

## LGBT STUDENTS IN THE COLLEGE COMPOSITION CLASSROOM

*Hannah Furrow*  
University of Michigan

*This study explored the concerns of lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) students in college writing classrooms. The researcher interviewed 37 college students and 11 faculty members from a variety of different types of colleges and universities. LGBT students stated concerns about their overall campus experiences, safety, and identity. They also expressed concerns about course content and structure, faculty connections and issues specific to writing. Faculty spoke about writing pedagogy, difference in the classroom, and specific moments in their own classrooms. Participants offered 8 suggestions for faculty: educate oneself about the issues LGBT students face on campus, set a positive climate, establish rapport, demonstrate acceptance, confront conflict, come out as LGBT or ally, consider course content in terms of bias and inclusion, and address writing concerns specific to LGBT students.*

**I**n their summary of research about LGBT college students, Draughn, Elkins, and Roy (2002) noted that while college campuses are generally seen as safe environments for students, the reality is far different: “[It is] uninviting at best, and treacherous, at worst, terrain for lesbian, bisexual, and transgendered (LGBT) students” (p. 10). Connolly (1999) described the reality of the modern classroom and noted that assumptions about safety and fairness are not accurate and that the setting is not entirely safe for

LGBT students: “Although the threat of physical violence to LGB [sic] students is greatly diminished in the classroom setting [compared to the campus in general], they nevertheless are subjected to psychological violence that can result from being systematically silenced and misrepresented” (p. 111). More recently, Fox (2010) wrote about the impact of alienation and high dropout, violence, substance abuse, and suicide rates among LGBT college students. Other recent studies have confirmed these concerns (Henry, Fuerth, & Figliozzi, 2010; Iconis, 2010; Smirles, Wetherilt, Murphy, & Patterson, 2009).

Beyond the ostracism and physical violence that LGBT students fear, they may also experience the classroom as a place that works to marginalize them as people in the greater world, and as learners in classrooms. Connolly (1999)

---

Hannah Furrow, Ph.D., is Assistant Professor of Education and Human Services at the University of Michigan-Flint in Flint, Michigan.

Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to hannahf@umflint.edu.

wrote of students' knowledge of how this outcome occurs: "Gay, lesbian, and bisexual students are acutely aware of the myriad ways in which pedagogy and curriculum collude to force their silence" (p. 113). Yet, according to Abbott (2009), the possibilities for faculty to create not only safer classroom spaces for students but also broader change is clear: "Courses which challenge traditional binaries of gender and sexual orientation play a key role in reducing discrimination and promoting empathy" (p. 152).

Although numerous scholars have published about related concerns, few researchers have specifically written about LGBT students in college composition classrooms, and even fewer have written about the safety concerns of these students in this setting. Alexander (2008) noted that composition researchers have just begun, in the last decade or so, to pay attention to the classroom writing practices and experiences of LGBT students. Previously, studies that addressed LGBT students' college experiences focused on student life and overall issues of campus harassment and violence issues. Scholars performed a significant amount of research about gay and lesbian college students' concerns (Connolly, 1999; Hart, 1988; Malinowitz, 1995; Parmeter, 1988) during the late 1980's and 1990's that has become outdated. University of Michigan (Frier, et al., 2004) and Gay, Lesbian, Straight Educators' Network (2019) are two organizations that compile regular reports about LGBT student life, but focus little on academics, and not at all on writing courses.

As Alexander (2008) noted, researchers are becoming more interested in related topics. This phenomenon can be seen in the number of sessions at recent annual meetings of the Conference on College Composition and Communication and a few recently published articles, such as Marinara, Alexander, Banks, and Blackmon's (2009) article about LGBT issues in composition readers, Mitchell's (2008) call for creating campuses that respect diversity, and Alexander and Wallace's (2009) review of 15 years of literature in related areas of scholarship. In addition, Alexander (2008) addressed issues of pedagogical connections between sexuality and literacy in college composition courses. However, as researchers have moved toward the important focus of challenging heteronormativity

and including queer issues in the classroom (Alexander & Gibson, 2004; Barrios, 2004; Fox, 2007; Gibson, Marinara, & Meem, 2000; McRuer, 2004; Peters & Swanson, 2004), they have left behind the very real nature of LGBT students facing identity, writing, and relationship concerns in their early composition courses.

In her classic piece about lesbian and gay students, Hart (1988) succinctly described the needs of our LGBT students: "LGBT students have special needs as learners in a patriarchal, heterosexist, homophobic society where their lives and experience are largely absent or misrepresented" (p. 31). In her foundational work on this subject, Malinowitz (1995) quoted a student living such an experience:

I was inhibited about writing any pieces involving gay subject matter which would then have to be read to the class. I believe all LGBT writers confront this in their writing and in writing workshops, and at times compromise. However, it is the act of compromising that is lethal to the writer. It stunts our growth and maturity as writers. (p. 3)

More than a decade later, little has changed. Alexander (2008) described the continued need for faculty to confront bigotry, support marginalized students, and implement policies that protect LGBT individuals.

Equally important, though, is how we all can benefit from creating safer classrooms. When we work to create a safe and productive learning environment for our LGBT students, we become more aware of the learning environment of all our students. Connolly (1999) described the changes that would need to be made and how we all gain:

The act of curricular and pedagogical transformation requires bravery and dedication, but its central aim, naming and changing oppressive social structures, has the potential to create academic environments that are safe and inclusive for all students. (p. 126)

Clearly, then, college composition instructors need to consider these concerns. After all, first-year composition is the one course usually required campus-wide, so these classes generally contain a microcosm of the overall campus community. Furthermore, as composition instructors, meaning-making is a large part of

what we do: We teach tools and systems of discovering, employing, and conveying realities.

As the research in this area remains limited, there is much left to be studied. I hypothesize that LGBT student writers are the best sources of information for composition teachers wanting their classrooms to be safer, more supportive environments for these students. I predict that working together, students and faculty can accomplish this goal, and the greater goal of helping all our students reach their maximum writing potential. My study reported in this article unites the voices of LGBT student writers and sympathetic faculty members to describe current composition classrooms and ways to make these classrooms safer.

