

Breaking the Silence: Critical Literacy and Social Action

Drawing on her teaching, Young shows how teachers can address LGBT issues, including homophobia and heterosexual privilege, in secondary classes and in schoolwide clubs and events.

This article explores the ways that students in a humanities class talked about, researched, and disrupted homophobia at Jones School, a public combined middle school and high school in a small New England town (all names are pseudonyms). It includes strategies that move beyond discussions of right and wrong to a place of critical inquiry and support for the human rights of all people. At the same time, it addresses some of the difficulties in “aligning cultural integrity and social justice” in a small, conservative public school (Young, “Challenges” 71).

As an English teacher, I encourage students to question, not simply reproduce what they read in the world. Drawing on the work of Ira Shor and Caroline Pari, and of Linda Christensen, I emphasize *critical literacy*—reading, writing, questioning, and revising the word as well as the ideologically constructed world—with all students. I focus on the critical literacy work of my Contemporary Issues class, a full-year humanities elective course with students in grades 9–12. Through one project, I worked with these students to challenge the silence surrounding homophobia in our school and make visible the existing support for people of all sexual orientations. I documented, reflected on, adapted, and analyzed the process through practitioner research (see Young, “Practitioner,” for more details).

Why don't we ever talk about homophobia at school?
—Orleana, junior

In Contemporary Issues I want to help students develop critical thinking, reading, writing, speaking, and listening skills as they relate to social issues that affect their everyday lives. I encourage students to dig deeply, questioning and disrupting the social inequalities they see, rather than accepting them as “just the way things are.” To do this, I ask students to determine the topics or contemporary issues that speak to their social concerns and lived realities. Drawing on the work of Paulo Freire, I help students to identify themes that emerge from critical discussions, freewrites, and brainstorming sessions. As a class, we pull these themes together, I write them on the board, and the students have the opportunity to discuss the topics and select some for whole-class inquiry and others for independent exploration.

Critical Inquiry into Homophobia

The class came up with a long list of topics including the death penalty, animal rights, violence in video games, affirmative action, and homophobia. While none of the students in the school at the time openly identified as lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgender (LGBT), homophobia received a unanimous vote. This was an issue in which all of the students felt vested, which was our first step to identifying a topic for critical inquiry.

Why did students who identified as straight pick homophobia as a topic of study in a small,

conservative town? Certainly same-sex marriage and hate crimes based on sexual orientation had been in the news. Some students had family members or friends in same-sex relationships, too. Thus, it was a contemporary issue in many of their lives, yet it was also a subject that was rarely raised in their other classes. In my classroom they knew it was open for discussion: There was a Safe Space sticker on the wall; I integrated attention to sexual orientation along with race, class, and gender in my courses; and I also consistently interrupted homophobic as well as other biased language while allowing students the space to respectfully discuss multiple perspectives on issues. In this way, they learned that I valued multiple viewpoints and encouraged dialogue, but always in a respectful way that affirmed all people's rights to social justice.

I started the unit by having students reflect in their journals on their experiences and beliefs about sexual orientation and homophobia and the manifestations of it that they saw in their school, homes, and community. Journals are an important place for students to begin to grapple with, question, and reflect on their beliefs; in Contemporary Issues, students write in them daily. Orleana, a junior, and Anwar, a senior (both of whom chose their own pseudonyms), wrote in their journals:

Why did students who identified as straight pick homophobia as a topic of study in a small, conservative town?

Orleana: I am not homophobic. I do not know any open homosexuals but I am not against homosexuality My friends support homosexuality and my family usually doesn't discuss the topic so I don't know their feelings. The only people in my family I would think are openly against it are my grandparents because of the difference in their generation. Also my grandmother is very religious so she is definitely against it.

Anwar: I have close friends and immediate family members who routinely make homophobic comments but claim not to be Despite the homophobic encounters I've had and have, the pro-gay experiences I've had have had a much larger impact on me. I have close friends and immediate family members who're gay and the vast majority of my friends are pro-gay rights. I certainly side with the people in my life who support gay rights.

While both of these students, like many other students in the class, position themselves as "not homophobic," their experiences with people of diverse sexual orientations vary substantially. Over the next couple of weeks, students captured in rich detail some of the manifestations of homophobia in their school. Phrases such as "that's so gay," "don't be gay," "you are so gay," "homo," and "fag" were among the most common examples that students cited in their journals and in class discussion. They noticed that teachers, in general, did not interrupt this language, which mirrors national trends (Kosciw and Diaz 17).

