

PERSPECTIVES ON PRACTICE

A Personal Narrative of LGBT Identity and Activism

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This essay connects part of a life story—mine—with part of a reflection upon practice. Delighted as I was to be invited to write an essay for this journal on the practice of lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) workplace training, it became evident to me that in order to fully address LGBT workplace training *practice*, it would befit such a piece to include a personal narrative of coming to terms with being a lesbian. The primary reason for this is that my lesbianism is what drew me to becoming an LGBT workplace equality activist, educator, and trainer. I did not seek out that as a “cause” but rather through my own life experiences, I learned about what it means to traverse through life in the late 20th century (and hopefully, well into the 21st century) as a lesbian. Additionally, I have learned how to negotiate an arguably successful life as a lesbian, including career success. I have learned about sexism, heterosexism, homophobia; I have learned and witnessed the discriminatory effects of wage discrimination as Badgett (1995) and Badgett and Frank (2007) have studied and empirically proven, and, importantly from a practice perspective, I have learned how to model for others compassion, self-confidence, and an inquisitive and curious nature. The purpose of this essay, therefore, is to describe my individual journey of LGBT identity and how that journey has informed my LGBT activism as manifested in the LGBT training and education work that I do.

Life Learning as a Backdrop of Activism, Training, and Adult Education

Heterosexuality persists as an organizing framework in organizational America today. Against the backdrop of unspoken assumptions, LGBT people face the never-ending constellation of decisions about disclosing identity. As a training and adult education practitioner for nearly 25 years, and as a baby boomer (though on the tail end, as I was born in 1962), I have experienced firsthand the challenges of deciding both the content and the format, as well as the delivery, of my training sessions. I began my training career, actually, on the tennis court in staid Richmond, Virginia back in the 1980s. At that time, I had indeed become aware of my lesbianism and at the age of 23 had begun a romantic relationship with a woman. It was perhaps the times—20 some years ago, when groups such as Human Rights Campaign—the political action committee that lobbies for LGBT rights—were in their infancy, before states, cities, and counties began to consider and implement protections for LGBT people, and perhaps it was the location of conservative Richmond, Virginia, but I never considered coming out to my club members. However, in retrospect it has often occurred to me that many of them suspected. This is the double bind that LGBT people engaged in the training and education of adults face. On one hand, fear of disclosure prompts LGBT people to hide their sexual minority status. On the other hand, invisibility perpetuates stigma. That is, by remaining closeted, LGBT people miss the opportunity to educate and to serve as change agents. The act of coming out is act of courage,

and it is a first step in helping to create change. I talked my way into a technical training position with a technology company and embarked on brief and disastrous forays into several different business occupations (Gedro, 2000). As I gained self-confidence as a lesbian, I began to consider ways of claiming my voice within business venues. After 10 years of self-imposed as well as societal-imposed hardship, I came out in two significant ways that set me on a path of training and education activism. The first was my encounter with who was to become my doctoral advisor in the Adult Education and Human Resource Development program at the University of Georgia. As I was hand delivering a paper to another professor, I ran into Ron. He was clearly one of my favorite professors. After we exchanged superficial greetings, I extemporaneously shifted the conversation to the substantive and asked him what he thought of the research topic of lesbians in corporate America. His reaction was one of immediate enthusiasm, and with his guidance as well as the support of a wonderful committee, I completed my doctoral dissertation entitled *Urban Cowgirls: How Lesbians Have Learned to Negotiate the Heterosexism of Corporate America* (Gedro, 2000). The second major event that emboldened me to thrust myself out of the closet was that I joined the employee resource group at my employer, BellSouth, and subsequently was elected Co-Chair. It was through the combination of scholarship at the University of Georgia and workplace activism at BellSouth that I became unwilling to settle for a work life of conformity to heterosexist assumptions.

LGBT Workplace Training: Out & Equal Workplace Advocates

Out and Equal Workplace Advocates is a San-Francisco-based not for profit organization dedicated to workplace equality. Out and Equal (2008) has also developed a world-class training program that has evolved over the years, called "Building Bridges." I became involved in Building Bridges during the course of my doctoral research, after learning about the organization and responding to a national call for trainers posted on the internet. I attended and participated in a train the trainer event in Seattle, Washington in 1999 and have conducted trainings for a variety of organizations since that time. Building Bridges is a leader-led training program, designed to raise awareness and sensitivity and to help participants acquire an understanding of terminology and legal protections (and a lack thereof) as they internally scan their workplace environment to assess its level of LGBT inclusion. Participants determine an action plan for their organization to help increase LGBT awareness, sensitivity, and inclusion so that all members of the organization can thrive. I have continued to engage in this training work and, most recently, co-conducted a train the trainer session for a group of human resource practitioners as well as workplace activists. As has become increasingly apparent to me, it is impossible to disentangle my lesbian orientation and identity from my training practice because the two are inextricably intertwined.