### Method

I chose a naturalistic inquiry approach to this study that allowed me to acquire the desired data, organize the data in meaningful ways, and present the data such that it would be both easily accessible and rich enough to connect with others. Naturalistic inquiry includes a focus on context, tacit knowledge, inductive data analysis, and emergent design in which a researcher is able to stay constantly aware of practices that can lead to oppression (Denzin, 2001). I expected this approach to be well suited for exploring the nuances of human diversity and working with a commonly marginalized population.

Throughout a period of three months, I interviewed 48 individuals: 30 individual students who had completed first-year composition, one focus group of seven such students, eight individual faculty members who taught first-year composition, and one focus group of three such faculty members. My participants comprised an even gender ratio. The number of students was greater than that of faculty because I emphasized student voices more so than those of faculty. I determined the number of participants by the point at which I reached saturation, with no new information being added to the research (Cresswell, 2007). I was able to provide detail and depth after having conducted sufficient interviews to distinguish between the experiences all participants shared and those only one or a few had lived.

As I began my research, participants primarily came from three state universities in the Midwest (two large residential universities and one smaller commuter campus) intentionally

chosen for their strong records for support for LGBT students. I expected faculty participants at these schools to have already considered issues related to these students and I expected LGBT students to report some degree of safety based on the schools' support of these students. However, as I asked student participants to help me find more participants, I soon found myself interviewing students from a variety of schools across the country: students from both coasts and from the South, as well as from a variety of Midwest schools; students from two Ivy League schools, two private religiously affiliated schools, and two community colleges, as well as large state institutions similar to those at which I began my research. This outplay provided an unexpected richness.

I invited my original student participants through campus LGBT centers and student organizations. My primary criterion was that the students must have completed freshman composition because I wanted to learn about students' experiences in this specific course. However, I chose not to locate students through English departments because I wanted my point of entry to be one of greater safety for the students: I wanted them to be safe: no negative ramifications could occur in their academic setting because of their participation in this study. Thus, I made direct contact with both the staff of the campus LGBT centers and the student leaders in the LGBT student organizations and asked for them to give information about the study and my contact information to potential participants. I also posted informational flyers in the LGBT centers that invited student participants.

I invited faculty participants through email. I sent emails to all full-time composition faculty at the three schools that described the focus of my research, interview procedures, intent to publish my findings, and contact information, along with an invitation to participate. While 11 faculty members contacted this way chose to be interviewed, none offered the names of faculty at other institutions. Thus, I limited faculty interviews to the three initial campuses.

I intentionally chose campuses known for a range of diversity in race/ethnicity, national heritage, and class; however, the individuals I interviewed did not tend to be diverse. Kong, Mahoney, and Plummer (2001) wrote about issues with representing diversity within the gay

population in research: "In representation, if not in action, they [gay men and lesbians] appear too modern, too urban, too here and now, too wealthy, and too White" (p. 246). I hoped to find the range of LGBT diversity that Kong et al. described: "Queers with rural origins, immigrant status, empty pocketbooks, racial identities at variance with the Anglo" (p. 246). While the students I interviewed varied in regards to their socio-economic class and family background, all except four of the participants were White despite the diversity of the schools I chose. Campus LGBT center staff told me this racial distribution was also true of participants in LGBT activities on campus; few minority students were involved with these LGBT centers.

The reason I used interviews in my research was to include in my written dialogue the voices of those who are marginalized in their college writing classrooms because of their sexual or gender orientation. Seidman (2006) wrote about interview's power: They provide a "deeper understanding" (p. 130) of the complexities that comprise participants' lives and stories. Since I intended to create a written dialogue, I wanted to let the words come directly from the participants. I also considered including an observation component that utilized actual composition classrooms, but I was concerned about the ethical considerations of working with a marginalized population in a setting that could have a real or perceived impact on their academic success.

Except for the interviews that took place over the telephone because of distance limitations, I conducted interviews on campuses or in nearby coffee shops. Interviews were audiotaped with participant permission, although two participants asked me to use handwritten notes instead. Each individual interview lasted up to 60 minutes, and the two focus group interviews each lasted 75 minutes. The interviews were semi-structured: I had standard questions I asked every participant, but their responses often led me to other questions and further discussion. In qualitative interviewing, participants are seen not only as sharers of information, but also as people making meaning by interpreting the events of their lives (Warren, 2001). Thus, I intended my interviews to be focused around not only my questions and participants'

answers, but also around the talk that supports the participants' meaning-making.

I included both individual interviews and focus groups because each has benefits not provided by the other. Cresswell (2007) described individual interviews as one of the most important data-gathering techniques used in grounded theory studies. Birks and Mills (2011) wrote that focus groups may be used to check conclusions drawn from individual interviews as well as to construct ideas for future individual interviews. Furthermore, Birks and Mills noted that focus group interviews allow the interviewer to engage the interplay between the group members to better understand concepts and experiences the group members share.

As I scheduled my focus group interviews, I considered how large the groups should be, how the questions should be organized, and how involved I should be in the conversation. Given the benefits of both smaller and larger groups in terms of intimacy of the conversation and possibility for fuller conversation, I intended my interview groups to have four to six participants. As chance and schedules would have it though, my student focus group had seven participants and my faculty focus group had three. I chose to ask only enough questions to keep the conversation flowing and only became involved enough to keep the conversation focused.

The questions that comprise the interview are important research tools. Questions I asked students included broad opening ones, such as: "What did you think of your freshman composition class?" and "Are you comfortable as an LGBT person on this campus?" I then asked more focused questions: "What factors influenced your decision to come out or not come out in your composition class?" "Did you ever write about any gay- or lesbian-related issue in class?" "What, if anything, could your instructor have done differently to make you safer in the classroom?" The questions I asked faculty were about their own classrooms: "Have gay or lesbian students ever commented to you about safety concerns in your classroom?" "Have you ever felt unsafe because of gay and lesbian issues in your classroom?" "Do you ask students to discuss or write about their personal experiences?" Near the end of each interview, I asked if the participant had anything to say that she/he had not had a chance to discuss in the

context of my questions. Finally, I finished the interview with member checking by summarizing significant responses and asking if my understanding was accurate.

