

What Is Known About Homophobia in the Classroom and the Limited Applicability of Anti-Homophobia Workshop Strategies for Women's Studies Classes

By Kathleen Martindale

Cet article donne un aperçu de quelques reportages Canadiens et Américains sur l'homophobie à l'université et soumet les ateliers anti-homophobie à une analyse féministe dans le but de soulever la question de l'hétérosexisme dans les programmes d'études de la femme.

One of the best available manuals for conducting homophobia awareness workshops was produced by the Cambridge, Massachusetts based group, the Campaign to End Homophobia, in 1990 ("A Guide to Leading Introductory Workshops On Homophobia"). It is detailed, clear, and has proven effectiveness at making participants conscious about personal and interpersonal homophobia. Nonetheless, it has limited usefulness as an instrument for confronting homophobia in the classroom, particularly in the kind of classroom setting I'm most interested in, the undergraduate women's studies course.

The manual suggests that homophobia manifests itself in four distinct but interrelated forms: personal, interpersonal, institutional and cultural. It focuses on the first two forms, that is, those which affect individuals most dramatically and seem to have an "individual solution." This approach is concerned with homophobia's effect on the homophobe, not on the victim of homophobia. The manual, as a liberal humanist document, provides accurate and humane information to counter the fears and ignorances of heterosexuals of good will so as to develop tolerance for members of a marginalized group.

Homophobia, in this approach, hurts, and it hurts heterosexuals, too!. While this is undoubtedly true, the ideology behind this workshop makes it of limited use for those who have a more sophisticated understanding of the relationship between discourses of dominance and marginalization, such as one would assume (rightly or wrongly) would be the norm in women's studies. Taking this approach without serious revisions would be analogous to teaching about abuse against women and children in a women's studies course and concentrating only on the psychology of the abuser and the consequences for his emotional health.

In the words of Cooper Thompson, the author of the manual, personal homophobia is a learned prejudice, the belief that lesbian, gay and bisexual people are sinful, immoral, sick, and inferior to heterosexuals. This form is experienced by the homophobe as fear that they themselves will be treated as if they were sinful, immoral, sick, or inferior. Anyone, straight or gay, can experience it. Interpersonal homophobia is the fear, dislike, or hatred of people believed to be lesbian, gay, or bisexual. It may be expressed by name-calling, verbal and physical harassment, and individual acts of discrimination. The targets are primarily gay people (20).

The two other forms of homophobia, the kinds Thompson's approach is less able to discuss, let alone confront, he terms "heterosexism". This is an odd usage, given the way the term has been theorized in feminist and gay and lesbian literature (See, for instance, Marilyn Frye and Suzanne Pharr, 16-17). Unlike Thompson's notion of homophobia, which puts the emphasis on the harm suffered by the perpetrator, heterosexism, in feminist and gay and lesbian theorizing, emphasizes the consequences to the victims and to culture in general.

Thompson's workshop approach is useless for dealing with institutional or cultural homophobia, "the all-pervasive forms of discrimination against gay people for which no one person is to be blamed, but which are nonetheless reinforced by the attitudes and actions of individuals all the time" (21). This is a serious omission. Thompson defines institutional homophobia as discrimination in the form of set policies, resource allocation and unwritten standards of behaviour for members of institutions such as governments, businesses, and churches. (Schools are not specifically mentioned.) Cultural homophobia, or the unwritten social standards which dictate that being heterosexual is better or more moral than being lesbian or gay and that everyone is heterosexual or should be, is also outside his mandate, since it is invisible to heterosexuals(21). He does admit that gays and lesbians are acutely aware of them, and as a result, feel like outsiders.

These forms of homophobia, then, since they are not detectable at the perceptual level of the heterosexual majority and since they are less dramatic, say, than gay-bashing, are not confrontable within the limits of Thompson's ideology or his workshop's individualist scope. Institutional and cultural homophobia is more a matter of absences, silences, failures, and exclusions. The forms they take might include the conversations in school, whether in the class or in the faculty club, which you are not asked to join or from which your absence or silence doesn't register in the minds of the heterosexual majority; the social and professional networks, formal and informal, that somehow fail to think of you and your lover or partner as a couple; the residence you cannot feel comfortable living in; the course you can never risk taking or giving; the scholarship, fellowship, or teaching position you don't get because, although your work is excellent, you wouldn't fit into the department; the promotion that never arrives.

Though Thompson has failed to address these forms of homophobia, they are more common and more insidious in the undergraduate classroom than the more dramatic violent verbal or physical attacks. However, as the Canadian Ontario Federation of Students' Report, "The Campus Closet: Institutional

Homophobia in Ontario Post-Secondary Education," (1991) indicates, classroom homophobic violence is not unknown in Ontario post-secondary education (10). Meanwhile, institutional and cultural homophobia goes undetected, perhaps precisely because it works by making itself invisible to the naked (heterosexual teacher/student's) eye. Thus, Thompson's well-meaning and well-researched manual is more useful and provocative for making educators think about what has been left out of his workshops and what we as anti-homophobia educators might want to put in instead.

