

Homophobia in the Classroom: One Teacher's Response

by Cynthia Peters

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"If one of my kids turned out to be gay, I would kill him," said one of my ESOL students.

"But you might not want to kill him," replied another, "because that would be murder, and they could put you in jail for that."

There was nodding all around.

I sat down, stunned. What had I prepared for class that day: a game for learning fractions? Reviewing the past tense? I couldn't remember. None of it seemed to matter. I didn't feel like a teacher at that moment. I felt angry, shocked, sad, and personally vulnerable, even though my own life partner is of the opposite sex and so for that reason, according to my students, I should be allowed to live.

Out of respect for the members of my class, I did not try to mask my feelings. We were friendly and affectionate with each other, and I cared a great deal for each of them. They had consistently impressed me with their finely tuned sense of justice and fairness, and their understanding of how power reveals itself in U.S. institutions—in the workplace, in the school system, in the home, in how U.S. foreign policy impacts their countries of origin.

Now these same students were advocating killing their own children in the event they should be gay, and the only argument against doing so was a practical one ("you'll go to jail"), not a moral one.

"My sister is a lesbian," I told them. The classroom was silent. "It hurts me to hear what you are saying." I showed what I was feeling—my face had probably gone pale and my hands may have been shaking—and it affected them. Because of the trust and affection we had built up over many hours in the classroom, they had no desire to cause me pain. And their faces showed what *they* were feeling—the conflict between their hatred of homosexuality and their curiosity about what it could mean that someone they thought they knew and respected could be close to a gay person. I felt that the students were looking at me completely differently.

"My sister is a wonderful person. I love her. My parents love her. If they had rejected her because she is a lesbian, we all would have lost so much. Our family would have been divided. I am so thankful that they loved their daughter even though it was hard for them to understand her."

When issues arise in the classroom, most teachers respond as teachers. We look for what can be learned from the moment; we see it as an opportunity for critical thinking, debate, and English language practice. In a flexible classroom, such moments might lead to a writing project or some research. Maybe we mine the conversation for vocabulary and create a lesson plan around related themes for the next class. I have done that kind of thing many times. In this case, I reacted not as a teacher, but as an individual who was clearly *affected* by what the students were saying. The students experienced an immediate consequence for their words and sentiments. I hadn't absorbed what they said in a neutral way. Instead, I let the emotion bounce back to them, and thus they got a second look at their words in a different light.

Not that they changed their minds. "It's against the Bible," they argued. "It's against nature, and a crime against God."

"The Bible also says not to have children out of wedlock," I replied. There was no need to point out that most of the people in the class had gone against the Bible on that score.

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We all looked at each other, feeling unnerved. I didn't rescue the situation from its uneasiness—the way I usually might in difficult situations. We sat in this strange stillness. The charged feeling hung in the air. I had no particular strategy about where to take the class, but I had a strong sense that I didn't want to be less than honest about my reactions. This felt like the more respectful—if more potentially treacherous—path.

"Next class," I offered, "let's all bring in pictures of our family." We returned to the lesson plan of the day, but something had been opened up between us. It felt raw but honest.

For the next class, I brought in pictures of my sister. "She looks just like you," the students said, still seeming to study me with new eyes.

I showed them pictures of my sister's sons. I showed them pictures of my parents and siblings, numerous cousins, nieces and nephews—my parents proudly in the center of it all. Ours is a mixed race family as well.

While we passed around everyone's photo albums, delighted over baby pictures, noted the family resemblances, and teased each other about the changes that are apparent over time, we talked about family. The students wrote about the importance of a family's unconditional love and of the family as a source of comfort in a difficult world. We noted that this was something we had in common despite our diverse families. One student began to speak up about the importance of accepting people who are different from you. She talked about tolerance and argued that people should mind their own business. "No one's asking *you* to be a homosexual," she said.



I did not attempt to steer the class toward any kind of resolution on the matter of homosexuality. But I hope I opened up a space for people to think about it differently, and for at least one student to voice her own argument against homophobia.

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As teachers, we often face moments that challenge us to decide how to handle our own (sometimes very strongly held) political positions. There are various ways to take on these moments. In this particular experience, I learned that being personally honest but not didactic had some value. My response was possible partly because, being straight, I did not have to take an enormous personal risk in voicing my opinion. It was also possible because I felt enough respect for my students to give them an honest reaction. This confluence of factors may not always be present in the classroom, but when it is, it presents a way forward. Teachers can draw off of it to find their way, respectfully and honestly, toward greater understanding.

Cynthia Peters is an anti-war and community activist, as well as a freelance editor and writer (www.zmag.org). She teaches at the Worker Education Program of I199 SEIU in Boston.