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Recommendations from the Field: Creating an LGBTQ Learning Community

Kathryn S. Jaekel

Northern Illinois University, ksjaekel@gmail.com

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Recommendations from the Field: Creating an LGBTQ Learning Community

Abstract

This article details the creation of a lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer (LGBTQ) learning community. Created because of research that indicates chilly campus climates (Rankin, 2005), as well as particular needs of LGBTQ students in the classroom, this learning community focused upon LGBTQ topics in and out of the classroom. While overall the learning community was successful, recommendations of increasing partnerships with other campus offices is detailed. In addition, critical questions of reframing learning communities as being essential for identity are outlined.

Keywords

LGBTQ, learning communities

Background

As a former Writing Program Administrator (WPA) for a large first-year writing program at Iowa State University and as a faculty member who has taught undergraduate writing and other courses, I have seen the effects of a “chilly campus climate” (Rankin, Blumenfeld, Weber, & Frazer, 2010) for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer (LGBTQ) students in my classrooms. Nearly every semester, a handful of the students who have come out to me indicate that they are struggling both academically and socially. I have seen many LGBTQ students simply stop attending classes and fail to turn in assignments, sharing with me that they felt uncomfortable in many of their classes because of classmates’ or even faculty’s intolerance around their gender identity and sexuality. I have attempted to help the best that I can: I have reached out to these students, connected them with student services offices, and talked with them at length about the various support systems available to them on and off campus. While this helped a few students, the majority of them continued to struggle. Of the students I met with who struggled or decided to stop attending their classes, most indicated that it was just too hard: they faced harassment, they did not feel like they had community, their families were not supportive of their identity, or they were simply struggling to figure out where they fit.

In recent years, Iowa State University has grown, with record enrollment over the past two years. The university is home to 36,000 students and offers over 100 majors. While it continues to be a predominantly White campus, with 71% of students identifying as White, Iowa State has seen an increase in both students of color and international students in this period of growth. Although the university does not track the number of students who identify as LGBTQ, as the university grows, certainly so does the number of students who identify in these ways.

Perhaps due to this growth, the institution has made strides in cultivating a more inclusive campus. The university offers multiple safe zone trainings for students as well as faculty and staff. In addition, there is a Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender (LGBT) Student Services office that serves as a resource for students. Yet, despite these resources available to students, faculty, and staff, I witness continued and numerous instances of my LGBTQ students failing to persist. Seeing it happen across many sections of my first-year writing program, I began to consider creating a LGBTQ learning community (LC) at my university. My thought was that if students were with peers who shared similar experiences, perhaps these students would persist, both in their writing classes and throughout their degree programs.

Learning communities in higher education have long offered students invaluable opportunities. In particular, learning communities can serve to incorporate collaborative and active experiences, creating more opportunities for

students to connect with one another. These connections increase not only academic success but also the likelihood that students will persist in college (Tinto, 1993). Just as important, however, learning communities can actually serve as safe spaces for the promotion of diversity (Cabrera, Nora, Bernal, Terenzini, & Pascarella, 1998; Pascarella, Edison, Nora, Hagedorn, & Terenzini, 1996; Zhao & Kuh, 2004).

Given the positive aspects of learning communities, Iowa State University has been implementing successful ones for 20 years. Because of this commitment—the institution offers over 80 LCs serving over 55,000 students—and because of the resources available, the creation of a new learning community was relatively simple. The typical structure of most learning communities consists of a cohort of students, often in the same major, who sequentially take courses together over a period of time. Often, students will take two or more courses a semester together, especially in their first two years. This structure creates community for students in and out of the classroom.

Thus, because of my campus context, it was possible for me to create a LGBTQ learning community where students could create community both in and out of the classroom, help support each other, and possibly create more visibility for LGBTQ students and their specific needs.

The Problem

While acceptance of and support for LGBTQ students on college campuses has been increasing, recent scholarship indicates that campuses continue to be places where discrimination against those who identify as LGBTQ occurs (Evans & Broido, 2002; Rankin, 2005; Rankin et al., 2010; Renn, 2010; Sanlo, 2004). Instances of harassment and violence directed towards LBCTQ individual still occur on campuses (Brown, Clarke, Gortmaker, & Robinson-Keilig, 2004; Rankin et al., 2010).

