Discussion paper:

Teaching sensitive issues – 10 Theses on teaching gender and sexuality

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The following text is based on my personal experience of many years of teaching on gender and sexuality in Higher Education settings in the UK and Germany. The text was originally prepared as a presentation for a workshop on 'Teaching Sensitive Issues' at the Department of Sociology of Manchester Metropolitan University on 26 November 2015. The ***10 Theses on Teaching Gender and Sexuality*** *address teachers in the Humanities and Social Sciences regardless of whether they deliver specialist gender or sexuality-focused units or not.*

GENDER AND SEXUALITY are closely connected categories. Gender is a complex subject matter and exceeds the question of male-female relations in many regards. Transgender issues are therefore included in this discussion. They have historically emerged in connection with discourses on and in the proximity of the cultures and politics of non-heterosexual groups. This is indicated in the common usage of acronyms/ umbrella terms such as LGBTIQ (Lesbian-Gay-Bisexual-Transgender-Intersex-Queer where Q at times also stands for Questioning). At the same time, it is important to keep in mind that many trans* people object to the conflation of transgender and LGBQ issues.

The following theses are based on my personal understanding derived from many years of teaching and researching on gender/ sexuality. They are meant to stimulate discussion and not to convey any ultimate truth on the subject matter. My main intention is to delineate a problem, rather than to provide water-tight solutions.

10 Theses on teaching gender and sexuality

1. ***We may be teaching sexuality without being aware of it and even if there are no references to these words and concepts in our lecture scripts***

Normative views on gender and sexuality shape not only common sense ideas, but run also deeply within mainstream social and cultural theories, encapsulated in and reproduced through many of the concepts we teach our students. For example, we reproduce the naturalisation of certain genders and sexualities, if we only refer to heterosexual families and relationships when we are teaching on family-related policies or if we assume that all our students are either heterosexual and/or cis-gendered (i.e. people whose self-identity corresponds with their assigned sex). This form of 'teaching gender and sexuality' may not be consciously picked up upon by all students, but it may reinforce the alienation and marginalisation of LGBTIQ students. Yet if we strive for a more inclusive curriculum and a more refined and adequate conceptual language, gender and sexuality contents will inevitably become more visible in our teaching.

2. ***Topics relating to sexuality and non-normative, trans* or non-binary genders are perceived by many as non-standard ('particularised') teaching subjects***

As a result of this, our experience of teaching these issues may be very different from our experience of teaching other subjects. This is the case for a variety of reasons. Sexuality is a taboo subject in many social contexts. Moreover, certain sexualities are more taboo than others. Historically, the expression sexuality has been heavily regulated and confined to the private sphere. As a taboo subject, conversations on sexuality were only considered to be legitimate within a small number of academic professions (such as law, medicine and psychology). Intersex and transgender identities have often been read through a sexuality-lens (usually in a sexual deviance perspective) or have received hostile treatment because they unsettle not only taken-for-granted views on gender, but also on sexuality or sexual orientation. Few people are comfortable discussing sexuality or issues relating to transgender or intersex in public settings. Talking about certain sexuality and gender issues can cause discomfort, shame or mobilise rejection or resistance. While discomfort and shame may stem from the effects of tabooisation, hostility is often the effect of response schemes bound up with homophobia, lesbophobia, biphobia or transphobia (that is, negative attitudes towards lesbians, gay men, bisexuals and trans* people).

3. ***Non-normative gender and sexualities experience marginalisation in many social contexts***

Non-heterosexuals (such as lesbians, gay men and bisexuals) and trans* and intersex people are likely to experience stigmatisation, exclusion and attacks in many parts of their social lives. This may not only include discrimination by institutions, but also individual members within their families, peer groups, neighbourhoods, ethnic or faith communities, universities, work places plus all kinds of public spaces. Such experiences are harmful and damaging and can have an impact on people's wellbeing, mental and physical health, career development, employment trajectories and levels of income. These issues alone should demonstrate that gender and sexuality are important issues within education. We need to think carefully about how we approach teaching these topics in the classroom.

