MEDIA AND MEDIATION: INFORMATION LITERACY AND THE CONSTRUCTION OF LGBTQ CULTURAL LITERACY

ABSTRACT

In this essay I discuss using information literacy to build LGBTQ cultural literacy so the needs of LGBTQ Canadians, especially teachers and students, can be met. I link this work to lifelong learning and I use the Alberta Teachers’ Association’s Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity website as an example of how this work can be done.

INTRODUCTION

My political and pedagogical project, which guides my teaching, community service, and research, is focused on rearticulating education for citizenship in Canada within the context of a contemporary multicultural society where LGBTQ (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer) citizens have become increasingly visible in our cultural mosaic while still being denied the rights and privileges of full citizenship. My ongoing research, which is funded by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada, has this primary purpose: to study welfare-and-work issues for LGBTQ teachers in Canada’s provinces and territories. In keeping with my political and pedagogical project, this study investigates the need for every Canadian to question further identity, difference, pluralism, equity, diversity, and inclusion as integral sociocultural dimensions of Canadian citizenship. These aspects of civility affect life, learning, and work. In schools as teachers’ workplaces, teachers work in the intersection of the moral and the political. In this milieu LGBTQ teachers have had to separate the personal (the sex-and-gendered self) from the professional (the educator acting in loco parentis). This is still the case for most teachers because, as my research indicates, significant efforts in Canadian law and legislation to advance the rights and privileges of LGBTQ Canadians have not translated into full accommodation for us in education and culture. Thus, with the support of a Centre for Research on Literacy Research Fellowship from my university, I have incorporated the following focus into my research: to use information literacy to build cultural literacy around LGBTQ citizens and their issues.

I begin this essay by discussing the importance of information literacy as an enabler of lifelong learning. I discuss using information literacy to build LGBTQ cultural literacy so the needs of LGBTQ Canadians, especially teachers and students, can be met. I use the Alberta Teachers’ Association’s Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity website as an example of how this work can be done.

THE IMPORTANCE OF INFORMATION LITERACY AS AN ENABLER OF LIFELONG LEARNING

Tuijnman and Boudard (2001) declare that learning improves literacy outcomes if it includes “schools, homes, workplaces and whole communities;” that is, learning is better
when it is “life-wide” as well as “long-long” (p. 9). From a civil perspective, they maintain that lifelong learning is also better when it includes emphasis on “strengthening social cohesion and active citizenship” (p. 9). As a vehicle for social education, lifelong learning can benefit citizen learners by assisting their personal, social, and cultural development through participation in diverse learning activities in formal settings such as schools, colleges, and universities; in non-formal settings such as workplaces, churches, and community venues; and in informal settings such as media, websites, and public awareness campaigns (Boshier, 2000). In this focus on citizen learners and democratic citizenship, lifelong learning can attend to matters of context, disposition (attitudes, values, beliefs, and motivations), and relationships of power that predispose learners to have positions and take stands on social and cultural issues. In the final report of the American Library Association Presidential Committee on Information Literacy (1989), the importance of information literacy is linked to democratic citizenship:

Citizenship in a modern democracy involves more than knowledge of how to access vital information. It also involves a capacity to recognize propaganda, distortion, and other misuses and abuses of information. … To say that information literacy is crucial to effective citizenship is simply to say it is central to the practice of democracy. Any society committed to individual freedom and democratic government must ensure the free flow of information to all its citizens in order to protect personal liberties and to guard its future. (in ALA, n. d., p. 4)

When lifelong learning is a socially focused engagement, it can assist citizen learners to build the knowledge and understanding necessary to building communities of difference where change can be mediated and the civil unrest and destructiveness wrought by ignorance and fear can be overcome. In these communities, new balances across social and cultural differences and new ways of communicating, connecting, and living together are emphasized. It is here that lifelong learning has to be innovative, adjusting to the social and cultural milieu that demands it help foster cultural literacy and social cohesion. Information literacy can help lifelong learning achieve these civil goals since, in general, “literacy has long been valued [for] … the capacity [it provides learners] to participate fully in society” (Canadian National Literacy Secretariat, n. d., p. 4).