I transcribed each interview as it was completed. I transcribed only the relevant aspects and summarized those that seemed less relevant. As I moved toward data analysis, I used post-it notes, highlighters, and a coding system to sort through the numerous types of data found in the interview and focus group transcripts in my search for categorical relationships and broader meanings. In this work, I twice found the information in my summarized notes valuable, and I went back and transcribed the relevant interview tapes.

When I analyzed the data, I used the constant comparative method of data analysis to build grounded theory (Birks & Mills, 2011). I chose this method because, although I had expectations of what I expected to find in the data (e.g., student-positive experiences, student negative experiences, teacher-positive experiences, teacher-negative experiences), I wanted to remain open to the ideas that would come to me through working with the interview data. In this approach, the theory is grounded in the context and boundaries of the data, examining categories, relationships, and the continuum of the information being discovered, created, and re-constructed. As I coded data, built hypotheses, and considered implications, I worked to find balance among the participants' voices, including both synthesized material and individual anecdotes in order to both present information that is seen as important to participants and also to allow the voices of individual participants to come through. In this process, I found the categories I had expected to find accurately represented the shared experiences of participants, but individual experiences (students describing physical violence, and faculty sharing specific classroom exercises, for example) moved not only outside of the codes I had anticipated, but also moved the codes to a more in-depth level than I could have anticipated.

Throughout the study, I strove for trustworthiness (Davies & Dodd, 2002) in terms of credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. I established credibility through persistent observation; I interviewed until I reached saturation (Seidman, 2006). I also

triangulated the data, as I interviewed faculty as well as students. Dependability is also found in this extensive interviewing and the description of my research process such that it can be replicated, as well as the use of previous research to contextualize and confirm findings. While transferability lies within the reader to judge, I have provided thick description (Denzin, 2001) and verisimilitude (Denzin, 2001) in the voices that are presented in the present study. To provide confirmability, I worked with a peer debriefer, an experienced researcher who examined my data, coding, and reflexive journal and considered issues of bias both in me as a researcher and in my research process.

## Results

Of the 48 individuals I interviewed, the voices of 23 are included in the present article. Keith, Andrew, Michael, Noah, Bruce, David, and Travis are gay or bisexual male students (pseudonyms). Lincoln and Jared had changed gender from female to male. Sondra, Katie, Sophia, Tina, Jennie, Erica, Helen, and Kim are lesbian or bisexual females. All the students are of traditional college age. The college faculty included are Marina, Anne, Colleen, Linda, Heidi, and Johanna, all female; and William and Paul, who are male. I did not inquire about the sexual orientation or ages of the instructors.

## Students

Students shared experiences about how the reality of being an LGBT student matched or varied from their expectations. They also discussed concerns that they and others faced, and glimpses into classroom dynamics. These experiences aligned with one of six themes: on campus, safety, identity, course content and structure, writing, and faculty connections.

Student theme one: On campus. According to student participants, LGBT students frequently describe lack of safety regarding their sexual and gender identity in K-12 academic settings. Gay and transgender youth, and other students who are seen by their peers as somehow gender-variant, frequently experience harassment, bullying, and violence during their middle school and high school years. Travis experienced such frightening threats and violence that he transferred to another school. Keith spent his senior year on the verge of suicide:

I didn't really know I was gay, but I knew something was different. I know that to many of the people around me, it must have looked like my life was fine. I got good grades, I was popular, I had a girlfriend. And yet, I always felt like killing myself. Finally, I told my girlfriend how I felt, and scared, she arranged for me to talk to her aunt who was a counselor and also happened to be a lesbian. Talking to her, I came to realize that I was gay. She probably saved my life.

While other participants did not have such difficult stories to share, high school and college were very different social milieus for LGBT students, particularly for young gay men and for transgender students.

Although I had not considered the political leanings of the included campuses, nor the role of one's major, students found these elements important to their experiences. Some students described their school as either liberal or conservative. The students who considered their schools as liberal were likely to say they were comfortable on campus. While I did not specifically ask students about their majors, they volunteered this information. Comfort in the academic environment (not specifically college composition) often seemed connected to the student's major. Andrew's comment was typical: "I was comfortable, and my classmates were fine. If I had been in forestry or fire science, it might have been different."

Student theme two: Safety. As I began my research, I interchangeably used the terms "safety" and "comfort," not realizing that for LGBT students safety is an issue of physical and emotional concern, while comfort is much less of a concern until actual safety has been established. Students discussed their overall comfort in class, particularly in their college composition courses. They also discussed the correlation between comfort and success. Several students described their academic history as safety; that is, they were used to achieving high grades and thought that this success protected them from professors' homophobic treatment. Andrew's comment exemplified this sentiment: "I always got good grades. Good grades were my safety."

Students wanted to talk about physical safety in the classroom and beyond, particularly

how classroom discussions can follow students outside the classroom. Lincoln, a transgender student, cautiously described this situation: "I was nervous about having to write. I felt exposed. We had to read papers out loud. There was no confidentiality. I had to be careful what I wrote about." Jared, another transgender student, directly stated that restrooms and parking lots are among unsafe places on campus for gay men and transgendered individuals, and that what happens in the classroom can have ramifications for safety in these public areas. He talked about the safety concerns of transgender students: "For me personally, safety is as simple as acknowledging my gender correctly."

Student theme three: Identity. Identity is an important issue for LGBT college students, many of whom have only recently come to realize that they identify as LGBT. Many participants wanted to talk about how identifying as an LGBT student impacted their life as a college student, both inside and outside the classroom. They had something to share about coming out (sharing one's minority sexual or gender orientation) and being out or about choosing not to be out or to be less out, as this decision is a very important one LGBT people make in each setting that comprises their everyday life. Several students raised the issue of being seen as a token or representative of all LGBT people, which many of them expressed gave them more responsibility than was appropriate, and identified them as "other." Michael described this experience as an extra burden: "It gets a little burdensome, being the queer voice in the classroom."

