

Putting Lesbian and Gay Families in the Picture

by
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Adult educators need to write down and share their lessons that include gay/lesbian/bisexual/transgender (GLBT) issues. Published adult education materials that include GLBT people and concerns are incredibly scarce. This lack of resources is certainly true when discussing the topic of family, which will be my focus for this article. Many workbooks and texts continue to use family trees and define families as one mother, one father and various children. There are some texts that helpfully expand this notion of family to include divorced, extended and single-parent families. However, even these latter texts usually fail to use any lesbian, gay, bisexual or transgender terms. For example, the low-level reader, *Many Kinds of Families* (New Readers Press), which actually includes a family of two men and a daughter, still does not use “gay” or any gay-related terms in its exercises. The absence of the word “gay” reiterates to readers who might understand the relationship as a gay relationship that it is taboo to discuss such a word aloud. The men’s relationship remains ambiguous, so teachers can even avoid discussing gay relationships if they choose. Therefore, it is important for those of us who want to clearly address sexual preference to document our lessons so we have some materials with which to work.

It is critical for educators to address GLBT issues in

the classroom for several reasons. First, there are gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgendered students in our classes, whether teachers are aware of it or not. Although I believe curricular topics should arise from students, I urge teachers not to wait until they know a student is gay to begin affirming their identity in the classroom, nor to wait until the issues are raised by the students themselves. Students might feel threatened if they acknowledge their sexual preference openly, or might feel awkward discussing a gay family member. It is also incomplete to discuss families and never to include gay and lesbian families. This omission contributes to the silence that burdens GLBT people. In addition, English classes are an important source of information and advocacy for immigrant students. GLBT students can greatly benefit by having their identities affirmed, and being aware of GLBT resources.

Affirming different sexual preferences in the classroom is equally important for GLBT teachers. They do not have the luxury to wait until it comes from the class, particularly for those of us who value teacher involvement in personal sharing. Class time should be a community-building and trust-building space. If I want others to feel comfortable sharing information about their families, I need to share it myself. In class we might ask each other about our weekends, holidays, families and homes, and so gay and lesbian “issues” are brought up regularly in classes in which I participate.

Background

I am a teacher and coordinator in the ESOL (English for Speakers of Other Languages) Department at Jamaica Plain Community Centers’ Adult Learning Program. I am a white woman in a lesbian relationship, raised middle class in New York City, and currently work with a class of Latino, Haitian, and African adult learners. I assume all the work I do is affected by these elements. I teach a beginning level class (the second level in our program), and the following ideas will reflect my work with this particular group. Many lessons, however, are suited for other levels with minimal adjustments.

I gathered the following activities from class sessions that addressed family issues this past year. For the purpose of this article, I have selected those lessons that involved discussion of gay and lesbian families, as well as activities that allowed participants to define “family” themselves. Each month our class focused on one primary theme in combination with specific grammar and

life skills. For example, in April, 1998, we looked specifically at the topic of “family,” basic prepositions, alphabet review, and oral presentations.

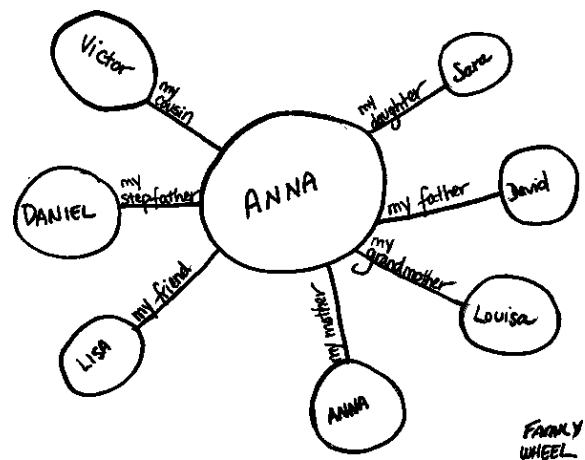
I present this list as one example of how to include lesbian and gay family issues in the context of teaching ESOL. It is only within the last year that I have been out as a lesbian in class and intentionally included lesbian and gay issues in lessons. While it is relevant to the class community in which I work, I have not yet effectively developed lessons around bisexuality or transgender issues. I am learning more each time how to be inclusive, and I hope this piece helps inspire a broader collection of lessons that reflect all families.

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Activities That Leave the Shape and Definition of “Family” to the Individual

Many of the following activities developed from ideas shared from other teachers and some workshops over the last six years. These activities effectively include students who have step-families, large extended families, gay/lesbian families and families where there might be different co-parenting or polygamous situations. All of these types of families have been represented in the classes in which I have worked. These lesson ideas encourage the class to build community, as students share and see similarities and differences between themselves and their families. The activities also reveal key topics on students’ minds that help the teacher create meaningful curricula.