“Information Literacy is the set of skills needed to find, retrieve, analyze, and use information” (ALA, n. d., p. 1). It is necessary for lifelong learning focused on enhancing the quality of learning for life and work and building functional democracy (ALA, n. d.). It is necessary to position people as arbitrators of information:

Ultimately, information literate people are those who have learned how to learn. They know how to learn because they know how knowledge is organized, how to find information, and how to use information in such a way that others can learn from them. They are people prepared for lifelong learning, because they can always find the information needed for any task or decision at hand. (ALA Presidential Committee on Information Literacy, 1989 in ALA, n. d., p. 1)

This suggests that information-literate people are thinkers (with critical capacity) and doers (with technical capacity). In the process of information retrieval, as Laverty (1997) emphasizes, “Analysis of an information need, knowledge of resource types, evaluation of access tools, and interpretation of results … [all involve critical thinking]” (p. 1). Thus
information literacy plays an important role in holistic lifelong learning: It “is a means to express personal ideas, develop arguments, refute the opinions of others, learn new things, or simply identify the truth or factual evidence about a topic” (p. 1). From this perspective, information literacy is about knowing how to learn, and it is the freedom to learn cognizant of both the how and the why. The information literate learner is self-reliant, critically involved, not subservient to the expert, able to provide an evaluative account of information surveyed, and in control of a learning process where knowing how and why helps mediate what David Shenk (ALA, n. d.) calls data smog in the search for small truths.

**USING INFORMATION LITERACY TO BUILD LGBTQ CULTURAL LITERACY**

There is an increasing volume of Canadian and international research documenting the marginalization and abuses of LGBTQ teachers and students in education, culture, and society (Grace & Benson, 2000; Quinlivan & Town, 1999). There is extensive complementary research indicating that heterosexism, homophobia, and sexism, in conjunction with racism and other abuses of power, function in schools to sustain and reproduce specific power and privilege that abet heteronormativity in maintaining the social and cultural status quo (Pinar, 1998). In Canadian K-12 education, tolerated hatred of LGBTQ teachers and students is normalized in school settings (CTF, 2003). Constant risks exist to the professional security of LGBTQ teachers and to the personal safety of LGBTQ teachers and students (Grace & Benson, 2000; Grace & Wells, 2001). The danger and damage to LGBTQ students (and to students perceived to be so) is immeasurable (D’Augelli, 1998). It is exacerbated by a pervasive contemporary phenomenon: Queer youth are acknowledging and embracing their sex-and-gender differences at younger ages, asserting their identities and, in some cases, becoming more confrontational. This increases possibilities of retaliatory dangers (D’Augelli, 1998).

In this environment of exclusion and risk, the need for LGBTQ cultural literacy has never been greater. We need a cadre of culturally literate individuals, groups, and agencies knowledgeable about LGBTQ issues in education and the larger culture and society. Parents, administrators, school district personnel, teachers, support staff, teacher unions and associations, governmental departments of education, and community organizations need to be culturally informed and critically aware so they can exercise influence and leadership to create safe, caring, and inclusive schools. Perhaps most importantly, youth need to be culturally informed and critically aware. One danger of cyberspace is that youth may rely solely on the high-tech world for interaction, thus losing social connectedness. Youth can learn to defame, defile, dismiss, deride, reject, and hate sitting in front of a computer. They can become cyber-Nazis through haphazard informal learning. This possibility has generated the moral panic that has resulted in demands, often from computer illiterate politicians, for more control, censorship, and surveillance of communication on the Internet (Kellner, 1998). A better response would be to teach youth to become information literate so they can become culturally literate and hopefully responsive and responsible citizens.
In Canada there have been progressive moves in law, legislation, education, and health that support LGBTQ human and civil rights. This progress has significantly advanced knowledge. Information literacy, which is an encompassing concept and process that includes building computer, library, media, network, and visual literacies, can enable the exchange, distribution, and evaluation of this knowledge. To be information literate today, Partridge (2000) asserts that one must have “the capacity to seek, retrieve, organise, analyse, synthesise, and present information using a variety of sources and formats” (p. 209). Senn Breivik (2000) accentuates the importance of information literacy, asserting that today’s citizens need to be able to access, evaluate, and productively use information to address issues and solve problems in their personal, civic, and work lives. She believes that an information-literate citizenry with universal access and quality information can become a knowledgeable and empowered people able to act on difficult issues.