Participants noted that the decision to come out in a room of one's peers with an authoritative figure who is responsible for grading a portion of one's academic work is particularly difficult. Twenty-four of the students in my research who identified as LGBT at the time they took their composition classes came out during the class. Sondra said she came out quietly in a writing class: "Yes, I have a partner. No, it's not a man." Twelve students noted that they were always out; they did not have to come out. Three students chose not to come out in their college composition class. Of these, Noah stated that he assumed others knew he was gay; Travis and Kim chose to "pass" as straight, but acknowledged that if the opportunity had arisen,

they would have disclosed their sexual identity. One transgender student, Jared, regretted being out and stated that some professors intentionally disclosed his transgender identity. The other transgender student, Lincoln had not begun physically transforming his gender, and he did not come out.

Student theme four: Course content and structure. Course content and structure did not initially carry great significance for the students. As each interview continued, though, participants began to talk about issues regarding the course material and organization that they thought made a difference or could make a difference in their education. Formats varied by class, and students noted the social impact of large-group and small-group discussions. Finally, 14 students wanted to discuss inclusion of LGBT issues in the classroom.

I asked students about the type of formats their composition instructors had used. Participants described a variety of formats, with the most commonly used including large group discussion, small groups, and peer review sessions. Students expressed a personal preference for one format over others, but noted that their preference was not related to their sexual or gender identity, as Katie explained: "It was really no different since I wasn't making an effort one way or another about my sexuality." Generally, students did not agree that class format had an impact on their comfort level as LGBT students in a composition classroom:

Given the frequency of class discussions in many college composition classrooms and the heteronormativity of such discussions, students had a good deal to say about their oral participation in the classroom. Two common themes arose in these students' comments. First, the classroom conversations generally were focused around the assumption that all participants who had not come out as LGBT were indeed straight, as Lincoln noted: "Sexual orientation didn't come up, but sex did, in terms of creative processes, memories of visceral experiences. There was always the straight assumption in discussion." Second, this assumption led students to assume a position as "other" in the classroom.

Participants stated that in themed sections of college composition, LGBT issues were occasionally included as a part of the curriculum. In other sections, these issues only seemed to

be included in classroom discussion if a professor, an LGBT student, or a person who wanted to share anti-gay sentiments initiated such conversation. Noah told me about how one of his professors approached this situation: "She came out in the context of a story she read. It led to a really good discussion of stereotypes." Students in my study who experienced inclusion of LGBT issues in the curriculum found such inclusion positive, although Bruce related a negative experience:

I don't remember LGBT issues ever coming up in the classroom. If it had come up, I would have responded with silence. I would have taken it in, but I'm already hating myself for not being the person I am. Those kind of comments probably would have confused me more.

Travis, though satisfied with his own college composition course, agreed with Bruce that students still establishing their sexual or gender identity could be threatened by such inclusion, and he was very cautious about assuming that his own positive experiences would be echoed in others' experiences.

Student theme five: Writing. Students were very much aware of the interaction between one's identity as an LGBT individual and one's identity as a student writer. They had actively considered the implications of sharing personal experience in writing. Students were concerned with how instructors and classmates respond to papers about LGBT topics.

College composition professors often emphasize writing about personal experience. In my study, students shared the degree to which their professors expected them to share personal experience in their writing and described a varying range of comfort with sharing such experience. Katie's voice was typical of many responses in that it seemed to represent a combination of insight and ambivalence in the description: "Nothing was 'required,' but we were welcome to share family histories and situations, and many times classes turned into something resembling therapy rather than writing instruction."

Although students stated that they were writing for self-expression or to earn a high grade, they also admitted that they could not help but be concerned what the professor would

think about what they had written, and about themselves as individuals. Sophia provided this very colorful description:

There are different kinds of stories you can write; you can write very plain, very safe, or you can write more visceral. You can really rip yourself open and spew your intestines on the paper. I was afraid to write too close, too deep down. I didn't want to expose myself. Straight students don't expose themselves. They can write the same thing, but then it's the norm: "My boyfriend dumped me" compared to "My girlfriend broke up with me," to saying more than you want about yourself. I didn't want to be known as "the gay one."

For students whose classrooms demanded a sharing of student writing, such concerns also included what fellow classmates might think. Despite stated concerns about acceptance by classmates, participants described classmates' actual responses as "accepting," so the reality often was not as negative as the expectation. Students said that their professor largely ignored the content of the paper and focused on grammatical concerns. Furthermore, they stated that their classmates appeared to be accepting of papers written about LGBT issues.

Student theme six: Faculty connections. Participants noted that relationships with faculty are important to all students, but especially LGBT students. Interactions with faculty played an important role for the participants' academic and social success in college. Participants described faculty as the "front line" of the academic component of the college setting for students. Because students saw faculty as representing the college, what faculty expressed in their courses may have been considered an extension of official college philosophy. Several students expressed the importance of the role of faculty in creating a comfortable environment for LGBT students. Jared stated that his comfort directly related to the instructor: "My comfort depends on which class I am in and the mood of the teacher. I have had great levels of comfort when the professor was understanding. And the opposite when they were not." Interactions with faculty played an important role for students. Students described trying to get a

sense of who their writing instructors were and what they expected from their students. Sondra described her writing instructor's clarity: "She was very clear about what wasn't appropriate, very clear about respect." David spoke of comfort in his relationship with his professor: "She was pretty accommodating, and I didn't feel uncomfortable. When I shared with her, I felt very comfortable."

