Queer(y)ing Religion and Spirituality: Reflections from Difficult Dialogues exploring Religion, Spirituality, and Homosexuality
Lucy LePeau[*]

This article describes a student affairs practitioner's experience with co-instructing a course entitled, "Queer(y)ing Religion and Spirituality". The ways practitioners can facilitate difficult dialogues with students about the intersection of spirituality and GLBT issues are explored.

Recently, the influence of spirituality affecting students' identity development as young adults has received more consideration in higher education (Parks, 2000; Love, Bock, Jannarone, & Richardson, 2005). Part of the challenge described in published literature pertaining to the study of spirituality is identifying whether or not spirituality is interconnected or separate from religion (Nash, 2001; Love, 2002). When issues of spirituality and the dimension of identity through sexual orientation overlap, conflict often arises for people of all sexual orientations (Love et al., 2005). Some mainstream religious denominations do not view homosexual orientation as "sinful", but may view homosexual behaviors as "sinful" making it challenging for people of multiple religious orientations to understand (Love et al.,2005; Nash, 2001).

Multiple Definitions of Spirituality and Sexuality

Confounding the challenge of understanding students' spiritual development is the multitude of definitions used to describe spirituality. Love (2002) uses examples from Palmer and Helminiak to try to differentiate between religion and spirituality. Religion is described as dogma and doctrine and spirituality is described as seeking "authenticity, genuineness, and wholeness" (Helminiak as cited in Love, 2002, p. 359). However, Nash (2001) describes how both religion and spirituality are complementary to one another because students should be able to combine both their heads and their hearts in making-meaning. Multiple interpretations of differentiating and combining spirituality and religion makes exploring how students see these constructs as particularly intriguing (Dalton, 2001) especially as it relates to sexuality. Recently, a study by Love, Bock, Jannarone, and Richardson (2005) explored spiritual experiences

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[*] *Lucy LePeau is the assistant dean of students for new student programs at UNC Charlotte. Correspondence concerning this article should be sent to lalepeau@uncc.edu.*

for lesbian and gay college students. In this study, the authors declare that in American culture there is no integration between sexuality and spirituality where heterosexuals can experience a sense of safety, even if this is not necessarily a healthy practice. In light of the current research exploring lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) students' interaction between spiritual and identity development, the course "Queer(y)ing Religion and Spirituality" provided students with a venue to try to understand spiritual and identity development for themselves, as heterosexuals, and for individuals who identify as homosexual.

Course Design

Context for the Course "Queer(y)ing Religion and Spirituality"

I co-instructed this two credit eight-week undergraduate course through the College of Education at Indiana University Bloomington (IUB), a Research I, public university with approximately 38,000 students (Indiana Campus Profile, 2005). The course was taught during two semesters, both the Fall of 2004 and Spring of 2005. My co-instructor and I were advised by the Director of the GLBT (Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, Transgendered) Student Services office and the Director of Campus Ministries throughout both semesters of the course. The format of the course was similar each semester, but my experiences as a co-instructor each semester were very different because of the diversity of students enrolled.

The course material raised questions like: What do faith traditions and personal spirituality have to do with diversity of sexual orientation and gender identity? Might gender categories other than male and female inform our sense of the spiritual? Is 'gay marriage' a political, social, personal, religious, or legal issue? This course provided a safe space for any students (whether gay, straight, or somewhere in between, whether religious or non-religious) to raise their own awareness with regard to these issues and to deepen their understanding of the interrelatedness of sexuality and spirituality. Reflection through journal writing and dialogue with religious leaders, classmates, and campus administrators from multiple faith traditions were significant components of the class (LePeau, Wailes, Jimenez, & Bauder 2005).

In the course syllabus, the co-instructors included a page entitled, "Guidelines for Class Dialogue." We stated, "During the first class, the class members will establish guidelines and a learning covenant for dialogue. Religion, spirituality, and sexuality are passionate subjects for many people, and issues involving all three are often controversial. This course is based on the expectation that we

will foster an environment for dialogue" (LePeau et al., 2005; p. 5). Part of the first class discussion emphasized students exploring the differences between dialogue and debate and the feelings associated with both terms. Students in the course then created guidelines for class discussion that became a living document of our class syllabus.

