Opinion

# 10 Tips for Building a More LGBTQ-Inclusive Classroom



—Getty

## Your students are ready to discuss LGBTQ issues. Are you?

By Joe English
October 10, 2019

This month is LGBTQ History Month. Founded in 1994, the annual campaign includes forums, marches, lectures, and "National Coming Out Day," all imploring Americans to increase the visibility of LGBTQ narratives.

Six states—California, Colorado, Illinois, Maryland, New Jersey, and Oregon—have answered the call to action over the past several years by passing legislation that will weave LGBTQ history and terminology into public school curricula. Colorado, for example, will reform history, English, and civics curricula, incorporating lessons on the AIDS Epidemic and novels with same-sex parents. Such policies bring discussion of LGBTQ issues out of the shadows and validate the healthy diversity in our communities.

State legislators and LGBTQ advocates should be applauded for their efforts, but the real impact will happen in individual classrooms. Educators will need to translate abstract policies into classroom activities, lesson plans, and conversations. For many, daunting questions arise: "What

does it mean to be LGBTQ? Will I need to talk about sex? What books should I use? How do I support LGBTQ students during these units?"

Thankfully, there is no need to reinvent the wheel. I interviewed 25 middle and high school teachers across the country by phone, over email, and in person to illuminate 10 key mindsets and teaching methods that help facilitate LGBTQ-inclusive teaching:

"By changing who is represented in the classroom, educators can signal to LGBTQ students that they are not alone, abnormal, or unwell."

**1. Know that your students are ready to discuss LGBTQ issues.** In fact, they have been engaging with LGBTQ issues for years through media, family, and conversations with peers. Unfortunately, most of this information is biased: Over 95 percent of middle and high school LBGTQ students report hearing homophobic remarks in school, but just 13 percent hear positive messaging about LGBTQ identity. Constructive in-class discussion about LGBTQ identities is a welcome—and necessary—addition to the dialogue.

**2. Recognize that sexual and gender identity is multifaceted.** Not every student fits into a box, and that's okay. GLAAD maintains a guide to LGBTQ identities, but deciding how and when to use labels is still daunting. When one 8th grader began questioning his own gender, his teacher, Amanda, found that knowledge of the transgender community helped her understand the student's concerns. She offered to use the student's preferred pronouns, shared a novel with a gender nonbinary protagonist, and stopped dividing her class by gender ("boys" and "girls" lines, for example). She explained, "labels help explain different experiences, but they shouldn't become rigid prescriptions for how someone should act or be treated."

**3. Refrain from "call out culture," but when discipline is necessary, respond to all identity-based attacks consistently.** If students misuse terms out of ignorance such as conflating homosexuality and being transgender, punishment may discourage them from asking questions or discussing LGBTQ issues generally. However, if students use intentionally insensitive slurs, treat the comment like any other slur; in fact, punishing racist comments while evading homophobic remarks could indirectly legitimize anti-LGBTQ attacks.

**4. Don't assume talking about LGBTQ issues has to involve talking about sex.** In *Reading the Rainbow*, researcher Caitlin L. Ryan and educator Jill M. Hermann-Wilmarth ask us to "shift our understanding of LGBTQ people away from sex and toward who people are, including how they live, whom the love, and with whom they build family and community." In speaking to the many facets of sexual and gender identity, you can share a fuller perspective of what it means to be LGBTQ in age-appropriate ways.

**5. Trust your own positive intentions.** An imperfect advocate is better than a silent bystander. Kristin, an 11th grade English teacher, described her embarrassment after asking her lesbian student if she preferred to use male pronouns: "I turned bright red when I realized how ignorant

that sounded." Her student, however, saw genuine compassion underlying Kristin's comment. Terminology is easy to fix when one's heart is in the right place. Students will understand this.

**6. Integrate LGBTQ-inclusive books with other books, and make them easy to check out anonymously.** Shelly, a high school English teacher in Tennessee, explained, "At first, I created an LGBTQ+ section, but only students who identified this way picked up the books. When I integrated the books with the other genres, *many* students checked them out." Her approach allows students to select books discreetly and leverages their complementary interests in, say, science fiction or fantasy.

**7. Treat LGBTQ characters in literature as whole people with many interests and identities.** Donna, a creative writing teacher, emphasizes the importance of creating many "points of relatability" between students and an LGBTQ protagonist—hobbies, aspirations, relationships, or other identities—to ensure students "don't think sexuality has to define someone."

More Opinion

Follow Opinion here.

**8. Speak in terms of relationships rather than labels.** For example, when teaching *The Color Purple*, AP Literature teacher Jackie refrains from asking if the main character, Celie, is lesbian. Rather, she tries to capture the complexity of attraction, asking students to "examine Celie's relationship with Shug. Why is Celie drawn to her? What motivates Celie's romantic interest in women generally?" The conversation reinforces that relationships are nuanced combinations of preferences, emotions, and circumstances.

**9. Don't rely on LGBTQ students to explain LGBTQ characters to the class.** Let them volunteer, but otherwise treat them like any other student. Many LGBTQ students are still figuring out their own identities, and asking them speak for an entire minority group is daunting. Additionally, singling them out may create the impression that LGBTQ people are monolithic.

**10. Build in substantial free response and open discussion time.** Zachary, a 7th grade ELA teacher, started a "Questions Mailbox," where students can submit questions on any topic from class anonymously. He found it was a win-win: students could submit questions at their leisure, and he had time to craft a thoughtful answer before the next day's lesson.

Many other resources help educators navigate LGBTQ-inclusive teaching. The "Welcoming Schools" project provides lesson planning resources, and Ryan and Hermann-Wilmarth's *Reading the Rainbow* highlights inclusive pedagogical approaches. If educators believe a student might need formal support for mental illness or physical harm, they should be ready to refer students to professionals.

By changing who is represented in the classroom, educators can signal to LGBTQ students that they are not alone, abnormal, or unwell; rather, their community and experiences are of value—worth writing about, studying, and discussing. Cultivating an inclusive classroom might be a daunting endeavor, but it is a crucial one.

Joe English is the founder of Hope in a Box, an education nonprofit based in New York City.