Students' suggestions for ally faculty. Students eagerly discussed faculty's responsibility for LGBT safety and they articulated ways that faculty achieve this goal. They noted that faculty should first educate themselves, then establish a positive environment with clear boundaries during the first days of class. Throughout the semester, faculty should develop rapport with students, come out as LGBT if appropriate, and intervene when necessary to maintain safety. According to participants, both curriculum and writing assignments should be created with LGBT student concerns in mind.

"Of course it is their job." This answer typified the response to the question, "To what degree is a composition instructor responsible for creating a safe learning environment for LGBT students?" Every student except Michael said that composition professors are responsible for creating safe and comfortable academic environments for their LGBT students. Participants spoke about LGBT students' safety as important within the context of making the classroom safer for all students. That is, participants did not specifically address the needs of LGBT students or other minorities. Andrew described this general need for safety: "It is the teacher's role to make everyone feel safe and respected. This is a place for learning. It's the same for everyone; we're all here with the same goal, to learn." Lincoln, though, described the specific obligation to address LGBT safety concerns: "Teachers have a large responsibility to make anyone who for any reason might be a target of bullying and discrimination safe in their classroom."

Participants said that teachers who want to create change for their LGBT students need to develop an awareness of the issues these students face. The students noted that self-awareness begins with education. Lincoln said that it was the responsibility of professors to educate themselves on the concerns of LGBT students: "Faculty need to learn to be comfortable

themselves.” Beyond this education, Kim described the importance for ongoing efforts: “They [faculty] should maintain an awareness of issues on campus and in the community.”

Students described the importance of the first days of a course. They agreed that the tone set at the beginning is critical to creating a safe and comfortable academic environment. Thus, they noted, setting the climate early is important. Students also noted the importance of quickly working to establish a positive rapport with students. Furthermore, they described the importance of setting boundaries for the entire class in order to establish safety for all students. They offered several suggestions for helping to establish this type of environment early in the semester. Sophia suggested making one’s syllabus clear and specific regarding diversity and discrimination, while Jennie described using classroom space to create intimacy.

Students also described the responsibility of faculty to set clear boundaries early in the semester regarding what will and will not be permitted in the classrooms. They addressed the importance of establishing ground rules for classroom discussions and maintaining confidentiality. Michael was succinct in his description: “To create a safe space, set clear boundaries around what is respectful. When it feels more open, one can feel more successful as a student.”

Students talked about the importance of faculty making a deliberate effort to establish and maintain good rapport throughout the semester, both with individual students and with the class as a whole. They noted they would appreciate knowing that their instructor was an ally (an individual supportive of LGBT individuals). For example, Andrew spoke about trying to determine whether faculty were allies: “As a student, you don’t know. And so much is subjective. What you say/how you carry yourself is important.”

Twenty-two student participants had never had an instructor come out. While 13 students said that faculty had no responsibility to come out, 27 thought said doing so would be beneficial for both LGBT and straight students in terms of increasing awareness. Bridget stated this concern simply: “If you feel there is a need for visibility on your campus, coming out would make life better for LGBT students.”

Furthermore, they noted the importance of faculty demonstrating themselves as personal and vulnerable, particularly those faculty who ask students to take such risks themselves.

While establishing a safe classroom environment, setting boundaries, maintaining rapport (including coming out, if appropriate) were all important to students, they also noted that unsafe incidents still happen. Students stated that they wanted the professor to intervene if the classroom environment became unsafe. Tina and Jennie provided specific ways instructors could intervene. Tina encouraged being proactive: “Be clear that intolerant behaviors will not be permitted.” Jennie spoke of managing class interactions: “Confront sweeping statements. Be good at directing discussion.”

Students noted that including LGBT issues in the curriculum and classroom could be fairly simple for faculty, yet very empowering for LGBT students. They appreciated such attempts at inclusion and thought they could have a positive impact for all students. They also described the inclusion of LGBT issues as very important. They shared various suggestions for ways that LGBT issues could be included in the curriculum and the classroom. Erica suggested the inclusion of gay content as one of a wide range of issues, Travis advocated for the use of readings by LGBT authors, and Helen asked instructors to consider bringing in LGBT speakers. Sophia said that instructors should bring up LGBT issues with a sense of normalcy, and Andrew noted that greater exposure to LGBT issues can help people move beyond stereotypes.

Beyond general curriculum concerns, students also spoke about writing assignments. Students in my study wanted to know what was expected of them in choosing topics, who would be reading what they wrote, and how it would be evaluated. Sophia described the vulnerability inherent in the writing process. Helen noted the pressure inherent in grading, Travis asked for multiple options or broadly interpretable prompts, and David suggested multiple revisions.

### *Faculty*

While my primary research questions focused on the experiences and needs of LGBT students, it was also relevant, even important, to consider what faculty who see themselves as

allies to their LGBT students are already doing to meet the academic needs of these students.

The 11 composition faculty members I interviewed shared their own experiences as they have worked as allies to LGBT students in their composition classrooms, and they discussed suggestions they would offer to other faculty who also endeavor to make their composition classrooms safer and more comfortable for LGBT students. As faculty described their own classroom experiences with LGBT issues, these experiences seemed to fall into three themes: writing pedagogy, difference in the classroom, and significant moments in the classroom.

Faculty theme one: Writing pedagogy. Faculty participants spoke about the inclusion of critical thinking as a significant component of their pedagogy. Some went further and described their intent to create social change through their teaching. They agreed with student participants about the importance of including LGBT issues in the curriculum. Anne included readings that discuss LGBT issues. Marina also included LGBT-focused readings, and additionally included a queer theory methodology for analysis. Both described the concerns that could be raised with such inclusion: Anne said she was “lucky” to have avoided any hostility, and Marina described sexuality as “the breaking point” in her class.

Faculty participants expected their students to share their written work with others in the class. While student participants advocated that the instructor call for some level of confidentiality, faculty participants dealt with concerns of privacy by providing clear guidelines for peer editing or by encouraging students to get to know each other well enough to communicate effectively. Anne and Colleen described how they worked to make sure students focus on the content of the writing rather than on the student writer as an individual. Colleen also noted the “bonding” brought about by student interactions in the peer editing process. Linda talked about the overlap between this social process of interaction and what student writers can gain from one another in the process.

