Chapter 4

A Critical Assessment of LGBTQ+ Speakers in the Classroom and Suggestions for Alternative Practices

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ABSTRACT

LGBTQ+ subjects have long been rendered invisible in school curricula. More recently, however, teachers, students, and administrators have recognized the need to remedy this erasure and many are making LGBTQ+ visibility a curricular imperative. In this chapter, the author explores a specific tactic that is often used to increase LGBTQ+ visibility and increase awareness of LGBTQ+ issues—the guest speaker. The body of the chapter begins with a brief discussion of the ways in which the guest speaker can be a useful tool. Most of the existing literature on the use of guest speakers, however, takes for granted that the technique is universally positive and empowering. Therefore, in the second portion of the chapter the author will elaborate several critiques. Finally, she will discuss several models that can serve to increase knowledge about LGBTQ+ topics and increase LGBTQ+ visibility, and which work as well as or better than the guest speaker model.

INTRODUCTION

LGBTQ+ people have long been rendered invisible in school curricula. Historically, when LGBTQ+ lives were acknowledged at all, they were presented as objects of pity, ridicule, or extreme stereotypes. This left schools and teachers with a dearth of useful teaching material related to LGBTQ+ people and their lives. More recently, however, teachers, students, and administrators have recognized the need to make LGBTQ+ visibility a curricular imperative. The question of LGBTQ+ visibility is complex, and that complexity has been explored in a number of studies since the 1990s (Britzman, 1995, 2012; Mayo, 2014; Pascoe, 2007; Rodriguez & Pinar, 2007). Within the past decade, the need for LGBTQ+ visibility in school curricula has become a legitimate area of scholarship and policy discussion, though it is a movement that is unevenly embraced in different schools and school districts (Martino & Cumming-Potvin, 2016; Alter, 2017; Maguth & Taylor, 2014).

In this chapter, I explore a specific tactic often used to increase LGBTQ+ visibility and increase awareness of LGBTQ+ issues—the guest speaker. I first discuss ways guest speakers may be useful and positively affect student perceptions. Second, I address problems with the guest speaker model. The model raises significant questions concerning labor equity, including the emotional labor already demanded of marginalized folks. Moreover, educators must avoid assuming that guest speaker visits can do the curricular work of connecting individual experiences to structural and systemic issues facing communities. In short, the guest speaker model often risks simplifying or tokenizing complex issues and must not be adopted in lieu of analytical work. Finally, I conclude with thoughts on what I see as an effective alternative to the guest speaker model.

My approach in this chapter draws on my own experiences as an educator for the past fifteen years. I will focus in particular on my work as the moderator of the LGBTQ+ Speakers' Bureau at a large midwestern state university. In the course of my discussion, I will also draw on my experiences teaching K-8 students at a Catholic school in the early 2000s, when the "inclusion" of LGBTQ+ topics was limited to responding to the phrase, "that's so gay." Additionally, I will apply my experiences teaching social justice-oriented classes at large state universities in both the U.S. South and Midwest.

The LGBTQ+ Speakers' Bureau

The Speakers' Bureau has been part of an initiative by the Health and Wellness unit on the university campus. Health & Wellness exists as a branch of the university health center that provides educational programming to students, faculty, and staff.

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