Thinking Critically about Language and Privilege

Back in our classroom, we problematized the phrase "that's so gay." Initially, some of the students said that it "doesn't mean anything," yet they all agreed that "gay" implied "stupid." Students offered multiple perspectives and experiences with the phrase. Exploring the larger meanings, ideologies, and implications of word choice, we discussed possible effects of using "gay" to mean "stupid." Through journaling and whole-class discussion, students realized that the phrase "that's so gay" was not neutral at all. Lauren, a senior, reflected on this in her journal: "I was able to think critically about the language we use and to understand how language can be used to maintain oppression. Homophobic slurs can really put and keep people down when others say them. I, like many others, have said, 'that's so gay,' but now I am more aware of when it might come out and I catch myself before I would say it." Lauren's critical thinking about language use is evident on many levels. She understands "how language can be used to maintain oppression," in particular that "homophobic slurs can . . . keep people down." She is also able to see her position of privilege in terms of sexual orientation and begin to disrupt her collusion in maintaining a heterosexist school climate when she stops herself from saying "that's so gay."

Anwar, whose mom had been in a same-sex relationship, wrote, "I don't believe in 'gay rights,' I believe in human rights," which sparked another discussion on the power of language to shape the

way that we view the world. “Gay rights” implies something special, rights that are afforded only to people who identify as gay, whereas “human rights,” the students reasoned, was more accurate as it connotes universal rights given to all people. In classes where students express that they disagree with homosexuality, I often return to a human rights perspective. Most students will agree with the United Nations Declaration of Human Rights that all people are entitled to basic human rights. Those who were identified as homosexuals, as well as Jews, Roma, Communists, and others, were persecuted during the Holocaust. Rather than discussing whether it is right or wrong, a sin or not, to be gay, we acknowledge that people have a range of sexual orientations and nobody should be killed for who they are. From this common ground, we can acknowledge that students may hold personal or religious beliefs about sexual orientation, while at the same time affirming that all people are entitled to human rights, including respect and safe learning environments.

In Contemporary Issues, we defined the words we were using. Students knew what *heterosexual*, *homosexual*, *gay*, *lesbian*, and *bisexual* meant, but many did not know what the “T” in *LGBT* signified. They confused *transgender* with *cross-dressing*, rather than understanding that people who are transgender have a wide range of gender expressions that transgress the cultural norms of their original biological sex in significant ways (Adams, Bell, and Griffin 219). Further, there was confusion about the use of the words *queer* and *gay*, because these words are used both as homophobic slurs and as reclaimed language within and beyond the queer community. The students remembered playground games of “smear the queer” and most thought of *queer* as a derogatory word. Queer studies, queer theory, and queer as an identity that signifies gender identities and/or sexual orientations that fall beyond the narrow scope of our heteronormative culture were all new concepts.

We also discussed *heterosexual privilege*, the unearned privileges granted to people based on their assumed heterosexuality. As a teacher in an opposite-sex marriage, I was granted the privilege to address this subject with students without being accused of trying to “convert” them. As a class, we

reflected on the heterosexual privileges that we took for granted. The students listed privileges such as

- being able to openly discuss the gender of our partners or people we were interested in,
- having our curriculum reflect our sexual orientation,
- having our sexual orientation presented as normal,
- not being made fun of based on our sexual orientation,
- not having our church say that our sexual orientation is wrong,
- not having our families say that our sexual orientation is wrong,
- not feeling like we have to hide our sexual orientation,
- not having our right to marry the person we love challenged, and
- having fairy tales and children’s literature depict our sexual orientation.

Widening Our Scope

Once the Contemporary Issues students had reflected on their personal experiences and roles in maintaining heterosexism, we began to discuss the silence that blankets the subject in our community.

Further developing critical literacy, we asked questions that connected to power: How does this silencing work? How does it manifest itself? Who benefits from such silencing? How can we change it? Through our discussion of silence, we drew on students’ current experiences to examine the ways that homophobia in their school connects to how heterosexism operates

on linguistic, cultural, and institutional levels. Students noted that they had never read or heard a children’s book that included gay characters. I brought in two of Leslea Newman’s picture books, *Heather Has Two Mommies* (Newman and Crocker) and *Gloria Goes to Gay Pride* (Newman and Souza),

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which we read and discussed. We also watched a *Frontline* episode entitled "The Assault on Gay America," which presents a national and sociocultural perspective on heterosexism and homophobia.