Faculty participants shared the types of assignments they were likely to employ in their composition classes. Not all used the degree of personal writing that I had anticipated based on student responses. Heidi described her first

semester course: “Students have more choice; they may write more confessional-type papers.” Anne explicitly avoided assigning personal writing: “For me, avoiding personal narratives is avoiding problems.”

While student participants frequently said that writing faculty did not address any LGBT issues in the students’ writing when they wrote marginal and end notes, faculty said that they did try to respond to such issues when they arose in student writing. Johanna tried to gauge what the student seemed to need in order to determine her response. Heidi noted that she sometimes changed roles when she wrote back to students: “I feel like a counselor. When a student takes the opportunity to write something that hasn’t been said before, nitpicking the writing isn’t appropriate.” Linda stated that she wrote positive responses to any LGBT sharing by students: “I often write something like, ‘I appreciate your sharing this with me.’ I try to address their bravery and confidentiality.”

Faculty theme two: Difference in the classroom. Along with issues of composition pedagogy, faculty members shared a great deal about how they approach issues of difference in the classroom. Nearly every participant provided an eloquent description of composition faculty’s responsibility to deal with LGBT issues as an element of diversity. This part of the conversation led to discussions of identity, safety, and modeling.

Faculty spoke about identity. All participants discussed coming out and identity, and focused on students rather than faculty. Johanna carried the idea of identity further and discussed coming out as a way of not only establishing one’s identity but also as a way of positioning oneself in relation to others: “Students are often trying on, or performing, new identities. First year classrooms are open to this in a way that other classrooms are not. In this way, they are positioning themselves in relation to the university and to themselves.”

All faculty participants expressed that establishing classroom safety is important. Marina noted safety’s importance to learning: “It’s extremely important as a place of learning that the environment be a safe space for learning.” While student participants demonstrated significant concern about safety beyond the

classroom, faculty participants did not raise this topic.

Faculty participants addressed the importance of modeling. They spoke in general terms about modeling appropriate classroom behavior and focused on modeling support for minorities, including LGBT students. They even mentioned modeling the social change they would like to see occur. These discussions focused around setting the context for the classroom, modeling acceptance during classroom discussions, and confronting conflict when it occurs.

Faculty theme three: Significant moments in the classroom. Every faculty participant shared stories that allowed glimpses into their classrooms and their experiences addressing LGBT concerns. Participants who had had students come out in class told the stories of those students coming out. Colleen told one such story: "One student out of a class of 18 came out. She was coming out to herself at the same time and was giddy and excited." Similarly, participants told stories of conflict in the classroom related to a specific assignment being done in the classroom. When asked if they had ever experienced lack of safety in the classroom, the response was divided between those who had and those who had not. Those who stated they had experienced lack of safety readily shared their concerns. For Marina and Heidi, the concerns involved the possibility of charges of bias. For Linda, the issue was one of homophobic language used in the classroom.

Faculty suggestions for ally faculty. As faculty participants provided suggestions for other ally faculty, their comments fell along four lines of focus. They addressed overall approaches and took a holistic view of how one might create a safer academic setting for LGBT students. Like the student participants, faculty described the importance of establishing such an environment on the first days of the class. Several instructors noted the importance of modeling what they wanted to have occur in their classrooms and beyond. William exemplified this concern well:

The best way I can teach my students is to model. I can't expect them to treat each other with respect unless I treat them with respect. I have to look where they're coming from and what they

believe and to respect that as much as I want them to respect me.

Some comments on modeling echoed those made by students as they spoke about being tolerant, intervening when necessary, showing oneself as an ally, and being personal and vulnerable.

Finally, Johanna suggested consulting available campus resources in order to educate oneself, a suggestion also made by student participants. The primary differences between faculty and student participants in the suggestions they shared are that students were much more specific, rather than suggesting overall approaches. The students also spoke much more about actual class content.

The 11 composition faculty interviewed made it clear that making composition classrooms safer and more comfortable for LGBT students was a priority for them and that they encourage others to also consider it a priority. As they described their own experiences working with LGBT students and their concerns in terms of pedagogy, difference, and moments in their classrooms, they shared a great deal about both themselves and their students. They also articulated suggestions regarding overall approaches, first days of class, and modeling that their colleagues could use to work toward the goal of safer classrooms for LGBT students.

## Discussion

Although their reasons vary, faculty and students who participated in the current study agreed that college composition instructors are responsible for creating a safe learning environment for LGBT students. Their reasons for this responsibility, however, differed: safety of all students, outside bias against LGBT students, safety as a pedagogical concern, and the personal nature of writing were all mentioned.

Within these multiple rationales, participants offered the following five suggestions for teachers who wish to serve as academic allies for LGBT students through the establishment of safer classrooms for these students. Instructors should (1) become aware of the issues LGBT students face on campus and beyond; (2) establish a positive climate in the early days of the course, then maintain a positive rapport and demonstrate tolerance; (3) confront conflict quickly and thoroughly when it arises; (4) come out as LGBT or ally if it is relevant in the course

or if providing a positive role model seems appropriate; and (5) consider how course content and evaluation reflect LGBT concerns.

First, instructors should become aware of the issues LGBT students face on campus and beyond. Croteau and Talbot (1999) wrote about the connection between faculty and students in terms of such understanding: "There is a positive relationship between the faculty's level of knowledge, skills and comfort with sexual orientation and their students' level of knowledge, skills, and comfort" (p. 17). According to participants, faculty might begin by examining their own thoughts, beliefs, and knowledge about this population, including any threads of homophobia they might harbor. They could then educate themselves about local LGBT concerns and talk to LGBT friends or people on campus, exploring campus resources, reading the campus newspaper, and staying abreast of the overall political climate for the LGBT population. All of these efforts could help faculty to better understand the issues LGBT students face in their classes. The impact of increasing one's own knowledge goes beyond measurement. One instructor participant, Paul, compared the classroom to a centrifuge where students gather information and then spin it out after every class; thus an instructor can imagine having an impact on as many different environments as he or she has students.