Course Framework

We began the class by introducing student development theory. After having students make connections between the theories described in some of their own undergraduate disciplines such as the sciences or communications, we shifted the discussion to how the students could view student development theory as a useful tool to help explain how a college student makes meaning of their sexual and spiritual identity.

Each subsequent class was divided into two parts that included: (1) a presentation by a religious or non-religious leader who discussed their faith and homosexuality, followed by (2) small group discussions regarding the ideas shared by the presenter. In addition to journal writing, the course assignments included: entrance tickets or questions students brought to the class for dialogue after they reflected on the assigned readings; an immersion project, where students attended a religious community different from anything they had previously experienced and observed how the community copes with GLBT issues; and reflection papers. The reflection papers were intended to deepen students' self-awareness by giving them an opportunity to apply developmental theories, information from reading assignments, and material from in-class presentations as they reflected upon their own spiritual journey with regard to GLBT issues. Below I will share some of the challenges we faced using relevant parts of the PIE model framework (Watt, 2007).

Challenges when Engaging in Difficult Dialogues in this Course

Emotions sometimes ran high for students in both class sections. It was not unusual for a student to cry, to be personally moved from a speaker's story, or to express anger when dissonance occurred between their own perspective and someone else's. We often experienced students who identified as heterosexual expressing "false envy" for some of the speakers or students in the class who identified as homosexual or bisexual. However, more often than not, we observed students emotional expressions taking on the defense modes of denial, deflection, and principium (Watt, 2007).

Denial

Because the course intentionally reviewed published stances on homosexuality from multiple faith traditions, we dissected the stances both in dialogue with our guest speakers and as a class. Some of the individual speaker's ways of making meaning of homosexuality in light of their respective religious tradition were clear to the students, while others were not. This ambiguity fostered relativistic and/or contextual thinking in our students when a speaker's understanding of homosexuality was not congruent with their faith tradition's published stance. In other words, students searched for ways to understand homosexuality by making comparisons and contrasts to their own religious upbringing. Students would make statements such as "I have always been told homosexuality was a sin. It confuses me to think that the references I have been pointed to in the Bible are a matter of interpretation." However, when the published stance was congruent with the speaker's perspective of homosexuality some students expressed "denial" that someone who identifies as GLBT may feel oppressed in some mainstream religious traditions (Watt, 2007). This was typically revealed when students would make statements denying that homosexuals would not be welcomed at their church and alluding to the idea that their church hates the sin and not the sinner.

Deflection

Some students had difficulty pondering the intersections of their religious, spiritual, or sexual orientation development. For example, students would comment that they never discussed homosexuality growing up, so they never really thought about it in regards to religion or spirituality. Watt's (2007) PIE model would describe this as "deflection". Students would refer to lessons they were taught by parents or church leaders as the reason they believe a particular stance on homosexuality. These comments were often accompanied by reflections in students' journals that stated that they were fearful or unsure about what they truly believed about homosexuality, spirituality, and religion separately or in interconnected ways. Fear students felt sometimes stifled their willingness to share their perspectives during class discussion.

Principium

Some students in the class felt passionate about their religious convictions concerning homosexual behaviors and labeled them as sinful. This challenge is similar to the defense mode of "principium" or choosing not to delve into one's own feelings based on a personal or religious principle as described in the PIE model (Watt, 2007). Even when speakers of the same faith presented, and,

by example, encouraged students to explore their feelings about homosexuality beyond the Bible, many students were not comfortable setting aside their religious belief.