Students then posed questions about homophobia, heterosexism, sexual orientation, and gay rights. They did research and shared their findings with the rest of the class. Among their sources was the Gay, Lesbian and Straight Education Network's national survey of LGBT students (www.glsen.org) and information about starting Gay Straight Alliances (GSAs; www.gaystraightalliance.org). Many of the students expressed interest in starting a GSA at

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our school and I encouraged them to do so, offering to be their faculty sponsor. After securing the principal's permission, we began the first GSA at the school, which 27 students joined.

As we continued our inquiry, my students became aware of the lack of LGBT voices in our discussions as well as in our school. When the students expressed their desire to hear from LGBT people about their experiences, I arranged for an LGBT panel from a local university to come

and share their stories. One of the panelists told us about a "Jeans and White T-Shirt Day" that he did at his high school to show support for the LGBT community, and he told us about the Day of Silence (<http://www.dayofsilence.org>), when students choose not to speak to show solidarity with LGBT youth whose ordinary lives are shrouded in silence.

Taking Action

After the panel, the students were inspired to do an action project that would raise the entire school's awareness about these issues and begin to break the silence at our school. They decided on a "Jeans and White T-Shirt Day." I told the students that they needed to receive the principal's permission to hold an all-school event. As a class, they composed this letter formally requesting and explaining their day.

Dear Principal,

Our Contemporary Issues class would like to propose a jeans and white t-shirt day on Thursday March 10 to raise awareness for solidarity in our school community with all people who are gay, lesbian, bisexual, or transgender. The idea was suggested by a member of the [panel from the local university] and has worked well at other schools in the area. People wishing to support the GLBT solidarity cause are urged to wear jeans and a white t-shirt on this day. Stickers will also be made available for those wishing to show solidarity. If you have any questions or concerns feel free to contact our class.

Respectfully, Contemporary Issues Class

Two of the seniors delivered the letter to the principal, who approved their day immediately, and the students began work on their project.

The students composed an announcement that was read once during the week before what became known as the "Day of Solidarity." This was met with some faculty and student resistance and confusion. In addition, the posters that the students put up about the event were taken down by the head teacher, who was responsible for disciplinary matters in the school. The faculty had heard nothing about the day up until this point and some were frustrated that they could not answer students' questions about it, while others philosophically disagreed with the intent of the day. According to my students, a few students in the middle school made homophobic remarks or jokes about the proposed day, calling it "Gay Day" and saying that "only homos would do that," while many of the older students expressed interest in participating.

By the next day the principal told me that he had been hearing a lot of opposition to this Day of Solidarity by some faculty and a few parents. The concerns were raised the following day at a previously scheduled School Committee meeting. They included the appropriateness of such a day for middle school and high school students, concern about a "dress code" or "uniform" to show support, and the need for more education within the school community regarding homophobia in general. As a result of this discussion, the principal officially postponed the Day of Solidarity, requesting that the Contemporary Issues class provide more "information" and "clarification" so that the day could



Artwork by Sable VanDermay-Kirkham.

“yield the positive result that the class is seeking.” He tasked the Contemporary Issues students with educating the school about homophobia.

Working with Resistance

My students’ responses ranged from frustration to understanding of the School Committee’s concerns, but they all agreed that they wanted to continue on with their Day of Solidarity. In fact, for some, the resistance and controversy served as motivating factors to push forward. The students were upset that their day was being postponed, but we discussed the unique opportunity we had to provide information to the school community on this subject. Using their research, the students created posters and a display on a rainbow backdrop entitled Solidarity and Awareness, which included facts and statistics about homophobia, names of famous LGBT people, definitions of key terms, resources for support, and other information.

When the students returned to the principal and the faculty with a new proposed date, there was still some resistance. Rather than shut out the resistance, we engaged it. The students invited the principal to our class on several occasions, and he joined our

discussions about how best to hold the event. In faculty meetings, teachers continued to talk about it and tried to figure out how it could work. After a few weeks, the faculty and principal agreed to allow the jeans and white T-shirt day to proceed as a high school-only event. My students were disappointed that they could not include the middle school students in this, but they took up the challenge of finding another way. Although they could not dress up, the principal agreed to have the seventh- and eighth-grade students meet with the Contemporary Issues students for facilitated discussions on the Day of Solidarity.