4. ***Many people are poorly educated around non-normative gender and sexualities***

Stereotypes of non-normative genders and sexualities abound in popular culture and are all too often reproduced in research and academic literature. This means that we need to thoughtfully choose teaching materials and carefully evaluate texts and visual sources that we wish to use in the classroom. We need to be prepared that students may have different experience and/or understanding of trans*, intersex and LGBQ issues and cultures. Lack of understanding often goes hand in hand with a lack of sensitivity which, in turn, may have a negative impact on classroom interaction and as a result may offend or alienate LGBTQI students. We need to be prepared to educate ourselves on the changing social, cultural and legal issues that concern minoritised genders and sexualities, if we wish to teach in an informed and tactful manner on these subjects. Some non-cisgenders and non-heterosexual sexualities are arguably even less understood than others. This applies (among others) to trans* identities outside the transsexual paradigm, intersex conditions, bisexualities or pansexuality. Genders and sexualities outside or beyond the LGBTQI spectrum are frequently completely off the radar of public perception. There is poor understanding of BDSM (Bondage and Discipline, Dominance and Submission and Sadomasochism), sex work, non-monogamy, polyamory and asexuality.

5. ***There is a lack of non-alienating, sensitive common public language to address certain sexual acts, and certain genders and sexualities***

The public language on sexuality and sex/gender is rooted in medical terminology which is somewhat distant from the lived and sensual experiences of sexuality and gendered embodiment. Moreover, with regard to gender and sexual minorities, terminology is also often burdened with a history of pathologisation. While medical language may be technocratic, over-rationalised and alienating, vernacular alternatives tend to reflect male experiences or a patriarchal mind. Subcultural terms and identities are not very well-known beyond certain gender and sexual identity-based communities. Beyond the lack of adequate words we face the problem that *speech acts* around sexuality, too, are highly regulated by gendered codes (that further differ across different cultural locations). The challenge thus is not only to find a language, but also to create a speech situation that welcomes *everybody* to express their views and that allows communication across difference. We should be cautious to avoid stigmatising or offensive language and be prepared to step in, if students address alternative genders of sexualities in judgemental or discriminatory fashion. We should strive for a language that does not misconstrue the classroom or any other collectivities (such as social classes, professional groups or ethnic, national or religious populations) as being monolithically heterosexual and cis-gendered. Moreover, we should always use the pronouns and names preferred by our students.

6. ***Whether gender and sexuality-related topics turn out to be 'sensitive topics' in classrooms depends very much on the context***

While gender and sexuality arguably assume a particularised status as teaching subjects, it would be counter-productive to label them as 'sensitive subjects' *per se.* While it is certainly good practice to dedicate care and effort towards finding adequate ways to address non-normative gender issues and sexuality topics in the classroom, an over-cautious approach may kill off spontaneity and could reinforce the culture of tabooing. I do not see any need to introduce every treatment of gender/sexuality with a 'trigger warning'. A generalised practice of using trigger-warnings continues to particularise these subjects. Whether certain gender and sexuality issues are experienced to be sensitive (i.e. potentially upsetting (traumatic) or capable of causing strong or uncontrollable emotions that may render it difficult to resolve conflicts in a non-injurious manner) depends very much on the context. Context-relevant factors include classroom composition, histories of conflict within learning groups, levels of understanding and familiarity, the proximity of critical local or global events that have the potential to entice or polarise, etc.). We have to take the decision whether or not to use trigger warnings or whether to formalise communicative procedures thoughtfully depending on the respective situation.

7. ***Discussing non-normative genders and sexualities may render certain people vulnerable of abuse and epistemic violence in the classroom***

Inviting classroom discussions on non-normative genders and sexualities may render certain students vulnerable to possible abuse of the exertion of some form of epistemic violence in the classroom. This may involve conscious acts of hostility (e.g. the defamation of certain genders and groups) or the teasing/bullying of particular students. Injurious behaviour may not always be intentional, as in the case of spontaneous utterances of disbelief, exoticising remarks or inappropriate questions hammered out in curiosity. While many LGBTQI students value the inclusion of LGBTQI subjects in the curriculum, they may not always experience such teaching sessions as pleasant. It is important to secure a classroom atmosphere

that feels safe and in which all students can express themselves freely, but also to keep things private to themselves. 'Over-disclosure' of personal information may cause problems for certain students as well. We also have to be aware that we never know exactly how many students with non-normative gender or sexual identities are in our classroom. Many intersex, trans* or LGBQ students may not be out to their peers or their teachers. Many may go through a period of questioning or struggling with their gender and sexual identities or may be in a period of transitioning, re-orientation or coming out. It is more likely for a conversation to take an 'objectifying turn', if there is a shared assumption that the 'kind of people' discussed are not in the room. This is why it is good to remind ourselves of the diversity of the student body and the (potential) diversity of each classroom setting.

