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Jason Barr,

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DISCUSSING GENDER AND SEXUALITY IN THE COMMUNITY COLLEGE CLASSROOM

BY JASON BARR

I suppose my first real brush with the naiveté of some of my younger students happened in this way: we were having a class discussion on African Americans and how they “alter public space,” building off of an essay by Brent Staples. Our class was not what one would consider racially diverse—we had one African American student and two Hispanic students; the other twenty-three were white – but there was a large gap in age. A small group of five adults were bunkered in the corner of the room; the other twenty or so students were traditionally aged first-year students.

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As the discussion progressed, the adult African American male shared his experience as a child in Southern Virginia. His impetus for sharing this story was that the younger portion of the class was ready to dismiss Brent Staples’s concerns and declare racism in America dead, ipso facto. His story was simple: he told the class that in the 1970’s, he clearly recalled convenience stores and restaurants with signs in the window that proclaimed, “No Niggers Allowed.” The other adults in the class agreed, and began to share their experiences, but were quickly drowned out by the dismissive comments from the younger part of the class; several of them proclaimed “yeah, right,” loudly, and some snickered to themselves and shook their heads. I explained to the students the phenomenon of so-called “sundown towns,” which openly discouraged African American visitors with the underlying sentiment that they would not be protected from violence, especially as night approached. Many students switched from derision to incredulity, though I noted there were still some who appeared to foster disbelief.

This reaction is not entirely their fault. Most, if not all, of these young students were products of the SOL-driven public education system in Virginia. Their education concerning civil rights essentially equates to Martin Luther King, Jr., appearing in the 1960s, giving a speech, perhaps waving a wand, and all civil rights for African Americans instantly appeared. Indeed, during my brief time as an elementary school teacher, it was not uncommon to hear students reciting their parents’ beliefs on slavery. Some students often said something to the effect of “Slavery wasn’t that bad; the owners had to take care of the slaves if they wanted them to work.

And during the Obama Inauguration, which the whole school watched live, several students needed to be chastised for making rifle motions at the screen. “My dad says someone needs to stop him,” one of these students told me. These are more extreme examples, of course, but I’ve discovered that, during the portions of my college class in which we discuss African American history, I often receive blank stares when I bring up major figures in African American history that are apparently not SOL-related: Booker T. Washington, W.E.B. DuBois, Marcus Garvey, Matthew Henson, Paul Robeson, and Malcom X, among others. These important figures – many of whom shaped the contemporary African American experience – are all but forgotten by the curriculum, and therefore, the students.

Of course, the art of teaching African American issues and literature has been well covered in this journal and others. I tell this story, however, because it illustrated to me the general ignorance of many traditionally aged students toward people whom they perceive as non-normative. This particular incident dovetails nicely with a similar incident that occurred in the same semester, although in a different class. A student shared with the class in calm, but offensive and abusive language, her views on homosexuality. She did not seem aware that her attitude and her language, even when couched in ordinary conversation, was creating discomfort with much of the class, especially the closeted (except to me and a few others) gay student who sat, squirming uncomfortably, two rows over. This was a learning experience for everyone, albeit painful, and, as a result, this essay will discuss a more rarely broached topic: discussing gender and sexuality in the community college classroom.

A few semesters ago – and one semester after the above incident – I had assigned Michael Chabon’s *The Adventures of Kavalier and Clay* as a supplementary novel for a composition course. I had chosen the novel with an eye toward discussing a variety of issues, including domesticity, the creative process, and the history of early twentieth century America. Additionally, the novel had been well regarded by academic critics and the “lay” reader alike and was, frankly, a work I had enjoyed as well. There was an openly gay male character in the work, and I would soon discover that I had underestimated the students’ general resistance to that particular topic in general.