Second, faculty should establish a positive climate in the early days of a course, set boundaries and begin to establish safety, then maintain this climate throughout the course. The teacher's demeanor, the interpersonal dynamic of the teacher and the students, and the course syllabus are all important. Syllabi should include classroom behavior expectations, university statements on diversity, and campus speech codes. Icebreaker games or other community-building activities can build relationships. Expectations regarding safety should be made clear the first day. Having established this tone, faculty should carry it through the semester. They should maintain a positive rapport and demonstrate tolerance in order to create and keep a learning environment in which students want to succeed and a writing environment in which they want to write. According to one student, Andrew, students need to know the professor is on their side. Because of the

personal nature of the composition classroom and of writing in general, faculty should be willing to drop their guard, to make themselves vulnerable to some degree.

Third, faculty must be willing to confront conflict as it arises. According to student participants, the classroom seems safer when students know the professor will intervene quickly and constructively if the environment starts to become less safe. Such conflict intervention should not be punitive, but work to create acceptance and change. Faculty who might otherwise be reluctant to get involved in conflict can use the school's code of conduct or diversity statements as a rationale for intervening.

Fourth, a gay or lesbian teacher should come out if sexual identity is relevant in the course. Although students described that it is rare for faculty to come out in class, they stated that faculty coming out increases LGBT visibility on campus. According to Jennie, gay teachers should come out to provide necessary affirmation for LGBT students: "People who share our identities validate them." Participants also stated that they appreciate when faculty demonstrate support for LGBT students. They note that allies' expressed and visible support (e.g., carrying a pen with a rainbow flag on it, displaying a "Safe Space" sticker in one's office) indicate LGBT student safety.

Fifth, it is often feasible for composition instructors to include LGBT issues in the curriculum and to consider writing concerns specific to LGBT students. Student participants said they would appreciate such inclusion and consideration. Such inclusion provides exposure to these issues, which can help students move beyond stereotypical understandings. A minority of three student participants expressed concern that discussing LGBT issues in the classroom might be unsettling for students struggling with their own sexual identities. At the very least, instructors can make sure that either course readings do not include homophobic bias or that instructors address such bias.

Beyond content inclusion, some composition concerns are uniquely significant to LGBT students. They fear that if they write something with which a professor does not agree, they may be penalized in the grading process. They also lack LGBT writing models. Students appreciate clearly written assignments, a choice of topics,

and evaluation guidelines. They also want to know who other than the instructor might read the paper (would there be peer review or other in-class sharing?). Multiple drafts are important so that if students discover they have not written appropriately to the assignment, they have a chance to revise. Some assignments can make students uncomfortable if they have to put a part of themselves aside in order to write so instructors might “try to get into the student writer’s head” (Jennie) to consider the impact of assignments on students. Even timing is important, as students prefer to write about personal topics later in the semester. Furthermore, evaluation is a sensitive topic. Students want faculty to read their papers with an open mind. If students risk themselves personally through self-disclosure in assigned writing, they would appreciate having the professor acknowledge that risk.

In summary, both faculty and student participants shared numerous concerns for LGBT students in composition classrooms; they also described ways these concerns can be addressed by supportive allies in order to make the academic environment supportive and conducive to learning for these students. In addition to implementing these suggestions, faculty might wish to consider how they can evaluate the success of such implementation. A question added to end-of-the-semester student evaluations of faculty could address concerns of safety; faculty might also consider approaching administrators about ways that academic issues of LGBT students could be addressed and evaluated across campus. Finally, it is critical that faculty remember the strong influence they can have in creating change, in the classroom and beyond, for LGBT students.

### **Limitations and Future Research**

This research study involved a limited number of participants within a particular geographic area over a fairly defined timeframe. Working with a marginalized population, I did not have the breadth of diversity that could have enriched this study. Thus, several limitations exist that might be addressed in further research.

First, I focused the setting of this research primarily on three large public four-year universities in one state in the Midwest. Both geography and type of institution may change results. Since several students noted the political

climate of their campus, for example, one might consider whether private institutions have a stronger political climate and whether this distinction has an impact on academic safety for LGBT students. One might wonder whether there is a difference in academic safety for students on rural and urban campuses, at two-year and four-year schools, at residential and commuter campuses. One might also consider the impact of single-gender schools, and of schools with particular religious affiliations. Even if the overall climate of the composition classroom remains fairly stable despite these many differences, it may be helpful for composition faculty to consider any differences that are specific to the type of institution at which they teach.

Second, because of the nature of the recruitment (through LGBT student centers and word of mouth), I included only students who identified as being “out” in this study. Although some participants said that very few people knew they were gay or lesbian, they were out to some degree. The nature of the interview questions also depended on the student being out, at least to himself or herself: one could not answer questions about safety as an LGBT student if he or she did not identify as LGBT.

Third, students interviewed stated that they were successful in both the composition classroom and in the overall academic environment. Two students who had recently quit attending college approached me about the study, and I would like to have interviewed them, but neither responded to further communication. My research showed that students who were comfortable in the classroom were also likely to be academically successful, at least in the composition classroom. Thus, if one were to interview those who are less successful, one might find a different set of experiences and different suggestions for supportive faculty.

In interviewing faculty, I did not distinguish between those who identified as LGBT and those who identified as heterosexual. I know that two participants were gay men; I made the assumption that the rest were heterosexual as they did not choose to come out to me. It may be worthwhile to intentionally recruit participants who represent all aspects of LGBT (lesbians, gay men, bisexual men and women, and transgender individuals) as well as heterosexual.

In extending this study, one might want to increase the breadth of the research by involving a broader range of participants, drawn from across the country and from a wide variety of institutions, and inclusive of a spectrum of race, ethnicity, class, and age. Such diversity would best ensure that the researcher was gaining a full understanding of composition classroom situations for LGBT students and their teachers, and that a wide range of suggestions was being offered for supportive faculty.