1. *Define family.* I asked students to write down a definition of family and then share the definitions—either aloud or on newsprint. Sometimes I added my own





definition or added a dictionary definition. This process allowed the class to reflect on the meaning of family and compare how different individuals might include different circles of people in their definitions.

2. Family wheels. I asked students to draw a circle with their names in the middle. Then they drew lines from the circle and wrote the names of all family—immediate, extended and other—in circles at the end of each line. I encouraged students to write the name of the relationship on the line. I demonstrated my wheel first and had them create their wheels. (See sample on previous page.) This activity allowed students to add anyone to the circle, without needing to fit their family into the traditional family tree format. In addition to excluding some participants, the traditional family tree structure can be very difficult for some students to understand. They can get too caught up in the format when the focus is sharing information about their family.

3. Family location charts. I had students fill out charts, listing names of relatives in Massachusetts, in other states, in their native country, and in other countries. I encouraged students to write the name of the state, city, or country next to the name of the person. We went around and shared our charts. (For example, “Amina is my sister. She lives in the Sudan.”) Students then came up and put dots (dots were colored circle stickers) on a world map, indicating the regions where they had family. The smaller the dots and the bigger the map, the better. In addition to being inclusive of all families, this activity allowed us to see visually where people have relatives. In my class it allowed some students from different countries to see that they have family in the same state, and it inspired discussions about why some families are spread out or needed to flee their countries.

4. Discussion/writing assignments. Usually I had the class discuss a writing topic before they wrote so they had ideas and vocabulary already in their minds when it was time to write. Topics I’ve used include: a) Think of the youngest person in your family. Write a story or description of this person. (I’ve also tried the same with the oldest person.) and b) How is your life different from

your parents’ lives? or How is your life different from your children’s lives? or What are some differences between families here and families in your country? This assignment builds a sense of community between the students, as they tend to share very special feelings toward relatives and/or strong beliefs about family life and difficulties they might have here.

5. Family problems. This activity is based on a popular-education strategy I learned at a Brecht Forum workshop in New York City in which one sees, analyzes and acts on the problem at hand. First, I suggested students work in groups and make lists on newsprint of problems that families have in their communities. It is more productive to say “problems in your communities,” rather than “in your families” so people (including myself) do not feel they need to reveal painful difficulties at home, yet have the freedom to bring up the relevant topics. I gave an example of how gay women and men sometimes have pressure not to talk about their lives or partners within extended families. After sharing their lists with the whole class, students returned to their small groups to draw or create a collage that would visualize one or two of the problems they listed. We have a huge stack of old magazines that students used if they didn’t want to draw. After sharing their drawings, they brainstormed and wrote down ideas of how to work toward solving these problems. By this time in the class, the activity was a little long—it might be better to spread it out over two or more days. There was not a lot of energy for the last problem-solving piece, so for the next day I chose one problem that seemed to come up for each group (teen smoking and drinking) and found a brief reading on it. After reading it together, students brainstormed on how to work on the particular problem.

Integrating Gay and Lesbian Vocabulary & Themes into Language Exercises and Readings

1. Definitions: I gave out the following list of words related to family:

widow	adopted
lesbian	divorced



pet
half-sister

step-father
great-grandmother

We had already discussed some words briefly, but some were new. Students worked in pairs or groups of three and were given two or three words on a sheet of paper. They needed to write a definition for each word. While they could come up with the answers as a group, each individual was asked to do the actual writing of one definition. Students could write the definition on their own, or could use a dictionary. Using dictionaries reinforced our alphabet review, and in addition, many students wanted to practice using an English dictionary.

2. *Guessing the word.* In this activity, I gave each person a word written on a piece of paper:

step-mother
cousin
aunt
great-grandmother

gay
nephew
foster parents
brother-in-law

They needed to explain the word, and the rest of us would guess what it was. We had discussed all the words before, so it was a review activity. If a person forgot the meaning, or had trouble explaining it, s/he could ask a person next to her/him, but then that person wouldn't participate in guessing.