Another limitation in adopting Thompson's approach to confronting homophobia is that it is designed for small groups of adults who are attending voluntarily. In our classrooms, if we are teachers, we have captive audiences, some of tender years; if we are students, we are among the captured. Thompson indicates that it's much harder to do sensitivity workshops with people who are resistant. Resistance would be predictable in typical classroom situations, and, paradoxically and painfully so, it is significantly present in women's studies classes, based on both my own experience and on current research about ways in which students resist liberatory pedagogical practice (Ellsworth, 1989, 297-324; Lather, 1991).

Homophobia is still the most acceptable form of discrimination.

In an appendix, Thompson discusses how his sexual orientation and his decision to identify himself as a heterosexual affects his leadership positively. It made him more relaxed with his heterosexual constituency, though some participants refused to believe him, wondering why anyone not gay would be interested in doing this work (42). On the other hand, his co-facilitator, a lesbian whose name does not appear as co-author, though she has written her own manual, indicates that identifying herself as a lesbian in the workshop is very difficult and makes her fearful. She notes that she gives far too much "air time" to hostile heterosexuals and not enough to her own "family members," the lesbians, gay and bisexuals in the workshops (42-43, Thompson; Kathy O'bear, n.d.).

The differences in the two facilitators' approaches to coming out in their workshops and their very different experiences of them, particularity of who should be their constituency, suggest something about the significant differences in terms of sexuality,

gender and degrees of power of the supposed agents of change that can be found in the sparse literature on confronting homophobia in the classroom. My own teaching experience and ongoing research (Martindale, forthcoming) suggest that those who are least powerful and most at risk for homophobic attack are usually the ones who take on the responsibility. My interview data from York University students and my experiences as a women's studies academic lead me to conclude that, like it or not, students rather than faculty are presently doing nearly all the educating when it comes to confronting homophobia in the classroom.

Clearly, differences of opinion exist between students and faculty and staff about the frequency and seriousness of homophobia on campuses generally and in the classroom in particular. In the Ontario Federation of Students report, "The Campus Closet," which includes lengthy and disturbing incidents of homophobic assaults on the persons or the career opportunities of students, mainly at the graduate level, they cite one study of reactions to forms of oppression in University of Toronto residences: "While over three-quarters of the respondents (81%) would speak out publicly against a racist event, and two thirds (64%) against a sexist, only a third (37%) would openly condemn a homophobic event (5)."

Since homophobia is still the most acceptable form of discrimination, speaking out against it requires more personal courage and a deeper analysis of oppression than conventional schooling is likely to provide. Fighting it requires different measures institutionally and culturally as well. One lesbian teacher who contributed to the 1988 monograph, *The Lesbian in Front of the Classroom*, argues why:

an educator comments, 'Because homosexuality is such a charged issue, teachers rarely confront children who use homophobic name-calling to humiliate and infuriate other children. Many teachers do not realize that this sort of name-calling can be dealt with in much the same way as other kinds of bigotry and stereotyping.' It cannot be handled the same way, since opposing homophobia is not given the same credence or lipservice as confronting other forms of prejudice. Most of my students believe that to hate someone of a different color is wrong. They have personally experienced racism. Yet, for the most part, they feel that it is fine to hate gays and lesbians (Sarah-Hope Parmeter and Irene Reti, eds., 9).

Two years before the OFS Report, the President of Rutgers University's Select Committee for Gay and Lesbian Concerns reported on the extent of homophobia and its impact on the university community. The degree of contradiction and denial

among the over one thousand university faculty and staff who responded to a survey on homophobia and the need for gay and lesbian educational resources at Rutgers is nothing less than astonishing: for example, the highest percentage of responses to the question, "how would you rate the environment for lesbians and gay men in your department," was given to the response of "excellent" (34.5%); only 5.8% said it was poor. Approximately 60% said gays would not experience discrimination or harassment in their department if they were openly gay, though a quarter had themselves witnessed anti-gay incidents and remarks, both in their departments and in the classes they taught. Nearly all those faculty members had done nothing about it (86-88).

On that point at least, there is remarkable similarity between the undergraduates in residences at the University of Toronto and their teachers at Rutgers University, a leading institution in the field of gay and lesbian, as well as women's studies. As far as their awareness of homophobia as it affected the students in their own classes, almost half of the teachers indicated that they believed that students in their classes would be discriminated against or harassed if they were open about their sexual orientation, and the implication was that they, their teachers, would do nothing about that, either.

In the most detailed study of the impact of homophobia on university students, the Classroom Climate Survey done in 1984 at the University of California at Berkeley, lesbian and gay students were found to be "the most uncomfortable in class, more than any other ethnic minority group, women, or the disabled. "82% of lesbian and gay students surveyed had been subjected to pejorative stereotypical comments about homosexuals by instructors" (Quoted by Ellen Louise Hart, 31-32). Nonetheless, and most bizarrely and sadly, in the Rutgers Report, almost 50% of faculty members responding said sensitivity training would not be helpful in their department or office (86).