On that day, many students did wear jeans and white T-shirts. Carlos, a sophomore, summed up the participation in his journal. “The outcome was really good in the seniors and juniors as was expected. The outcome in the sophomores was a little surprising. The surprising element was that the sophomores were so enthusiastic about the day. They wanted stickers even though they were dressed up. They wanted to show that they are for it. Some people who forgot to dress up were asking for stickers.”

About half of the ninth-grade students dressed up as well. The principal, the guidance counselor, and the head teacher did not participate. About half of the teachers did.

At 1:30 p.m. on the Day of Solidarity, the middle school students reported to the cafeteria, where the Contemporary Issues students were waiting for them. The doors closed and I was left inside with 100 middle school students and my Contemporary Issues students huddled into ten groups. Some groups were quieter than others, and in those groups the high school students did most of the talking. In most groups, however, the middle school students were actively participating, leaning in so they could

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hear each other as they engaged in discussion. There was some laughter and a lot of serious talk. And there was perfect order.

At the end of the session, the high school students were clearly proud as they met with me for a five-minute debriefing. Through engaging in dialogue and visibly demonstrating their support for people of all sexual orientations, the students showed their commitment to ending the homophobic school culture. The next day the principal thanked the school community for its mature response to the Day of Solidarity.

Understanding and Continuing to Engage in Social Action

At the end of the year, I asked my students to define *social action*. Several explained social action as disrupting injustice or collusion. Lauren suggested that "Action is doing something, instead of being quiet and letting your ideas and views get passed by. Action looks like someone who teaches others,

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speaks up and talks about issues." Carlos wrote, "[Action] can just be verbally confronting people when they say homophobic slurs and it can also be our day of solidarity. An action usually is to raise your voice against any injustice or things you disagree with."

The juniors from Contemporary Issues were leaders in the GSA the following September and they continued to

take action. They hosted an after-school panel of LGBT people from the same university. They spoke at a faculty meeting about creating safe spaces in all classrooms for people of all sexual orientations, and they provided their teachers with Safe Space stickers and information packets.

They also held a second Day of Solidarity. This time they faced no opposition and were allowed to hold an hour-long middle school meeting a few days prior to the Day of Solidarity, where they discussed the issues with their younger peers. Middle school students also were allowed to participate in the jeans and white T-shirt part of the day. Nora composed a letter describing the purpose of the

event, which the principal sent to students' homes. On the actual Day of Solidarity, in addition to wearing jeans and white T-shirts, the GSA students invited participants to write their names on small pink triangles that were put together to form a giant triangle of solidarity, which remained displayed in the cafeteria throughout the year.

While this second year was marked by less resistance than the first, there were still pockets of it. We had, however, opened a schoolwide conversation about homophobia and heterosexism at Jones. In the school newspaper, there were "Pro" and "Con" op-ed articles about the Safe Space stickers, which many teachers and the principal chose to display on their doors. Some teachers now heard and interrupted homophobic remarks. Two students came out to their peers as not being heterosexual for the first time in the collective memory of the school, with little fanfare.

Lessons Learned

Homophobia is everyone's responsibility to challenge. Students and teachers with heterosexual privilege must be active participants in the work to end it in their schools and communities. To end heterosexism as we develop critical literacy, it is important to problematize and challenge heterosexual privilege, homophobic language, and silent collusion. Addressing the issue of sexual orientation in schools is complicated; it is important to respect the home cultures and beliefs that students and teachers have, while at the same time ensuring that all people are guaranteed equal respect, rights, and privileges at school. Maintaining a safe learning environment where all students feel heard and represented requires students, teachers, administrators, and families to have open dialogues and work together. Inadvertently, we dove into our project without first opening our dialogue to the larger school community, but as we negotiated the Day of Solidarity, we worked together with the school community to understand the project through a supportive human rights perspective, rather than as a religious statement. Engaging in this dialogue and modeling how to have difficult conversations with students, colleagues, and administrators was important.

