

Strategies for Reaching Sexual Minority Students Inside and Outside the Classroom

Jeffrey L. Helms and Teresa Joyce

Kennesaw State University

Even on the most open campuses, sexual minority individuals [i.e., lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, questioning, and intersexual (LGBTQQI) people] often feel excluded in the educational environment. Although there are certainly active attempts to marginalize these individuals, marginalization also occurs due to benign neglect resulting from "invisibility." As a result of this invisibility, active strategies can and should be used to incorporate LGBTQQI students into campus life inside and outside of the classroom. This chapter provides information about some basic strategies for faculty members to accomplish this objective.

Strategies that can be used inside the classroom fall into two broad categories: obvious and subtle. Obvious strategies are direct in nature and have little ambiguity or room for interpretation in the attempt to be inclusive. Subtle strategies, on the other hand, attain the goal of inclusiveness in less direct ways. Even though these two types of strategies overlap, we assign examples to one category or the other for the sake of simplicity.

Obvious Strategies for Use Inside the Classroom

Invite speakers to give relevant presentations

One of the most obvious ways to reach LGBTQQI students, and all students for that matter, is through the use of invited speakers and presentations on related topics. Openly LGBTQQI professionals/psychologists in the community can be a valuable resource for courses. Many LGBTQQI community organizations have speakers' bureaus that are excited by invitations to address students. However, it is imperative that LGBTQQI-relevant coverage go beyond topics such as sexually transmitted diseases and hate crimes. Although these are extremely important issues for all people, focusing too much time on these negatives gives a skewed perception of LGBTQQI people and life. Some national organizations that may have local chapters or may be able to give you leads on speakers in your community include the Human Rights Campaign (<http://www.hrc.org/>); Parents, Families, and Friends of Lesbians and Gays (<http://www.pflag.org/>); and the American Civil Liberties Union (<http://www.aclu.org/>).

Assign articles for your students to read

Although this strategy probably speaks for itself, many of us may be unaware of the respected, peer-reviewed journals that contain relevant articles. Journals distributed by

the American Psychological Association (APA) and its divisions are always a good place to start. Additionally, there are topic-specific journals, such as the *Journal of Homosexuality*, *Journal of Bisexuality*, *Journal of Sex Research*, *Journal of Sex Education and Therapy*, *Journal of Gay and Lesbian Psychotherapy*, and *Sex Roles*. For additional assistance, APA's Public Interest Directorate's Healthy Lesbian, Gay, and Bisexual Students Project web site has a searchable database (<http://www.apa.org/pi/hlgb/>).

Integrate LGBTQQI topics into your course material

Most topics can be easily transformed or modified to be LGBTQQI-inclusive. Additionally, some have special significance for LGBTQQI people (e.g., prejudice). Regardless of whether you choose specialized topics or modify existing ones, every field of psychology has produced peer-reviewed material related and relevant to the LGBTQQI population. Here are some potential applications that can be expanded with the assistance of major database searches (e.g., PsycInfo, ERIC, MEDLINE).

Social psychology courses can address issues such as stigma and prejudice, stereotyping, and heterosexual privilege; abnormal psychology classes can address how suicide impacts LGBTQQI people, especially youth. In developmental psychology classes, in utero development of intersexual people and sexual identity development readily fit; psychology of gender courses can easily tailor a discussion of sex/gender role development toward LGBTQQI issues. Family psychology courses can incorporate material and discussion related to gay parenting. Even the upper-level, more traditional science-oriented courses can be inclusive. For example, cognitive psychology classes can include the issue of risk-taking behavior in LGBTQQI people, physiological psychology courses can review relevant brain development studies in the course readings, and perception classes can address research on auditory differences between gay and straight people. Additionally, psychopharmacology courses can incorporate discussion about the use of drugs and alcohol in LGBTQQI communities and individuals.

Establish a supportive climate with your syllabus

The first introduction students often have to a course and to the professor is through the syllabus. As a result, this is an excellent opportunity to reach LGBTQQI students and set a tone for the course (i.e., an inclusive, safe environment). One way to set this tone is via an explicit, inclusive diversity statement in the syllabus and to go over it on the first day of class. The syllabus can also be an opportunity to provide links to campus and community support systems and resources (e.g., LGBTQQI-friendly student groups).

Develop inclusive assignments

Course assignments are another obvious strategy for incorporating LGBTQQI topics and individuals into the course. Some possibilities include critical reviews of articles relevant to LGBTQQI people or areas of study, interviewing an LGBTQQI psychologist or researcher, reviewing a popular media's depiction of LGBTQQI issues/people and assessing how it meshes with the available research, and requiring writing assignments to be sensitive in terms of language usage. Professors can also include examples of LGBTQQI research topics so that students know that these are acceptable and important issues for further study when students have an option to select a research topic.

