

Things We Can Do: Addressing Issues of Sexual Orientation in the ABE Classroom

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There is a range of possible actions in dealing with issues of sexual orientation in the classroom and in combating homophobia. We all make different decisions depending on what we are comfortable with. You may decide that one of these actions is right for you, or you may want to take on more. This list was adapted from several sources. See footnotes for references.



1. Do not assume all of your students are straight (heterosexual). Remember that in a classroom of ten students, the odds are that at least one is lesbian, gay, bisexual or transgendered and more may have lesbian, gay, bisexual or transgendered friends and relatives.
2. Don't force students to disclose anything they are not comfortable with. For example, if you plan lessons that demand disclosure of personal or family information, you can always give an optional lesson that does not require students to reveal OR disclose their sexual orientation.
3. Use inclusive language. (Especially for administrators/coordinators.) When speaking, writing policies, or when distributing memos, use language that is inclusive and gender-neutral about behavior and relationships. For instance, invite people to bring their "spouses or partners" to a meeting or event. This shows that all families belong.
4. Openly use the words gay, lesbian, and bisexual in any context that you are teaching, not just when you are teaching specifically to these issues.
5. Provide classroom speakers who are gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgendered in order to share their experiences, respond to students' questions, and to celebrate diversity. (See Resource section for SpeakOut!)
6. Institute an "anti-slur" policy from the first day of class that includes a ban on homophobic remarks. Don't allow offensive humor directed at gays and lesbians or homophobic remarks in class.
7. Challenge all homophobic remarks. Ask what they are based on. Don't shut students or colleagues down for having "politically incorrect" opinions, but don't ignore that hate hurts the people targeted by it. You can ask other students to respond to the comments, express your own discomfort with the comments, or begin a discussion and supply the class with information that helps dispel stereotypes and inaccurate information. Remember that silence=collusion; being silent means you are, in a way, agreeing with the comment and sending a message to the rest of the class.
8. Display a gay-positive symbol such as a pink or black triangle pin or sticker or a rainbow flag in the classroom.
9. Expose learners to positive historical and current role models for the gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgendered communities. For example, when discussing literature, history, social studies in class, point out that certain figures were/are gay or lesbian the same way you would mention their ethnic or racial background. You could note that Alice Walker is a lesbian, or that Walt Whitman was bisexual. Further, you could proactively introduce curriculum that affirms gay leaders, activists, athletes, musicians, writers, and artists. Don't leave out gays who were persecuted during the holocaust.

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10. Push for teacher in-services around gay, lesbian, or bisexual issues. For example, set up a staff training about homophobia: how and why we should confront it as educators.
11. Post resources for all students about social services and include numbers for gay/lesbian hotlines.
12. Include discussions of gay, lesbian, or bisexual issues in the class, as with any other issues pertaining to oppressed groups. Teach about the history of American Movements: civil rights movement, labor movement, women's movement, and gay movement. Use documentary films such as *Eyes on the Prize* and *After Stonewall*.
13. Join GLSEN, the Gay, Lesbian, Straight Educators Network. (See Resource page for information.)
14. Examine images of gays and lesbians in the media -- especially in feature films and television. Look at stereotypes as well as positive images of gays and lesbians. Some films with gay-positive characters include *The Wedding Banquet* and *Bent*.

Notes

1. "Dealing With Sexual Orientation in the Classroom," Karen Snelbecker and Tom Meyer. Originally published in *TESOL Matters*, August/Sept 1996; reprinted in full in *The Change Agent*, February 1999, Issue 8. Available from Marie Horchler at World Education, 617-482-9485.
2. "Supporting the Invisible Minority," John D. Anderson. *Educational Leadership*, April 1997 (p. 70)
3. The Gay, Lesbian, and Bisexual Speakers Bureau (now called *SpeakOut!*), *handout*.
4. *The TA's Guide for Overcoming Homophobia in the Classroom* (Web resource): youth.org/loco/PERSON-Project/Resources/organizing_Tactics/TA.html

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Resources

Please see *Bright Ideas* at www.sabes.org/ for more complete resources and bibliographies.

GALE (Gay and Lesbian Educators): Support and networking. Write to: PO Box 930, Amherst, MA 01004.

SpeakOut! (formerly the Gay, Lesbian and Bisexual Speakers Bureau), 29 Stanhope Street, Boston, MA 02116. 617-450-9776. Offers speaking engagements on gay, lesbian, and bisexual issues to encourage dialogue and understanding. Sliding scale for honorarium. Also train people as speakers.

PFLAG (Parents and Friends of Lesbians and Gays): 978-562-4176

Call for regional PFLAG offices around the state.

Web: www.ultranet.com/~gbpflag