By comparison with the Rutgers survey with its view from the top, the view of the Ontario Federation of Students is from the bottom and the report is far more politically engaged. Written just after the imported crisis about "political correctness," the authors can easily place the resistance to ethnic, women's and lesbian and gay studies in a context of political reaction and acknowledge what is at stake for students and faculty who insist on hearing voices speaking from the margins:

Given the challenges that diversity presents to heterosexist perspectives and frameworks, it is not wholly surprising in the present academic environment of liberal retrenchment, that those individuals who attempt to research and articulate gay or lesbian related issues are often subtly discouraged and directly punished" (9).

Unlike Thompson, the OFS report focuses on institutional homophobia or heterosexism. Whereas Thompson's approach emphasizes the psychology of homophobia, the OFS report emphasizes the politics of heterosexism, and in particular its material consequences for those who suffer it, such as having their academic interests and concerns "denigrated, side-lined or ignored" by those in power or by having their academic assessments or funding jeopardized (9).

As important as the reporting of concrete and well-detailed cases of homophobia in the classroom are in the OFS report, their findings are not that useful for my research, which concerns the assessment of homophobia, or more particularly heterosexism, in the undergraduate women's studies class and practical ways of confronting it. Most of the accounts they give came from graduate students and none was involved in women's studies. However, their cautionary note about taking the students' accounts as representative of "the lesbian and gay experience" in Ontario universities is well taken. That is, the gay or lesbian student who comes out in class becomes tokenized, the class specimen and expert. The OFS report ties this tokenization to the instructors' lack of responsibility for confronting homophobia: "It was suggested that it was the responsibility of the instructor to challenge prejudices and to critically examine the pedagogical tools used in this class-room/seminar"(9-10).

The OFS report does not include accounts of homophobia in women's studies courses. Now, perhaps I should note that, to outsiders to women's studies, the existence of homophobia in such classes might seem difficult to believe because it seems so contradictory to the methodology and pedagogical outlook of women's studies, if not to its vision of justice. Furthermore, everyone's heard the rumours that women's studies is a programme run by and for radical lesbians. If Mark Lepine was not alone in thinking that all female engineering students are feminists, by extension not only are all women's studies students and their instructors feminists, they are all a bunch of lesbians.

Unfortunately, after teaching for thirteen years in this field, I must report that such rumours are greatly exaggerated. These days, many of the students who take women's studies courses, especially at the introductory level where the enrollments are biggest, do not consider themselves feminists. Not even all the instructors do either. Though there are probably more lesbian students in a typical women's studies class than in most others, I have taught many courses where there were, apparently, none. Finally, the number of instructors in Canadian women's studies programmes, and I know three or four rather well, who are openly lesbian amounts to no more than a handful. Because of institutional homophobia, it is not safe for lesbian instructors in women's studies to come out either in their academic work or in the classroom until after they have tenure. Because many of the

women involved in the teaching of women's studies are graduate students, part-time, sessional or untenured instructors, the number of "out" lesbians will always be tiny until homophobia is eliminated from women's studies.

Again, we might expect to find a great deal of solidarity between heterosexual instructors and their closeted and open lesbian colleagues. Unfortunately, as the lesbian philosopher Marilyn Frye wrote almost ten years ago, such solidarity is rare. Homophobia and lesbian baiting are rampant in what Frye calls "heterosexual women's studies":

The predominance of heterosexual perspectives, values, commitments, thought, and vision is usually so complete and ubiquitous that it cannot be perceived, for lack of contrast. (Like the air on a calm and moderate day; the way sexism still is for many people.) ...Women's studies programming is grounded on the assumption that the vast majority of the students are and always will be heterosexual. Hence we give them almost entirely heterosexual women's literature, the history of heterosexual women, and analysis of the roles of heterosexual women in work, business, the arts, and heterosexual domestic life (194-195).

Heterosexual women's studies instructors told Frye that they cannot tell the truth about the politics of sexuality to their students because it would alienate them. While Frye disputes this, she does argue that most of her heterosexual women's studies colleagues seem comfortable with the present silences around lesbian issues in their classes and uncomfortable with Frye's presence and her insistence that these silences be broken (194). Fears of lesbian baiting affect them so profoundly that, tenured or not, they fail to confront the homophobic omissions and commissions in their curricula, their lectures and their class discussions. Frye concludes her argument by urging heterosexual women's studies academics to think about their choice to be and remain heterosexual and to think about their assumptions about their students.

Though Frye's logic and moral passion are admirable, as a workable strategy her suggestions seem unlikely to succeed in the current climate of backlash against not only lesbians and gays but against feminists of all kinds. It is also worthy of note that since the time Frye wrote this article, there has been yet another period of rupturing between heterosexual and lesbian feminist theorizing and activism. A decade or more after lesbians and women of colour have made their cases about the exclusionary nature of bourgeois feminism and the women's movement, the mainstream has still not acted in good faith. While heterosexual

feminist work seems stalled and some students and instructors think of themselves as "post-feminist", lesbian and gay studies is burgeoning, conferences and publications of the most prestigious kind are flourishing and gay and lesbian political and theoretical activism represents a creative and visible resistance to the New World Order. Because of the vibrancy of this theoretical and political activity, I would argue that students, graduate and undergraduate, are at this moment much more likely to make themselves counted as agents of and for social change than most faculty, even women's studies faculty.

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