Using information literacy to build LGBTQ cultural literacy can fortify the development and implementation of an LGBTQ inclusive pedagogy. To build LGBTQ cultural literacy an individual needs to

- increase awareness of self and others as a study of similarities and differences;
- understand LGBTQ politics, motivations, dispositions, and cultural practices;
- understand how hegemony works to include or exclude LGBTQ persons across different ways of being, becoming, belonging, and acting;
- remember that cultural and other forms of knowledge are socially constructed, so some forms of knowledge are not connected to truths about cultures;
- debunk myths and reject stereotypes that debase LGBTQ persons; and
- understand the inextricable ways that culture, history, language, knowledge, and power interconnect.

An engagement with LGBTQ inclusive pedagogy as a public pedagogy is intended to advance social cohesion, cultural democracy, and larger public interests focused on social justice in education and society. This pedagogy aims to supplant ignorance, fear, exclusion, and violence with knowledge, understanding, respect, and accommodation. When other citizens are LGBTQ culturally literate, this helps deconstruct the outsider status given LGBTQ citizens due to their sex-and-gender differences. This deconstruction is vital so that LGBT persons can obtain respect and be accommodated. Knowing and knowing about LGBTQ persons helps others overcome their ignorance and fears, which in turn helps LGBTQ persons achieve the rights and privileges of full citizenship.

THE ALBERTA TEACHERS’ ASSOCIATION’S SEXUAL ORIENTATION AND GENDER IDENTITY WEBSITE

In mainstream education there is this perception: “Ideas from nonmainstream races, cultures, or other multicultural groups are exotic, strange, unnecessary, or possibly immoral or evil” (Laughlin et al., 2001, p. 93). Vandergrift (1995) asserts that literacies are socially constructed in terms of their acceptability, appropriateness, and usefulness in particular contexts and cultures. Formal education assists in this exclusionary work that disenfranchises particular differences: “Curriculum, as a selection from possible cultures
and literacies, marginalizes or omits alternative cultures and exercises social and political control over participants in schooling” (p. 42). As an alternative, “cultural literacy ought to be a literacy of inclusion, one that transforms as well as conserves the heritage so people can recognize themselves in the artifacts of our world. Such transformation does not negate our heritage; it enlarges and enriches it (Vandergrift, 1995, p. 44). Of course, some fear inclusion as an assault on tradition and “core” culture. The fear of LGBTQ inclusion is probably greatest for those with dispositions constructed in the intersection of conservative politics and morals. As they imagine what would happen if schools were LGBTQ inclusive, they recede to the realm of myths and stereotypes. For example, they might envision gay teachers as pedophiles lurking in elementary schools. They might picture gay boys with feather boas lisping dialogue from Oscar Wilde’s The Importance of Being Earnest. In ignorance and out of fear they would castigate LGBTQ teachers and students and exclude them from the realm of the accepted and acceptable.

Amid such myths and stereotypes, LGBTQ cultural literacy is necessary to achieve these educational and cultural goals: to respect and accommodate sex-and-gender differences and to create inclusive communities that promote personal and social wellbeing. In today’s multimedia learning environment information literacy is required to build LGBTQ cultural literacy. Individuals need to be discerning as they surf the Internet. They need to interrogate and evaluate the information about sexual orientation and gender identity that is available on numerous websites that have numerous intentions. Information literacy helps the user of websites to investigate the educational utility, effectiveness, and quality of these cyber-sources of information. This involves careful scrutiny of a particular website, noting its purpose, design, content, pedagogy, intended audience, communication strategies, and the interests at work.

