decision of whether to come out and contribute to this goal, while weighting the consequences, personal, professional and pedagogical, of this decision, something that heterosexual and cisgender academics usually need not worry about (Marrs & Staton, 2016). To combat this, widening the visibility and inclusivity of sexual minorities in the curriculum

and at university should be shared by all members of staff regardless of their sexual orientation or gender identity, and indeed of the university as an institution, which has the duty of ensuring that the people who

study and work there feel safe, recognised and empowered.

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