My concerns about the general class reaction to the somewhat frank depictions of homosexuality in the novel began even before we had started to read the work. One of the more outspoken male students in the class – and probably one of the more popular members of the class – spoke at length about his tour in Iraq before and after class. He fondly noted that he and members of his unit would spend down time “acting faggoty” with one another. (Ironically, his perspective toward much of the literature we approached up to this point had been some of the most astute in the class). He also directed me to a YouTube video he and his friends had posted that illustrated this concept: they pranced around, gave each other hugs, and did other stereotypically “gay” things. He thought this was hilarious, as did many others in the class who viewed the video on their own time. He was obviously proud of this, and he became, because of his gregarious nature, a de facto leader for several of the other males in the classroom. In other words, at least partially because of his military experience, he had placed a high value on hegemonic masculinity, in which

his “[s]elf discipline, physical ability, emotional control . . . and intelligence” placed him in a superior social hierarchy (Hinojosa 191), with everyone else falling to the lower rungs of the hierarchy. It would not be unusual for me to walk into the room several minutes before class began and hear him being peppered with questions by the other male students, including discussions about his sexual conquests, his workouts, and the amount of weight he could bench press.

As we started to read the novel, most of the students were openly receptive to the themes we had discussed, but when one of the main characters finally “comes out of the closet,” I noticed several students essentially shut down in terms of class discussion. Additionally, one scene in particular – in which this same character is brutally raped by a male FBI agent – propelled discussion for more class time than I anticipated. This scene, after all, was about three paragraphs buried within a novel well over six hundred pages long. In other words, it became a struggle to *both* discuss and to *not* discuss issues of gender, which was never my sole focus to begin with. Instead, many students just could not seem to “turn off the tap,” and several of them, mostly men, would return to the character’s homosexuality as the alpha and omega of his existence.

Though the discussions centering on homosexuality were often congenial and open, I noticed that the class had divided themselves: those who were willing to discuss the issues, and those that weren’t. The course surveys I received supported my intuition. I specifically asked for direct feedback on the novel. No one mentioned the length of the work or its complexity; instead, a large number of students wrote something to the effect of “I loved the novel” or “I hated the book,” with little variance in between. Almost all of the survey responses mentioned homosexuality or gender in some way.

This piqued my curiosity, and I began to wonder what conceptions the average community college student brings into a classroom discussion that centers on homosexual or transgendered issues. Remembering my discussion about African American literature a semester earlier, and how many students appeared to be unaware of the issues at hand, I decided to perform a survey that would help me to gauge three factors: 1) the prior knowledge students held concerning homosexual or transgendered literature, 2) the prior knowledge students held regarding homosexual or transgendered issues/identity, and 3) how students regarded homosexuality in general. This survey was informal and the intention was to guide my planning for future courses in which we would discuss issues surrounding homosexuality and gender identity.

After distributing these surveys to a total of six classes, and receiving seventy-five responses, I noticed some interesting trends. One of the biggest and most surprising trends was that students who regarded themselves as “open-minded” toward discussing homosexuality in the classroom were often also those who deemed it either “somewhat acceptable” or “completely acceptable” to use terms such as “faggot” or “dyke” during a class discussion.

Most disturbingly, however, was the incredibly high number of students who could not recognize prominent gay authors or writers, or those who admitted to never discussing the topic in a high school classroom. Many pre-service teachers who have a willingness

to learn about and understand basic gender issues are severely underserved by their programs, with around 40% of all teacher preparation programs in the United States failing “to include sexual orientation topics within program curriculum endorsed by faculty” (Macgillivray and Jennings 176). While this is somewhat understandable – the issue is not fodder for the SOLs, and the prospect of talking about homosexuality in a high school classroom could be intimidating – it does show that a simple dash into a novel, short story, or discussion that broaches homosexuality as a discussion topic requires a more intricately structured approach.

These sorts of results allowed me to create three distinct categories of student and how they approach or perceive homosexuality. This has been done before on a wide variety of levels, but primarily in high school populations. Even so, these categories that I have named do match up with qualities listed in other characterizations, including Fear, Hostility, Concern, and Ambivalence (Peters 334). Instead, what I have done is create categories based on a student’s willingness to participate in a gender-driven classroom discussion. I will name these three types of student and briefly discuss their characteristics.

The Open

These students appear aware and somewhat well-informed about gender issues. They may have a general gap in their knowledge concerning major homosexual figures, but they overall appear to be ready and willing to engage in an open, constructive, and substantive discussion.

