

PREVENTING AND DEALING WITH HOMOPHOBIA IN THE CLASSROOM

Handout prepared by Renee Wells, University of Alabama.
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Setting the Tone: Preventative Steps You Can Take from Day One

There are a couple of preventative steps you can take before the semester begins. These steps involve the course policies listed on your syllabus. The first step is to establish a policy for the Classroom Environment. For example,

English 220 is a combined lecture and discussion course. This means that, in part, all students are responsible for contributing to both their own learning experience and the learning experience of others. Because the contribution of ideas from each student is critical to the learning process, any behavior that makes other students feel uncomfortable in their learning environment will not be tolerated. This includes interrupting others while they are talking, carrying on conversations separate from the class discussion, or making comments that could be perceived as offensive in terms of race, gender, sexual orientation, religion, ethnicity, nationality, disability, etc. Please make every effort to maintain an atmosphere where everyone feels comfortable sharing and responding to ideas.

The second step is to let your students know that you're a Safe Zone Ally and what that means. This can be included as part of your Classroom Environment statement or as part of a separate section, such as Office Hours or Conferences. For example,

If you would like individual help with any of the reading or writing assignments, you are welcome to set up a conference with me or to come by during my office hours. Keep in mind that office hours are times I have set aside specifically for meeting with students. You do not need to make an appointment to meet with me during those times, nor do you need to tell me in advance if you plan to come by. Just show up, and I'll be there. Also, please note that I am a Safe Zone Ally, one of many resource people on campus who provide an open door for individuals seeking information or assistance regarding sexual orientation, gender identity, harassment, and/or discrimination. Feel free to talk to me any time if you or someone you know has questions or concerns.

Narrowing the Focus: Negotiating Student Responses to Reading Assignments

If you are giving students an in-class reading assignment that deals with LGBTQ issues, you should frame the assignment before students begin reading. For example,

Today we're going to look at John Smith's article "Identity Development among Gay Youth." I realize that many of you have very strong beliefs and opinions about being gay; I also realize that it can be difficult to put those beliefs and opinions to the side and to read objectively. However, I am asking you to do just that as we read and discuss this article. Our discussion will focus on the points Smith makes about identity development, not on the morality of the gay identity, the politics of the gay community, or the nature versus nurture debate. In other words, I'm asking you to put all of the major debate points out of your mind so you can find and discuss what the author is addressing in his article.

If you are giving students an out-of-class reading assignment that deals with LGBTQ issues, you should still frame the assignment so students know what they will be expected to know or what they will be expected to discuss during the following class. It is also very helpful to give them a writing assignment that forces them to engage with the reading in the way you are asking. For example,

For homework, you will be reading John Smith's article "Identity Development among Gay Youth." I realize that many of you have very strong beliefs and opinions about being gay; I also realize that it can be difficult to put those beliefs and opinions to the side and to read objectively. However, I am asking you to do just that. As you read, you need to identify Smith's main points and underline or highlight them. Once you've finished reading, go back to each main point and find the information Smith uses to support it. For Wednesday, you need to have a typed list of Smith's main ideas with a brief summary of his support for each point. We will discuss Smith's argument in class—not our beliefs or opinions about being gay, the politics of the gay community, or the nature versus nurture debate. Thus, you need to remain objective and focused as you read so you will be prepared to contribute to the class discussion.

Framing the Discussion: Facilitating Conversations between Students

If you are discussing LGBTQ issues in class (either because an issue spontaneously came up or because you brought up the issue for discussion), it is important to frame the discussion before students begin talking. It is particularly important to ask students to state their ideas *as opinions* rather than *statements of truth*. For example,

As we discuss the issue of gay marriage, I would like you to keep in mind that the classroom is a place for intellectual inquiry and for the respectful exchange of ideas. I realize that many of you have very strong beliefs and opinions about the issue of gay marriage; however, because not all of you agree on the issue, it is important to frame your comments as beliefs or opinions, not as statements of truth. For instance, rather than saying *Being gay is a mortal sin and all gay people will go to hell*, try saying *I was raised to believe that being gay is a mortal sin and all gay people will go to hell*. This makes it much easier for you to engage with each other since you are being asked to respond to each other's opinions, not to fundamental truths that cannot be changed.