## References

- Abbott, T. (2009). Teaching transgender literature at a business college. *Race, Gender, and Class*, 16, 152-169.
- Alexander, J. (2008). *Literacy, sexuality, pedagogy: Theory and practice for composition studies*. Logan: Utah State University Press.
- Alexander, J., & Gibson, M. (2004). Queer composition(s): Queer theory in the writing classroom. *Journal of Advanced Composition*, 24, 1-22.
- Alexander, J., & Wallace, D. (2009). The queer turn in composition studies: Reviewing and assessing an emerging scholarship. *College Composition and Communication*, 61, W300-W320.
- Barrios, B. (2004). Of flags: Online queer identities, writing classrooms, and action horizons. *Computers and Composition*, 21, 341-361.
- Birks, M., & Mills, J. (2011). *Grounded theory: A practical guide*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Connolly, M. (1999). Issues for lesbian, gay, and bisexual students in traditional college classrooms. In V. Wall & N. Evans (Eds.), *Toward acceptance: Sexual orientation issues on campus* (pp. 109-130). Lanham, MD: University Press of America.
- Cresswell, J. (2007). *Qualitative inquiry and research design*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Croteau, J., & Talbot, D. (1999). Understanding the landscape: An empirical view of lesbian, gay, and bisexual issues in the student affairs profession. In V. Wall & N. Evans (Eds.), *Toward acceptance: Sexual orientation issues on campus* (pp. 1-28). Lanham, MD: University Press of America.
- Davies, D., & Dodd, J. (2002). Qualitative research and the question of rigor. *Qualitative Health Research*, 12, 279-289.
- Denzin, N. (2001). The art and politics of interpretation. In S. Hesse-Biber & P. Leavy (Eds.), *Approaches to qualitative research: A reader on theory and practice* (pp. 447-472). New York: Oxford University Press.
- Draughn, T., Elkins, B., & Roy, R. (2002). Allies in the struggle: Eradicating homophobia and heterosexism on campus. In E. P. Cramer (Ed.), *Addressing homophobia and heterosexism on college campuses* (pp. 9-20). New York: Haworth Press.
- Fox, C. (2007). Texts of our institutional lives: From transaction to transformation: (En)countering white heteronormativity in "safe spaces." *College English*, 69, 496-511.
- Fox, C. (2010). (Un)covering normalized gender and race subjectivities in LGBT "Safe Spaces." *Feminist Studies*, 36, 629-649, 700.
- Frier, B., Anderson, D., Conway, B., Conway, L., Haskell, G., Levy, B., Lyle, J., Rassi, S., Two Ravens, P., Vicinus, M., & Willis, E. (with Toy, J.). (2004). *From inclusion to acceptance: Report of the task force on the campus climate for transgender, bisexual, lesbian and gay (TBLG) faculty, staff and students*. Retrieved from <http://www.provost.umich.edu/reports/tblg/TBLGFinalReport.pdf>
- Gay Lesbian Straight Educators Network. (2009). *The 2009 national school climate survey: Key findings on the experiences of lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender youth in our nation's schools*. Retrieved from [http://www.glsen.org/binary-data/GLSEN\\_ATTACHMENTS/file/00%01/1675-2.pdf](http://www.glsen.org/binary-data/GLSEN_ATTACHMENTS/file/00%01/1675-2.pdf)
- Gibson, M., Marinara, M., & Meem, D. (2000). Bi, butch, and bar dyke: Pedagogical performances of class, gender, and sexuality. *College Composition and Communication*, 52, 69-95.
- Hart, E. (1988). Literacy and the lesbian/gay learner. In S. Parmeter and I. Reti (Eds.), *The lesbian in front of the classroom: Writings by lesbian teachers* (pp. 30-43). Santa Cruz, CA: HerBooks.
- Henry, W., Fuerth, K., & Figliozzi, J. (2010). Gay with a disability: A college student's multiple cultural journey. *College Student Journal*, 44, 377-388.
- Iconis, R. (2010). Reducing homophobia within the college community. *Contemporary Issues in Educational Research*, 3, 67-70.
- Kong, T., Mahoney, D., & Plummer, K. (2001). Queering the interview. In J. Gubrium & J. Holstein (Eds.), *Handbook of interview research: Context and method*. (pp. 239-258). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.
- Malinowitz, H. (1995). Textual orientations: Lesbian and gay students and the making of discourse communities. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.
- Marinara, M., Alexander, J., Banks, W., & Blackmon, S. (2009). Cruising composition texts: Negotiating sexual difference in first-year readers. *College Composition and Communication*, 61, 269-296.

- McRuer, R. (2004). Composing bodies; or, de-compositions: Queer theory, disability studies, and alternative corporealities. *Journal of Advanced Composition, 24*, 47-78.
- Mitchell, D. (2008). I thought composition was about commas and quotes, not queers: Diversity and campus change at a rural two-year college. *Composition Studies, 36*, 23-50, 162.
- Parmeter, S. (1988). Four good reasons why every lesbian teacher should be free to come out in the classroom. In S. Parmeter & I. Reti (Eds.), *The lesbian in front of the classroom: Writings by lesbian teachers* (pp. 44-58). Santa Cruz, CA: HerBooks.
- Peters, B., & Swanson, D. (2004). Queering the conflicts: What LGBT students can teach us in the classroom and online. *Computers and Composition, 21*, 295-313.
- Seidman, I. (2006). *Interviewing as qualitative research: A guide for researchers in education and the social sciences*. New York: Teachers College Press.
- Smirles, K., Wetherilt, A., Murphy, M., & Patterson, E. (2009). Transgender realities: Student lives and community challenges. *Human Architecture, 7*, 61-73.
- Warren, C. (2001). Qualitative interviewing. In J. Gubrium & J. Holstein (Eds.), *Handbook of interview research: Context and method* (pp. 83-101). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.

Copyright of Journal of Ethnographic & Qualitative Research is the property of Journal of Ethnographic & Qualitative Research and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.