The Unaware

This group of students tends to view themselves in a more favorable light, but remains somewhat ignorant or unaware of major issues surrounding gender. A good example of this is a student who, on the survey, claimed to be “progressive” and “forward thinking,” but found the use of “faggot” in a classroom discussion to be “completely acceptable.” The student also added that he didn’t “understand how there could be such a thing as ‘gay issues,’” and also freely commented that he was “okay with gays,” so long as they didn’t “flirt with” him. Another student who was “alright” with homosexuality openly wondered why there were no “straight pride” days. These students may be well-intentioned, but could damage a class discussion by accidentally fostering negative stereotypes about homosexuals.

The Entrenched

Simply put, these are generally the students who have disdain toward homosexuality. As one student wrote on his survey, “I neither like or [sic] tolerate homosexuality.. Another student proclaimed that “gays are nasty” and they “deserve” to be called names. These are the students who generally fall totally silent in class, and will certainly need the most work in terms of increasing their understanding of the topics at hand.

Though I did not initially set out to statistically examine the questions – my purpose was to gather honest, anonymous feedback from students – a brief rendition of some of the percentages may be useful before we continue.

The gender composition of the classes was split almost down the middle: 53.5% of the respondents were male, 46.5% female. Over 86% of the students claimed they had not been exposed to gay or transgendered authors in high school, and their inability to recognize major gay and transgendered authors or their works bears this out. Many of the author or works, including Edward Albee, Tony Kushner, and John Cheever – all of them Pulitzer Prize winners – ranked in the 80th percentile of students being unable to recognize any aspect of the author or their work. The two most recognized authors were Walt Whitman and Oscar Wilde, with over 50% of respondents claiming to be able to recognize some aspect of them or their work. The apparent contradiction between students who claimed to be unexposed to gay or transgendered authors and those who could recognize Whitman and Wilde can be explained away easily – high school teachers are discussing Whitman and Wilde, but are avoiding discussions regarding their sexuality. This is borne out by my own experience – many students are absolutely flabbergasted to hear that Walt Whitman, at the very least, was bisexual. More surprisingly, students are equally shocked to hear Oscar Wilde had numerous homosexual dalliances, which, when exposed in the courts, essentially ended his career, and ultimately, his life. Indeed, many secondary schools “remain skeptical . . . of the idea that curricular content should include information about the sexual orientation of historical and literary figures” (Beigel 142). To them, Walt Whitman and Oscar Wilde were simply the people who wrote things they had to read in high school, answers to standardized test questions.

This, therefore, becomes the starting point for approaching homosexuality and gay topics in the classroom. Unfortunately, a large amount of this “preparation” occurs long before they enter the classroom. Social upbringing, personal experience, prior knowledge, and even the overall campus environment impact a student’s perception and ability to discuss gender-related issues in the classroom. Essentially, when a student enters a classroom, they carry with them, to be poetic, the weight of their world. An instructor will not be able to change opinions, but there should be a goal to at least allow some free exchange of appropriate opinion in an environment that everyone feels is safe. This should be the goal of any classroom, but especially so in this age range, where any number of young students are wrestling with their gender identity (Ivory 65). Recent research indicates that in a classroom of twenty to thirty students, it would be “appropriate to assume that there are gays and lesbians in the room” (Biegel 133). Certainly, many community colleges would benefit from having strong LGBT programs on campus, but, unfortunately, the implementation of these programs have been sporadic. As one author notes, “[i]t seems unreasonable to expect teachers to be willing to discuss openly a topic about which they have little or no education themselves” (Loutzenheiser 62). Unfortunately, community colleges occupy a space practically devoid of research on the unique collision of age, gender, and race that occurs in almost every classroom. The research that is conducted tends to focus on what is to be done on the campus, rather than in the classroom, and most research focuses on secondary schools or four-year institutions. Even so, the first step any educator who chooses to promote gender identity discussions in the classroom should take is to seek out opportunities for further training.