As a teacher, I was reminded how much students were capable of when I provided them with

the space and support that they needed to delve deeply into an issue about which they were passionate. Through critical inquiry, the students and I identified an issue, heterosexism, in which we felt vested. We researched and documented multiple perspectives and experiences with it and looked at each critically. Through dialogue, research, and journal writing, we examined relationships between power and language. Ultimately, a goal of critical literacy pedagogy is to engage in informed social action, which the students did through their Day of Solidarity and subsequent events.


In their final self-evaluations, students also reflected on their lessons learned on many levels:

Carlos: I started to realize that this topic covers a lot more than just hate crimes. I also realized how it applies to all of us on a day to day basis.

Orleana: Throughout the year I developed a better understanding of multiple viewpoints. I learned to step back and try to understand the opposite stance from my own.

Katie: We didn't just randomly attack homophobia for existing, we worked to try to understand why it existed, how prevalent it was in our society, and the various ways we could address it.

Nora: As a class we were able to motivate and inspire each other—strengthening our cause and making it possible to go farther than any of us could have gone individually . . . Most of all, I think that our homophobia unit and Solidarity Day gave me a chance to imagine how to address injustice through activism. I can take action

against injustice and make a difference, and I don't have to take something at face value if I believe that it may be wrong. . . . I've learned more about myself this year—who I am, what I am capable of, and what I want to do with my life—than ever before. 

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Formerly a high school English and social studies teacher, **Sara Lewis-Bernstein Young** is currently a faculty member in the School of Education at the University of Massachusetts Amherst. Her research focuses on the development of critical literacy practices and social justice activism in high school students. She may be reached at slbyoung@educ.umass.edu.

READWRITETHINK CONNECTION

Traci Gardner, RWT

Undertake your own social action initiatives with the resources in "Persuading the Principal: Writing Persuasive Letters about School Issues." The lesson includes graphic organizers and student handouts on persuasive writing that students can use as they compose letters to the principal, just like the students in Young's article. http://www.readwritethink.org/lessons/lesson_view.asp?id=1137

About Face Youth Theatre

About Face Youth Theatre provides an innovative and rigorous arts-based series of programs that increase the safety, empowerment, and leadership capacity of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, questioning youth, and their allies (LGBTQA) in order to catalyze youth-led civic dialogue and action within schools and communities.

About Face Theatre tours nationally to high schools, colleges, conferences, and community organizations. On tour this year is our hit show *Fast Forward*!

Fast Forward tells the true stories of LGBTQA youth to explore the sex education crisis and rising HIV rates in America.

Set against the backdrop of high school, *Fast Forward* depicts a world replete with gay-straight alliances, abstinence-until-marriage sex education, cyber-bullying, and gay prom. What has it meant for this generation to grow up in the era of HIV and AIDS? How has it affected the outcomes of their lives? *Fast Forward* bridges the generation gap between the start of the epidemic and now, and with the audience's help, the ensemble envisions a leap into a better future.

Fast Forward tells the true stories of our ensemble members of the LGBTQA community to explore the connection between the lack of comprehensive sex education in schools today and the impact of HIV and AIDS on the youth community.

For more information, please contact Education Programs Director Paula Gilovich at Paula@aboutfacetheatre.com or 773-784-8565, ext. 116.



Candidates Announced for Section Elections; Watch for Your Ballot

The Secondary Section Nominating Committee has named the following candidates for Section offices in the NCTE spring elections:

For Members of the Secondary Section Steering Committee (one to be elected; terms to expire in 2013): **Amy Lucas**, Midland High School, Varna, Illinois; **Clarissa West-White**, Florida A&M University, Tallahassee.

For Members of the Secondary Section Nominating Committee (three to be elected; terms to expire in 2010): **Tim Fredrick**, New York University, New York; **Calle Friesen**, St. Mary's Schools, Storm Lake, Iowa; **Shekema Holmes**, Union City, Georgia; **Ruth Townsend Story**, Portland, Maine; **Byung-In Seo**, Chicago State University, Illinois; **Keith Younker**, Southridge High School, Huntingburg, Indiana.

Members of the 2008–09 Secondary Section Nominating Committee are Claudia Swisher, Norman North High School, Oklahoma, chair; Larry Johannessen, Northern Illinois University, DeKalb; and Maureen Rippee, Woodrow Wilson High School, Long Beach, California.