

TEACHING MORE OF THE STORY: SEXUAL AND CULTURAL DIVERSITY IN ART AND THE CLASSROOM

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In 1996, a midwest elementary public school library displayed a photo exhibit of gay and lesbian families entitled *Love Makes a Family* (See Lyman, 1996/97). Second grade teacher Kate Lyman stated that “she first became aware of gay and lesbian issues through [her] involvement with the feminist movement in the 1970s, [and] it wasn’t until the 1980s that [she] began to make the connection between multicultural education, gender equity, and [providing] gay and lesbian inclusion” (p. 14). Lyman notes that addressing homophobic name-calling and stereotypes about lesbian and gays became a priority for her because she taught students who had lesbian or gay parents. The exhibit dovetailed with her school’s improvement plan to focus on prejudice reduction and inclusion. When local media coverage created a controversial and heated climate about the planned exhibit, the school faculty responded with a school/community letter stressing the importance of teaching about homophobia as discrimination. After significant school and community debate, the exhibit was shown in its entirety. Lyman describes the entire process in her article. Her story illustrates the importance of teaching about critical issues to students of all ages. While such examples may seem rare, teachers and students in schools across the United States face situations involving lesbian and gay issues, homophobia and name-calling.

Art Teachers Request Information About LGB Issues

As art teachers begin to address difficult social and political issues, especially the inclusion of sexual identity, many have asked for information and support. This was evidenced at several Lesbian, Gay, and Bisexual Issues Caucus (LGBIC) workshops at the 1997 and 1998 National Art Education Association (NAEA) annual conventions in New Orleans and Chicago respectively. Elementary and secondary teachers requested information to educate themselves about lesbian, gay, and bisexual (LGB) issues in art and education. One of the goals of the LGBIC is to promote quality instruction in visual arts education that includes information relating to the understanding of lesbian, gay, and bisexual content in artists’ works and their lives.

Who Is Interested?

Many art teachers work alongside LGB colleagues, have LGB students in their classrooms, have students with LGB parents, or have LGB friends, neighbors, sons, daughters, etc. (Kuklin, 1993; Woog, 1995). Some teachers are gay and lesbian (Jennings, 1994). Some teachers want to include LGB content in their classroom curriculum. They feel comfortable addressing multiple and diverse multicultural aspects (Harbeck, 1992). Others just want to be prepared “if” the topic surfaces. And still others are interested in closing the chasm between the “real world” contexts of making art and what is included and excluded in teaching about art in schools (Cahan & Kocur, 1996).

Who Are Some Of These Artists?

One need only to look at the multiple histories of art that reveal rich and diverse pictures of creativity and imagination in the twentieth century (Cotter, 1994). Take, for example, Bernice Abbott, Sadie Benning, Romaine Brooks, Charles Demuth, Louise Fishman, Laura Gilpin, Gluck (Hannah Gluckstein), Della Grace, Keith Haring, Marsden Hartley, David Hockney, Holly Hughes, Jasper Johns, Sadie Lee, Robert Rauschenberg, June Redfern, Andy Warhol, and David Wojnarowicz. These are artists whose sexuality had an impact on their art (Cooper, 1994). To totally disregard such a fundamental part of one’s life often can reduce or misrepresent the artist’s intent (Clark, 1996; Katz, 1993). Though such material may be considered controversial by many people, to ignore such valuable information is to distort histories and deny educational opportunities (Deitcher, 1990; Lampela, 1996).

Lessons In Action

What follows are several examples of teachers dealing with LGB issues in the classrooms in a variety of settings.

1. **Name-Calling.** Homophobic name-calling is pervasive throughout all levels of education and the culture. Homophobic name-calling creates hostile environments for all people. Creating safer educational environments and classrooms for all students means confronting difficult issues. Lenore Gordon (1994) states that “[t]eaching children to be critical of oppression is teaching true morality, and teachers have the right, indeed the obligation, to alert their students to all forms of oppression” (p. 86). She describes elementary and middle/junior high school situations (adaptable for high school) focusing on homophobic name-calling. She specifies ways to confront, combat, and educate students about homophobia.

2. **Teaching About Controversial Subjects.** T. Barrett and S. Rab (1990) explored cultural differences, censorship and controversy through the art of Robert Mapplethorpe. The article describes their painstaking process to prepare students to view a Mapplethorpe exhibit as an after school project. As Barrett wrote, “it provides a real, public school example of addressing controversial differences of groups of people through sensitive teaching about controversial art” (p. 17). The authors describe in detail reasons for the trip, preparation prior to the visit, their personal fears and concerns, and individual student reactions to the exhibit. It showcases the power of art to “increase understanding of differences among people” (p. 16). Complex issues such as controversial art, censorship, personal fears, and ignorance are addressed by focusing on the contexts of the controversy, the museum visit, and various individual’s reactions to the event. This study provides an example of how one teacher and one professor handled controversial material within a public high school setting.

3. **High School Lessons.** Simon Leung (Cahan & Kocur, 1996) provides ample context for a discussion of AIDS and related social issues (homosexuality and homophobia). In his chapter entitled “AIDS and Its Representation,” each lesson focuses on aspects of oppression, identity, and social change. He encourages critical thinking, personal reflection, and analysis throughout his chapter. Included in each lesson are ways to make difficult issues accessible through contemporary art examples. Teachers are left to consider individually how to approach such issues and implement from within a classroom setting. Thought-provoking and innovative lessons are offered that challenge normative practices with a focus of critical analysis and inclusion. Specific lessons (Lessons 23 and 24) address the topics of homophobia and related social and cultural issues. Also included in the book are over fifty contemporary artists full color reproductions with a section devoted to artist statements in English and Spanish.

Conclusion

Many art teachers are addressing LGB issues in their classrooms in a variety of ways. Providing teachers with accurate information and curricular resources is just one facet of the LGBIC. For more information about LGB art and education issues write c/o: Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual Issues Caucus, an affiliate of the National Art Education Association. Co-Coordinator: Anne M. Manning, Hood Museum of Art, Dartmouth College, Hanover, NH 03755; and, Ruth Slotnick, 602 S. Pugh Street, State College, PA 16801.

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