3. *Word jumbles.* I gave them a set of letters mixed up and they needed to put them together to form the following words about family. This was another way to review and be comfortable with spelling and letters. This was harder than I had expected, so while I first encouraged individuals to do it, ultimately folks worked in groups.

stepfather
daughter
interracial
partner (this turned out to be particularly difficult because if you take out one of the "r's," you could spell "parent," which was another word we reviewed)

children
boyfriend
uncle

4. *Pictures of gay/lesbian families.* Pictures are great as a basis for discussion and writing. One can find photos of

GLBT folks and families in gay-friendly magazines and newspapers. Around gay-pride day there might be some pictures in mainstream papers. Photos in particular can be helpful for visualizing real people if you have so far only discussed gay/lesbian families in the abstract. For example, some students had difficulties understanding me when I spoke about my partner and her daughter. In my case, I brought in my photos during our family photo-sharing days, which made my relationship clearer to students. The word "partner" is confusing because some people are familiar with the term "partner" in business. In addition to pictures, I try to write the word "partner," as well as "lesbian" and/or "gay" on the board when I'm explaining my relationship, because in Romance languages the words "lesbian" or "gay" can be similar. In other cases, people might write these words down and look them up in their language dictionaries. If you just say "partner" or "lesbian," people often are confused or think it is their lack of English that makes them misunderstand.

5. *Articles.* I began collecting newspaper articles on gay families this summer. Another ESOL educator gave me one from the *Boston Globe* that was particularly effective in addressing both gay families and foster-care issues. It was from the October 7, 1997, edition in the Metro Region section, with the headline, "Foster ruling stands up: State placed boy in gay household." I used four paragraphs from the article that summarized how a biological father contested his son being placed in a gay foster home. After reading the article in groups, they discussed the questions, "What are experiences of gay parents in your country?" and "Are there 'foster parents' in your country?" and then came back to the whole group to share. Those who shared their ideas about gay families all said that it wasn't talked about in their countries. One said, "If someone is gay in the family, it is secret," and "People don't talk about it like here." With regard to foster parenting, some students had personal experiences with the Department of Social Services and have felt fearful that DSS might take their children away and put them in foster homes. Others had considered being foster parents themselves. Those people who shared their expe-

riences said there were no foster families in their countries. Working in groups allowed students to share other opinions without having to share them with me or the whole group.

6. Family literacy. One month many students chose to read, practice and present a children's book to the whole class. They could choose any book, but I brought in many choices that students could pick as well. I could have taken time to bring in more gay-friendly children's books, but only brought in one: *One Dad, Two Dads, Brown Dads, Blue Dads*, by Johnny Valentine. In the summer, one student chose to read it, but we did not discuss its gay content. It is a fun light-hearted book and, in a very entertaining and subtle way, approaches serious themes of understanding different families. One can read it, though, without clearly addressing the gay family—the fact that the children have two fathers can be interpreted as part of the light-hearted comical aspect of the book, like having blue fathers. For more gay-inclusive children's books in the Boston/Cambridge area, one can visit the New Words bookstore in Cambridge or the Glad Day bookstore in Copley Square. Many women's or gay-friendly bookstores have a children's section. In addition, one can get a listing and description of a few gay-friendly children's books by sending a written request to: Alyson Publications, 6922 Hollywood Blvd., Tenth Floor, Los Angeles, CA 90028.

Results and Responses

Introducing gay and lesbian issues to the classroom and being out was easier than I expected. Students did not attack or challenge my identity in a confrontational manner. I did not feel they disrespected me as a teacher. I do believe all these hypothetical responses are possible in some situations, but it has not yet been my experience. The fact that I am their teacher plays a role in their response. There is inherent social power for someone in a teacher position that can prevent students from outwardly disrespecting the teacher. One time a substitute teacher was facilitating a discussion of gay/lesbian issues in the class, based on looking at a picture of homophobic graffiti. One or two students in this setting did communicate that gay and lesbian relationships were against their religion and they did not approve of them. As a

straight-identified substitute, she might have elicited more negative responses than I would have. The responses I received were not all positive; I did receive some negative personal expressions (body language) when I explained that I have a relationship with a woman, and some expressions of disdain for my choice. More than one student asked, "Why?" or "You don't like men?"

On the whole, the experience has been meaningful and effective. The positive experiences encouraged me as a teacher to be out in the classroom, and gave me a solid starting point for continuing to address GLBT issues in the future. I found that some learners were sincerely interested in asking questions about gay men and lesbians. Some asked, "Are there churches that have gay people?" and one student asked me more than once to explain lesbian relationships. He understood gay male relationships, but did not understand how women had relationships together. In many cases, people were curious and interested, maybe even in a scandalous kind of way, as discussing the topic broke a social taboo. Many others expressed interest in understanding my relationship and expressed no disagreement with my family choices. These learners are now more informed about the gay community and had an opportunity to ask questions and discuss how gay people are treated in their countries. They have names to put on these "taboo" relationships and have been exposed to them in a way that validates the relationships within regular discussions about family. I urge adult educators—straight and gay—to introduce gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender issues in the classroom. Sharing the results of these experiences, both positive and negative, will enable us to develop increasingly better strategies and curricula that are inclusive of all peoples and families.

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