8. ***Whether to refer to one's own gender and sexual identity is a tricky question in gender and sexuality teaching***

The question of self-disclosure in gender and sexuality teaching is a tricky issue, in particular for those of us who inhabit non-normative gender or sexual identities. Heterosexual and cis-gendered teachers may disclose more unconsciously through little stories on their families or the use of gendered terminology. LGBTQI staff will of course also have to consider the potential risk of exposing themselves to workplace discrimination. Yet here I am more concerned with considering the potential merits of 'being out' in the classroom. Many students seem to appreciate the readiness of teachers to share personal stories of their lives, which many seem to take as an indicator of trust. It may therefore contribute to a comfortable and open atmosphere in the classroom. Many students may be speculating regarding the sexual identities of their teaching staff (if they do not know already) and may crave to know. Many situations are conceivable, in which it would be odd, create artificial barriers and result in the loss of important learning opportunities, if teachers would not take the opportunity to relate their own experience to a discussion. Some of the literature on the subject alludes to the positive effects of LGBTQI role models within education settings. The assumption is that students may identify with such role models and read the existence of 'out' LGBTQI teachings staff as an indicator that their university is a welcoming and ultimately not so hostile space. I would like to argue that what we need an inclusive educational environment that takes diversity issues seriously, rather than individual role models. We also have to take into account the possibility that some LGBTQI students may not feel empowered, but maybe even awkward or intimidated in the presence of 'out' LGBTQI teachers. The value of self-disclosure in teaching gender and sexuality is difficult to determine 'in general' and decisions about self-disclosure ('coming out' or the telling of personal experience stories) may require or benefit from a 'situational' analysis (the moment, the context, the institutional setting, and one's own position with regard to all of these).

9. ***As teachers concerned with an inclusive educational practice we need to deepen our understanding of heterosexism, homophobia, biphobia, sexism and transphobia***

Research suggests that many LGBTQI students have suffered harassment during their time at schools and at colleges (Beemyn & Rankin 2011; Ellis 2009; Valentine et al., 2009; Pallotta-Chiarolli, 2010; National Union of Students, 2014). Many LGBTQI students seem to perceive universities to be a relatively safe and welcoming setting. However, the level of homophobia, lesbophobia, biphobia and transphobia at higher education institution in the UK is shocking. According to one study, 46 per cent of LGB students interviewed have received homophobic comments from other students and 8.9 per cent also from staff.

Homophobic discrimination and bullying have played a part in the educational experience of 20 per cent of LGB students. 28.5 per cent of transgender students have been taking time out from studying, which is a figure that is much higher than the national average (Gunn, 2010, see National Union of Students, 2014). To understand our students and to make sure that we are not part of the problem we need to work towards deepening our understanding of heterosexism, homophobia, biphobia, sexism and transphobia. Multiple surveys involving LGBTQI students in UK Higher Education suggest the need for professional training on LGBTQI gender and sexuality issues across the university and college sector.

10. Institutional culture shapes the teaching environment. The university management and colleagues need to be prepared to step in to support staff and students who are attacked on the grounds of their gender or sexualities or their teaching/learning on gender and sexuality-related topics

Teaching gender and sexuality involves particular challenges. Some of these challenges are bound up with the construction of non-normative genders and sexualities – or of the open and critical discussion of gender and sexuality as such – as a social problem. This situation renders the teaching of gender and sexuality precarious within wider educational practice. Moreover, certain groups of students – and some members of staff (depending on their identities) may experience a stronger vulnerability than others in the context of gender and sexuality teaching. A safe teaching environment is only possible, if management and staff work towards a culture of inclusiveness. This necessarily implies the readiness to act in support of students (and staff) who might find themselves at the receiving end of homophobic, biphobic or transphobic attacks. This is at least what they would be expected to do within the framework of the law, since the single Equality Act (2010) requires universities (as public institutions) to counter discrimination, promote and advocate equality of opportunity and to foster good inter-group relations.

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