Subtle Strategies for Use Inside the Classroom

Use the LGBTQQI acronym

Although certainly a mouthful, use of the initials LGBTQQI when discussing lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, questioning, and intersexual people demonstrates to students that the course is inclusive of all sexual minorities, not only the traditionally referred to LGB portion. In the use of the initials, it is also important to highlight that these are self-identified labels. As such, individuals who self-identify as LGBTQQI do not necessarily have to meet typical or generally accepted operational definitions of LGBTQQI. This last point is especially important when reviewing and critiquing research, noting the importance of both the self-identification issue and intergroup and intragroup differences that may be present.

Use inclusive language when describing relationships

Another subtle way to increase the inclusiveness of the classroom is by avoiding the identification of relational factors in narrow ways. Here are several examples and factors to consider.

"Partner." This relational term ensures the applicability of your examples to dyadic relationships that are same-sex, opposite-sex, or intersex.

"Their relationship." The use of this phrase refuses to identify the governmental, social, or religious sanctioning of the relationship. Using relational terms like marriage, civil union, and domestic partnership suggest to the listeners that these relationships hold more value than those that have not been sanctioned. The use of "their" also does not indicate the number of partners in the relationship, a reminder that not all relationships are dyadic.

Closed/open and polyamorous relationships. The nonassumption of monogamy is important since a segment of the population (neither exclusive to nor definitive of LGBTQQI people) does not define their intimate/sexual relationships as exclusive of other people or potential partners.

Keep in mind that just because a person's primary intimate/sexual relationship is with someone of the same sex does not mean the person is homosexual (e.g., the person could be bisexual). Sexual orientation is not defined by a partner's gender or even the presence of a partner.

In general, open discussion of the impact of language is never a bad thing. This type of discussion can include not only the issues of a label's denotation and connotation but also the issue of stigma brought about through labels. Additional language strategies can include switching gender/orientation of the typical examples used in lecture and making a point to include LGBTQQI examples throughout lectures.

Regardless of the subtlety of the strategy, LGBTQQI students will see our efforts toward fostering an inclusive environment. Certainly the keyword here is "effort." Although all of these attempts may not be well received, if we are willing to learn and are genuinely concerned, it will show in our openness to questions and our own questions. Shaping a discussion through a simple question like, "How might this be applicable to LGBTQQI individuals in a similar situation?" can set a tone for a class. On the whole, subtle strategies may be easier to incorporate into the curriculum when teaching in an environment that may not be receptive to the inclusion of these topics (e.g., socially conservative administrations and student bodies).

Strategies for Use Outside the Classroom

Use visual strategies

Our office doors are an extension of our personalities. They are the first clue to faculty openness to LGBTQQI people. As a result, having a welcoming office door "speaks" volumes. Displaying a rainbow sticker and LGBTQQI-related information (e.g., campus events, Coming Out Day celebration activities, Pride Month activities for your area) can go a long way to putting LGBTQQI people at ease. Depending on the receptivity of your colleagues, a welcoming departmental office door and building bulletin board may also prove useful.

Sponsor Psychology Club and Psi Chi activities

Sometimes all it takes is a nudge from a group's faculty advisor to set the wheels in motion. Encouraging discipline-related groups to sponsor LGBTQQI-related activities can go a long way, and many of the in-class activities described earlier (e.g., invited speakers from LGBTQQI-related community groups and organizations) can also be used for these gatherings.

Involve your department

Many of the strategies already mentioned can be adopted at the departmental level. For example, departmental web pages can display not only a departmental diversity statement that is inclusive of sexual minorities, but it can also contain links to related resources. If the department is not ready for this level of openness/inclusion, individual faculty members' web pages are a perfect alternative. Potential links include APA's Public Interest Directorate - Lesbian, Gay, and Bisexual Concerns (<http://www.apa.org/pi/lgb/>); APA's Division 44 - Society for the Psychological Study of Lesbian, Gay, and Bisexual Issues (<http://www.apadivision44.org/>); and APA's Public Interest Directorate's Healthy Lesbian, Gay, and Bisexual Students Project (<http://www.apa.org/pi/hlgb/>). Your state or regional psychological organization may also be potential resources. For example, Georgia Psychological Association's Division H - Sexual Orientation Issues and California Psychological Association's Division VII - Public Interest has a subdivision devoted to LGBTQQI issues.

"Wow! That's a Lot of Stuff! I Can't Do All of That!"

The strategies noted earlier are suggestions and possibilities. Although it would be exhausting to become "inclusive" overnight (or even over one semester or academic year), small steps toward inclusiveness go a long way. As a result, we suggest picking just one of the strategies for the current semester. Incorporate that strategy into your class, web page, or class/club activity. Next semester, add one more. As your comfort level rises with each class discussion and each activity included, the impact will become even more apparent. Additionally, small but deliberate steps may be better received in more conservative environments. Regardless, all of these methods communicate to LGBTQQI students, allies, and nonallies that LGBTQQI people not only have a place at the table but also are welcome at the table.

Note

An earlier version of this chapter was presented at a symposium at the Reaching Out: Best Practices in Teaching Diversity and International Perspectives Across the Psychology Curriculum conference in Atlanta, Georgia in October 2006.