There are still some basic techniques to employ. The first step to creating a safe, open classroom environment, of course, is to create a “safe” classroom. Within this context should be the classroom that is considered “safe” enough to incorporate all viewpoints. Those students who are classified as “entrenched,” for example, may already be aware that their opinions toward homosexuality are unpopular or problematic. As these students grew throughout their education, they became conditioned to take the road less fraught with peril: silence. Everyone should be able to freely express their opinion in a classroom discussion, even those with “unpopular” opinions. After all, the so-called “teachable moment” that forms much of the basis of modern pedagogy can be sculpted from an often controversial statement. As a result, moderating a discussion requires a significant amount of tact on the part of the instructor, and the instructor needs to consider how he or she uses language in the classroom in an effort to set a standard for students to follow.

Perhaps the first aspect of this problem is that the instructor needs to discuss value judgments and the impact of stereotyping within the classroom. Consider the report by the Massachusetts Governor’s Commission on Gay and Lesbian Youth, which discovered that 53% “of gay, lesbian and bisexual students heard teachers use homophobic statements” (Loutzenhiser 62). While the report is admittedly outdated, what should be drawn from this report is that, most likely, these students were not reporting generic name-calling, but also prevailing negative attitudes that came across to them as judgmental or stereotypical. While telling students not to use the word “fag” or its derivatives in a classroom is fairly basic, advising students to avoid using the word “sinner” in reference to gays is a bit trickier; this is not a word that educators would normally forbid in class, but “sinner” carries with it a large negative value judgment. These sorts of value judgments tend to be as divisive in the classroom as more aggressive or blunt language. These comments are indeed powder kegs, and will engage almost every student, regardless of what category they fall in. Those students who perceive themselves as “open” or “unaware” may rush in to “defend” a perceived slight, causing other students to either ramp up their rhetoric or simply fall silent.

Another step is to avoid any assumptions of heteronormativity – that heterosexuality is “normal” and all other persuasions are “abnormal.” Like the “safe” classroom concept, this is a deceptively complex technique. Many students and instructors, for example, may freely consider the negative stereotypes – that male homosexuals are “girly,” that lesbians are “manly” and so on – but there are numerous other assumptions that occur surrounding gender questioning students, such as that they are politically liberal, or irreligious (Biegel 137). These sorts of assumptions drive home the point to all students that somehow, someone who is homosexual falls outside the “norm.”

Just as dangerous, perhaps, is the mindset that LGBTQ students are victims. This attitude swings the scales in the opposite direction, from policing negative stereotypes to an almost overly sympathetic view. Discussing a gay character, for example, may cause some to focus solely on the victimization – and, indeed, this was the focus a lot of students kept falling back on during our *Kavalier and Clay* discussions – which robs the person or character of a distinct and fully autonomous identity. Certainly, during the time period that this novel was

set, being openly – or even closeted – homosexual could lead to a wide variety of abuses, but the discussions continuously veered back toward the “poor gays” (their words) and their modern struggles. Though well meaning, the students had come to perceive LGBT people as victims first, and actual people second. This, of course, stripped away definitive portions of the character’s identity, and also led to some wild misinterpretations of the work and stereotyping in reality. The balancing act falls in keeping students aware of the hatred formerly (and even now) directed at the LGBT population, and also acknowledging, on the other hand, that their identities have not been forged through victimization. This language is also easy to identify simply by language that uses collective pronouns; for example, “all *they* want to do is to be like everybody else,” an overly loaded statement that was spoken several times in our class discussions, and one that somehow managed, despite the good intentions of the speaker, to combine almost every negative aspect of language in one sentiment.

Any classroom discussion, of course, can turn sour quickly, mostly from the often unintentional efforts of one or two students. Even though many educators warn the class against sexist and racist comments, and the class response is generally one of apathetic acknowledgement, gender-based discussions often remain unexplored, for fear of a student “saying the wrong thing.” This can – and does – happen, but the educator should attempt to strike a delicate balancing act by respecting the basic purpose of the discussion while effectively moderating all sides. This is perhaps the most effective way for students to learn and to grow more comfortably in a world where gender identity and concerns will continue to dominate their lives.

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Jason Barr is currently an English Instructor at Blue Ridge Community College. He holds Master’s degrees in English and Teaching, and has been published in The Explicator and the African American Review.