An example of a cyber-source of information that I have investigated in terms of its educational utility and effectiveness is the Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity website developed under the auspices of the Diversity, Equity, and Human Rights Committee of the Alberta Teachers’ Association. Kristopher Wells, a former schoolteacher and current doctoral student in educational policy studies at the University of Alberta, constructed the website. Kris intended the site to be a source of information to help teachers, parents, students, school administrators, counselors, and the general public build LGBTQ cultural literacy so schools might support LGBTQ students and teachers who deserve to be safe and secure in inclusive environments where they are respected and accommodated. He also intended the website to be a resource to inform educational policy-making and program development. In this regard the critical role of educators in providing a safe and caring learning environment for LGBTQ students is emphasized:

This website has been designed to assist educators in their legal, professional and ethical responsibilities to protect all students and to maintain a safe, caring and inclusive learning environment. Addressing homophobia is an important part of that obligation. This website provides Alberta teachers with information, contacts and resources that can assist them in creating safe, caring and inclusive learning environments for LGBT students and staff. (p. 1)
As a source of information, the website is encompassing. It addresses a set of reflective FAQs (frequently asked questions) to give ontological, epistemological, social, and cultural perspectives on sex-and-gender differences. In answering questions, ideas are suggested for enhancing LGBTQ-inclusive education. The answers provide supportive, practical information and refer readers to related links as appropriate. The website also lists these practical actions to help teachers create a safe learning environment:

- Develop knowledge and awareness.
- Examine the language you use.
- Take a close look at your classroom.
- Challenge homophobic jokes or remarks.
- Develop inclusive material.
- Advocate directly for LGBT youth.
- Develop a support network.
- If you are a gay, lesbian, bisexual or transgender teacher, consider coming out.

The website also outlines practical steps to improve the overall learning environment:

- Create and specify clear policies and rules of conduct.
- Assess the existing school climate.
- Adapt curriculum.
- Provide staff training.
- Provide workshops.
- Involve community partners.
- Support student human rights groups.

In addition, the website supplies information and links to help teachers understand their ethical and legal responsibilities. There is a detailed listing of publications and local contacts. As well, since there are many Catholic school boards in Alberta, the website provides information to help teachers support Catholic LGBTQ youth. While the Catholic Church acknowledges that homosexuality is a generally unchangeable individual trait, sadly it holds the tenuous position that homosexual acts are acts of grave depravity.

As a concluding perspective, I leave you with Mark Holcroft’s evaluation of the website. Mark is a gay undergraduate student in teacher education in the final semester of his program in elementary education. He critically reflects:

This is the first time that I have worked my way through the entire Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity website. As a regular user of the Internet, I was impressed with the format, the content, and the usefulness of the site. I really liked the comprehensive resource listing. As a gay teacher, I felt empowered because there were tools to help me deal confidently with my own fears and hesitations as I gathered practical information to help make my school an LGBTQ-positive space. The site also provided me with educators’ ideas and with resources and cautions to help me deal with what still is a potentially explosive topic in most schools.

As an educator reviewing this website, I saw three themes explored. First, there is the theme of ethical obligation. The website made it clear that teachers must protect
all students and provide a safe-and-caring learning environment. This duty is
highlighted by a link to the Code of Ethics of the Alberta Teachers’ Association.
Second, there is the theme of relevant and necessary responsibility. The website
appeals to the teacher as a caring individual. It emphasizes the educator’s
responsibility in addressing homophobic/heterosexist attitudes. The third theme is
supporting and enabling. The web site supplies practical information regarding
steps a school, a community, and a teacher might take to help create a safe learning
environment. It also provides information to assist teachers with their personal
worries and fears around working on LGBTQ issues.

CONCLUDING PERSPECTIVE: APPRECIATING LGBTQ

Information literacy can enable the building of cultural literacy as a medium to advance
social cohesion, cultural democracy, and larger public interests focused on social justice
in education and society. Kellner (1998) offers this perspective on cultural literacy:
New forms of social interaction and cultural awareness are needed that appreciate
differences, multiplicity and diversity. Therefore, expanded social and cultural
literacy is needed that appreciates the cultural heritage, histories, and contributions
of a diversity of groups. … [W]e also need to become culturally literate in cultures
that have been hitherto invisible. (p. 119)
LGBTQ persons have had to be invisible to survive in the mainstream intersection of the
moral and the political. As citizens, we want more. Building cultural literacy is part of the
journey toward full citizenship.

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