Practical Implications

The reflections from an instructor of this course may be useful for practitioners in student affairs who are hesitant to talk about sexuality and sexual orientation in connection with spirituality and/or religion because some mainstream religions published stances opposing homosexual behaviors (Nash, 2001; Love et al., 2005). When facilitating dialogue on this topic, practitioners must keep in mind:

1. Explore Your Own Privilege

I identify as a woman, White, heterosexual, able-bodied, Catholic, spiritual, and gay affirming individual. In preparing to teach this course I reflected on how my privileged status affects me. I revisited my experiences of having difficult dialogues on the intersections among religion, spirituality, and sexuality. I also openly shared my process with the students. In retrospect, I can see how the defense mechanism of "intellectualization" from the PIE model particularly affected me as an instructor (Watt, 2007). I also realize that many of the questions I asked myself were intellectual like, "How will I challenge students cognitively through dialogue and the course assignments if the majority of students identify similarly religiously?" By disclosing to my students that I am still evolving and questioning my own meaning making, the students seemed to feel more open about sharing their own process as well.

2. Trusting the Course Framework

It is important to create a safe space for dialogue with students. By encouraging students to express their expectations for dialogue in the beginning of the class, they take a vested interest in the living document of a class syllabus. By establishing the safe space from the beginning and co-creating a document that can be referred to regularly, an environment is created where participants can be increasingly challenged as the content becomes more complex and the dialogue more difficult.

3. Create Opportunities for Non-Verbal Expression

Through students' journals and papers, some students commented about times when they ceased discussion with someone who views homosexual behaviors as sinful because they felt silenced and overwhelmed in these situations. As a result, we created class activities devoted towards helping students synthesize

thoughts from all of our dialogues concerning the intersections of religion, spirituality, and GLBT issues. Using construction paper and markers, we asked students to create their own continuum of faith traditions from most accepting to least accepting of homosexuality. When students shared their continuum, they were able to verbalize explanations from our dialogue that had previously been difficult for them to articulate.

4. Validate Students' Feelings

It is important in these dialogues for students to feel like no one is trying to change their religious beliefs or change their sexual behaviors. We created a "non judgmental" environment by providing diverse perspectives through guest speakers and validating each person as someone with their own story to share (Watt, 2007).

5. Utilizing Guest Speakers

Inviting guest speakers from multiple faith traditions to share their own journey of making meaning of homosexuality in relation to their religious and/or spiritual identification, helped to engender dialogue. Our speakers took risks by trusting students with stories of their individual faith journeys. During these sessions, students were encouraged to share how their own perspectives were congruent or divergent from the speaker's. Having guest speakers helped us address behaviors such as "rationalization or deflection" because an individual's life experience helped students to recognize the complexity of identifying as homosexual and spiritual and/or religious. For example, if a student had never met a person who identifies as Muslim and homosexual, the intersection among religion, spirituality, and sexuality became real to the student (Watt, 2007). Likewise, students in the class were often excited when leaders from their own religious traditions spoke to the class. The speakers often affirmed some of the students' choices to remain committed to their faith even if they experienced dissonance between an official stance of a religious tradition in regards to homosexuality and their own beliefs. One student commented,

> "Actually lots of the speakers that we had that came in, whether they were homosexual or not they were saying that it's your religion and you choose what you want to take from it. You know, that's true. I don't have to agree with their views…I can disagree with some of them, but that doesn't mean that I can't be a part of the church…there may be conflicts if there's a deep conversation, but I guess that that's how the class helped me get through that part."

Conclusion

I learned a great deal from co-instructing these two courses. First, I was able to see the value of the use of reflection activities that connect inside and outside of class experiences. Having the students share in personal awareness exercises and reflect on those experiences in their journals was a critical part of establishing an environment of trust between the students and with the educator. Second, it was important for me to recognize and share with my students that I am continually growing in my own journey. Learning with students in these two courses gave me opportunities to look at the intersection of religion, spirituality, and GLBT issues in new ways.

Faculty and student affairs practitioners who employ these practical applications in courses or workshops can further engage students in difficult dialogues that explore the interconnectedness between sexual orientation, religion, and spirituality.

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