Moreover, in the classroom, LGBTQ identity and topics are often silenced. Students are aware of the marginalization and exclusion that happens within the curriculum of courses (Connolly, 1999; Furrow, 2012). Because instructors are afraid to bring up these topics or they fear backlash, LGBTQ students experience limited opportunities to learn about or even talk about LGBTQ issues. For students, factors such as harassment, violence, and marginalization work to create feelings of invisibility and isolation and can lead, ultimately, to struggles with academic success (D'Augelli, 1993, 1998; Sanlo, 2004).

When LGBTQ students and topics are discussed, they are not always talked about in a positive manner. To date, there is a lack of literature detailing the positive components of being LGBTQ. There is little discussion about items such as resiliency, academic success, or survival skills as they relate to LGBTQ students on college campuses (Sanlo, 2004).

The Creation of a LGBTQ Learning Community

In an effort to create a space where LGBTQ students and their allies could openly discuss topics, issues, and aspects central to their lived experiences, I proposed to my administration that I pilot an LGBTQ themed learning community. I argued that this learning community could help students persist because it would be a space where they could be open, create community, and learn more about what the institution does to help support them. Open to anyone who wanted to join, this learning community's flagship course would be a first-year writing course (a core requirement at my university) and then an introductory queer studies course that I taught the following term. The learning community would continue to meet programmatic outcomes, such as critical thinking, cultivation of rhetorical strategies in writing, analysis of rhetorical arguments, communication and writing skills, while focusing on LGBTQ topics. The overarching learning goals would be for students to learn more about inclusive campus spaces, offices, and services. Students would not only learn more about those spaces, they would analyze them and make suggestions about needs that were not being met on campus.

My administration supported this learning community completely. They created the section, gave me a course release to teach it, and even offered to buy up seats in the class if it did not fill to capacity. In addition, the learning community administration at my institution helped publicize the learning community on their website. Overall, the upper administration, both in my department and in my college, was incredibly supportive.

In total, 18 undergraduate students signed up for the flagship course. The course curriculum focused on analyzing the grand narrative of LGBTQ topics in popular culture. Students analyzed LGBTQ themed advertisements, read about current news and events regarding same-sex marriage and transgender rights, and analyzed different political arguments surround civil rights for LGBTQ individuals. In addition to the formal curriculum, students were required to attend an "Out-to-Lunch" lecture put on by the university's LGBT Student Services. These short lectures focus on subjects like gender fluidity and identity, LGBTQ activism efforts, or community service initiatives. Finally, students were required to make and present a poster about a topic or issue that they wanted to give more visibility. They presented their posters in an open session, during which individuals could attend and engage with the students.

Successes and Struggles

There were many successes of this piloted project. Having 18 students enrolled, interested, and engaged was itself a great success. All but one student successfully completed the course and commented that they enjoyed having a space to be out

and open. One student in particular shared that he had never been out in a college course and for the first time, finally, he felt like he could be himself. Others noted that group work was a lot easier because they felt comfortable talking about their experiences or their partners with their peers. Many said it was good to connect with classmates in an authentic way.

Students were particularly appreciative of the assignments that helped them navigate the institution better. One assignment asked students to analyze the mission, function, and role of a campus office, for example, our Women's Center or our LGBT Student Services Office, providing them with more information about how they could use that office and that space. Students indicated that they had heard those offices existed prior to doing the assignment but did not know anything about the specific programming led by those offices nor about the actual physical spaces provided for students to do homework, hang out, or talk to staff about their concerns. This assignment made students aware of various offices, programs, and even people that they could go to if they needed help. One student, who decided to analyze at the university police force, told her classmates that she found the police officers to be supportive, kind, and knowledgeable about many LGBTQ topics. Several students were surprised to hear this and later shared with me that they now felt more comfortable with the idea of reporting instances of discrimination because of their peer's presentation.