If you are discussing LGBTQ issues in class, it is also important to ask students to rephrase each other's ideas before responding. For example,

As you discuss the issue of gay marriage, you need to engage with each other respectfully. One way to do this is to rephrase the idea you wish to respond to. For instance, if Tiffany said, *I was raised to believe that being gay is a mortal sin and all gay people will go to hell*, and Kate wanted to respond to her statement, then Kate would need to rephrase Tiffany's idea first—*You believe that gay people will be sent to hell because it is a sin to be gay*—before stating her own response—*But I believe that we are all who we are because God made us this way, so I don't believe he would send any of us to hell for being who we are*. By rephrasing each other's ideas, you are forced to really listen to each other and to respond to the points being made, not merely to make the same canned responses that always get made during these discussions.

Playing Referee: Handling Inappropriate Comments

It will happen: students will make inappropriate and offensive comments during these class discussions. When it happens, it is important to be prepared to handle it. There are a number of things you need know as you deal with the situation:

1. *All eyes will be on you.* When someone makes an inappropriate comment, you won't be the only one to recognize that what was said was offensive. Everyone will turn to you, waiting to see how you'll react—sometimes even the student who made the comment. It is important to step up and deal with the comment quickly and tactfully.
2. *It is your responsibility to respond to the comment.* It's your classroom and you're the voice of authority. You set the ground rules and someone broke them. You must deal with the inappropriate comment so that everyone recognizes that the ground rules will be enforced.
3. *How you respond to the comment sends a clear message—especially if you say nothing.* Saying nothing (i.e., ignoring it or pretending you didn't notice) is the worst thing you can do because it sends one of two messages: Either that you didn't find the comment inappropriate and therefore such comments are acceptable in your class or that you aren't going to call attention to inappropriate comments, which turns the on-going discussion into a no-rules game.
4. *As referee, your main responsibility is to keep tempers from flaring, including your own.* The comment may offend and/or anger you but it is important to keep your cool, for several reasons. First, you don't want your students responding emotionally to the comments made during discussion so it's important for you to set a good example and respond to the content of the comment rather than the feelings it evokes. Second, an emotional reaction from you could intimidate students and prevent them from engaging further in current or future class discussions. The last thing you want to do is make students uncomfortable. The point is to maintain an environment of open and respectful exchange, which means that you must frame your comments respectfully as well. Third, it is important never to appear angry at the student who made the comment. S/he will be your student for the rest of the semester and you don't want to create the impression that you are/will be hostile/biased toward the student.
5. *It is important to address the comment without offending the student or "calling the student out" in front of the class.* Rather than making a *statement of truth* such as *That's an inappropriate and offensive comment, John*, try taking the comment apart and asking the student who said it (and/or the rest of the class) to consider its implications. Try asking a question that forces the student(s) to reflect on what was said. For instance, *You believe that all 'homos' will burn in hell. 'Homos' is an interesting choice of words. Why did you choose that? What is its connotation? What are the implications of choosing such a word? How do you think others will react to the word?* You could even ask the class to generate a list of words used to label gay people and then discuss the politics and implications of each choice. You could even refrain from directly addressing the student who made the comment. For instance, *Let me just jump in for a minute and ask a question about language. There are a lot of different words that get used when discussing members of the gay community, and they don't all have the same connotation or receive the same reaction. I've heard a number of different words used thus far in our conversation—gay, homosexual, queer, homo—and I wanted to ask everyone to think about the implications of word choice. What connotations do these different words have? How do others react when you use them? What does it imply about you when you choose one over the others?* This can easily lead into the word list exercise mentioned above. The point is not to make a student feel embarrassed or uncomfortable for saying something inappropriate. The point to get students to think about the implications of what they say—ideally before they say it, but if necessary afterwards—so that neither they nor the other students in the class will make the same mistake again.