Lesbian Orientation as a Backdrop for HRD and Adult Education Work

My lesbianism, particularly when training on topics directly related to LGBT issues, works as an integral part of my training and education practice. When appropriate, I use my own stories, examples, and insights from my lived experiences as a lesbian and weave that material into my training. The use of those autobiographically and demographically based aspects of my training practice is not limited to LGBT workplace training. In several aspects of my career in human resource development (HRD) and adult education, my orientation becomes a subtext of

the training and education efforts. Over time, it has been difficult to disentangle my lesbianism from my teaching and my training.

Training and Consulting as Contested Terrain

There are times when it is not safe or perhaps even appropriate to highlight my own orientation. For example, in my consulting practice I have conducted human resource training to first level managers in the defense industry. The complexity and the context of this type of training venue—that is, where I am an outside consultant training on a variety of management issues for an organization that is part of a historically conservative industry-- highlights the constant vigilance that LGBT people face even today in organizational America. When faced with situations where receptivity to LGBT issues is an unknown, I think it is still prudent for an LGBT person to remain circumspect and subtle about one's sexual minority status. As the stakes rise, and as the audience is an unknown, I have found it to be appropriate to not look for opportunities to disclose my orientation and, instead, to stay on training topics at hand.

This practice reflects the learning that the participants in my doctoral research experienced about “pre-screening” an audience for receptivity to LGBT issues (Gedro, 2000). This type of “sterile” training and consulting—consulting and training that have little to no direct relationship to sexual minority issues—remains challenging terrain for LGBT HRD practitioners. I have learned over time how to negotiate my identity within the context of a mostly heterosexist backdrop and to disclose my orientation when and where I feel safe and where I feel it appropriate.

Adult Education as Contested Terrain

As a professor of Business, Management and Economics at a non-traditional college that serves adult learners, I have a unique opportunity to practice critical pedagogy. I have integrated my lesbianism into my adult education practice. As Brookfield (2000) offered:

I used to live my life according to other people's expectations. I didn't know who I was or live according to my own assumptions and beliefs. Now I've discovered who I really am –my core self- through critical reflection, and I'm living a more authentic and integrated life. (p. 46)

Because I work with adult learners who are pursuing undergraduate degrees, many times within the field of human resource management or HRD, I am in a privileged position to establish curriculum that often times includes readings, articles, writing, reflection, and discussion about issues of heterosexism, homophobia, and LGBT inclusion. More often than not, the topic of my sexuality comes up during the face to face meetings that I have with my students. The few times when it has felt unsafe, I simply neither seek nor invite opportunities for the matter to arise. At a meta-level, the way that I educate adults has become more and more “queer” over time. My lesbianism, I conjecture, democratizes my classroom and other teaching environments because I sometimes use it as a starting point to invite discussion around training ethics, workplace learning, and critical pedagogy. I am a walking, talking, breathing example for students and for clients about “other-ness.”

Conclusion

My training practice includes subjects related to business and human resource management. I have trained restaurateurs on point of sale software; bankers on treasury and accounting software; telecommunications managers on performance management, progressive discipline, and sexual harassment; and I have trained Department of Defense accountants on a full spectrum of human resource management practices. Clearly, too, I have trained and still train on topics directly related to LGBT workplace activism. My training career has spanned years, organizations, and subjects. In each training venue, my lesbianism is present. Sometimes it is overtly present, and sometimes it is tacitly present. However, I could not be effective without having a solid sense of my sexual orientation and an astute awareness of its affects on the classroom or other training venues.

During my thirties and now into my forties, I have learned how to synthesize a fully accepted sense of self that permeates my training practice. Clients and students have given me feedback for years that I make them feel comfortable, empowered, and capable. I confidently conjecture that my own coming to terms with my identity has created a depth within me that reaches out to others, no matter what venue, and speaks not only to their minds but also their hearts that acceptance, compassion, respect, and support are wonderful characteristics of a training session.

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