While these successes are important, perhaps the most important part of this project was how we struggled. To begin, recruitment was incredibly difficult. Because the learning community was new and did not have a specific disciplinary home, getting the word out to advisors, faculty, and staff was difficult. In order for students to sign-up for the learning community, they had to have a specific course number, which only advisors had. Although advisors knew about the learning community, some struggled to suggest it to students. For instance, if a student was not out, or did not "appear" to be someone who would "fit" in the learning community, advisors may not have mentioned the opportunity or advised the student that the course was even available.

In addition to recruitment issues, some additional marketing had to occur for students to take the class. Since learning communities at our institution are directly tied to majors and potential career outcomes and this was an identity-based community seemingly without "direct" career paths, it took a lot of convincing to get students to join. While other learning communities structure their programs around particular industries and career opportunities, the LGBTQ learning community could not make the same argument. Because it did not focus on careers in the same way, it was difficult to get advisors and students to understand that this learning community afforded students critical opportunities with regard to learning and the cultivation of community.

Another struggle was resources. It was difficult to find classes and faculty to link with my introductory composition course. Students needed more than just my perspective on social and academic issues, but the shortage of courses and faculty members who teach about LGBTQ issues made linking challenging. The introductory queer studies class that was a good fit for the learning community is one that I teach. And the courses of the few faculty who teach other gender and sexuality courses are almost always full. Due to resource budget and staffing constraints, we could not create new sections of existing classes, nor could we incorporate a large group of students into an existing section.

Finally, even though we ultimately created a link for the subsequent term, only half the students from the first term of the LC actually took it because it did not count toward degree requirements for their majors. Taking it represented extra expense and extra time tacked onto their degrees. While many expressed an interest in taking the class, and they would have learned more about LGBTQ topics, financially it just did not make sense for them.

Strategies for Improvement

The process of creating this learning community led me to identify strategies that may be of use to others who are contemplating developing an identity-based learning community.

Strategy 1—Partnering with Student Affairs

While academic advisors play a key role in recruitment, it did not occur to me that advisors might encounter difficulties recruiting students for this learning community. Due to this, one of the most successful ways that recruitment occurred was through partnerships with specific student affairs offices, in particular partnering with the LGBT Student Services office because those offices had different relationships with the students. Many LGBTQ students found out about the learning community through that office's recruitment, publicity at events, and outreach. In addition to an LGBT center, other offices such as Women's Centers and Multicultural Centers would be excellent resources to help recruit students.

It also would help if the learning community could partner with Residence Life. While initial talks had been occurring about creating gender-neutral housing or LGBTQ housing on my campus, at the time of this project, it was not possible to create a residential learning community. However, if an institution had this type of option, it could enhance opportunities for student learning and development.

Strategy 2—Meaningful Links

One key recommendation is to use broad parameters when thinking about potential course pairings for the learning community. I struggled finding other

academic courses that were both relevant and would fit into students' schedules. Because learning communities are often discipline focused, I could have partnered with the Women Studies department and even another discipline that would have allowed for students to take classes together. At my institution, however, there are not many Women's Studies majors and thus, the class would not have filled. Instead of with just one department, had I partnered with several similar disciplines, such as women's studies, anthropology, and sociology, we might have been able to develop a community of students with similar interests who could have taken classes together, creating a bigger, richer community in which to learn.

Strategy 3—Rethinking Purpose

Several students who showed initial interest ultimately decided not to sign-up for this learning community because it had no obvious career purpose. This learning community did help cultivate skills students could use in their careers, such as critical thinking, awareness of diversity, and a better understanding of social issues. However, I needed to do a better job of highlighting the outcomes that mapped onto students' educational and career goals. Even that approach can be tricky, however, since many of our students are focused on taking the courses necessary for their majors rather than on the skills they need to develop. Thus, while it's important to be clear about what students will gain from participating in a learning community like this one, there may be logistical problems with the option of asking students to take an "extra" course.

Conclusion

LGBTQ students have specific needs that learning communities can help meet. Through identity-based learning communities, LGBTQ students can find community, both inside and outside of the classroom. Moreover, these communities can help create spaces where students can feel comfortable and safe to participate and learn. Despite the initial struggles and points of consideration offered here, successful LGBTQ learning communities have the potential to be incredibly effective. Perhaps most importantly, creating LGBTQ learning communities can help students persist in college, learn about important issues and topics, and do so in a manner that is comfortable for them.

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