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Putting Ideas into Practice

High School Teachers Talk about Incorporating the LGBT Past

DANIEL HUREWITZ

In the spring of 2013, I spoke with nine high school history teachers who had begun incorporating LGBT history into what they teach. They came from a variety of backgrounds: half taught at public schools, half at private; some taught advanced placement (AP) U.S. history, some ran the International Baccalaureate (IB) course on the Americas; some offered more narrowly defined U.S.-focused seminars, some led classes specifically on LGBT history, and most taught a combination. Yet all had been breaking new ground in their schools and communities. And while most felt that their students and colleagues supported their efforts, they all faced challenges in bringing LGBT history into their schools. As a result, these nine teachers were full of insightful strategies and approaches that others could use. As I spoke with each of them, our conversations centered around a group of recurring issues: finding topics in the U.S. survey where LGBT content could be easily incorporated, building a framework of respect in the classroom and managing strong reactions, laying the groundwork with colleagues and administrators, and incorporating innovative strategies for bringing the material to life.

What follows are excerpts from our conversations. They happened in back-and-forth dialogues on the telephone, but I've woven them together here to show the points of consensus and the range of suggestions. The passages that follow are not formal in tone. Instead they are



Daniel Hurewitz

the voices of teachers at the cutting edge who were putting these ideas into practice.

Choosing Units Where LGBT Content Can Be Included

Most of our conversations began with a discussion of topics within the survey that could be readily expanded with LGBT content. While almost all the teachers mentioned folding LGBT material into their units on 1960s civil rights struggles, many suggested an array of additional potential topics: nineteenth-century women's activism, the frontier West, the Harlem Renaissance and Jazz Age, the AIDS epidemic, and contemporary analogies. And they also recommended materials that can be used in the classroom, which are gathered at the end of this essay.

Before turning to the topics, the interview with Will Grant, who had been a teacher for twenty years, offers a framework for thinking about what material to include. Grant had taught for the previous five years at the Athenian School, a small, private, middle and high school about

thirty-five miles east of San Francisco in Danville, California. At Athenian, he taught a ninth-grade world history and cultures course, as well as electives for eleventh and twelfth graders, including African history, Chinese history, and a course on LGBT history and culture. He also advised the school's Gay-Straight Alliance (GSA) and consulted with the Santa Cruz School District about ways to incorporate LGBT content into its schools.

Grant

First, I think that it's really important to integrate this information into units that you're already teaching rather than doing stand-alone units on GLBTQ history. And a major reason for doing that is that it normalizes it. It makes it part of history rather than being something that we hang on the side of the "real story" of history. . . . By integrating it, we start to create the understanding that gay and lesbian history is not just history for gays and lesbians, it's everybody's history. The second thing is that I try to look for elements to teach where the history brings in important and relevant information to current issues going on in our culture and society. So that the kids get that this is history that matters to them because



Will Grant

this is what they are seeing in the media, these are the conversations they're having with their friends.

Also, I really consciously try to construct historical information that's going to confront current stereotypes and narrow perceptions, because I want to change the ground of the discussion that the kids are having. I didn't look for topics where someone's sexuality is a sidebar—somebody did all this stuff and they *happen* to be gay. Instead, I was looking for history where their sexual identity or their gender identity was one of the moving factors, one of the things that actually compelled them forward. . . .

Finally, it's important to not just tell the story about oppression. Often the narrative that people have, even folks who are in support, is that the world was dark and oppressive for all homosexuals before the Stonewall riots. And then after the Stonewall riots there was the gay liberation movement, but then there was AIDS. And maybe only in the mid-1990s did things start to look up. And that's *not* the case in so many ways in U.S. history. So I think, especially for kids who do identify as GLBTQ or kids who are questioning, it's really important for them to get that there's a history of a coherent culture, and strong identity, and especially of resilience, and even a kind of celebration. And I think doing that—even for the kids who aren't questioning and are straight identified—creates a kind of opening, that there's a strong vibrant subculture that's always been around.

Nineteenth-Century Women's Activism and the Frontier West

While most teachers readily identified LGBT content to incorporate into twentieth-century U.S. history, Grant also had two dynamic ideas about bringing LGBT history into the nineteenth century.

Grant

The suffrage movement is actually one of the best examples. Because the leadership of the suffrage movement [and other reform movements] in the 1800s . . . many of them were known to be involved in Boston marriages, and there's strong evidence that many of them were lesbians. One of the readings that I've done pointed out that, in the 1800s, political activism for a married woman was very difficult because they were legally controlled by their husbands [and] could be prevented from being involved in these politics. . . . So a lot of the women who were involved in the suffrage movement were [people we might today call] lesbians, and many were women who had made the choice not to be involved in marriage, even though that was going to cost them enormously in terms of

economic security, legal standing, and social standing. So what becomes clear is that their sexual identities actually created a situation where they had mental independence but took a massive hit in terms of their social security, and being placed outside of society. But then these were the women who had the freedom to mobilize and organize. . . .

One of the things I do with cowboys is rethinking what's going on. Why would young men in their twenties leave the comfort of society to go live in a very rough area where the only thing they will have is the company of men? The dominant narrative is "Oh, these poor men, and how they lacked a woman's touch, and how there were a few women who would go out there *eventually* after things got settled." . . . And then the other interpretation, that's backed with historical information from diaries and really interesting photos, is that what you actually had was a lot of young men who . . . went out west to live among other men. [I bring in these] two amazing pictures of the cowboy stag dances [which show male cowboys dancing together]. And I use this again with the goal of changing their gender stereotypes. People chuckle at the idea of gay cowboys, but these were men who loved men, who loved masculine men, and if you loved masculine men and you wanted to be around men and out from under the eyes of Victorian society on the East Coast, then you headed out to the frontier and started a life where nobody was going to pry into your private life.

Harlem Renaissance and the Jazz Age

Several teachers suggested the 1920s and Harlem Renaissance as good places to incorporate LGBT content, drawing on research done by George Chauncey, Eric Garber, and others. (See Red Vaughan Tremmel's essay in this volume for an expanded discussion of this topic.) Eric De Lora had been teaching for five years at Maybeck High School, a private, progressive, college preparatory school in Berkeley, California, with a strong reputation for diversity. Prior to that, he had taught at community colleges in Oregon and elsewhere in the Bay Area. De Lora's courses included music history, theater history, film history, social justice, and LGBT U.S. history. In his LGBT class, he said, students connected strongly with the Harlem Renaissance material.

De Lora

In discussing the Harlem Renaissance, we were able to talk about African American history and the connection to LGBT history. We talked about how the Harlem Renaissance developed separately from what was going on in the rest of

Eric-Richard De Lora



New York, how there was this other place, and so people would go to Harlem to have these other experiences, whether it was to listen to jazz or explore their sexuality. . . . And you can weave African American and LGBT history together easily. You can talk about Zora Neale Hurston and Langston Hughes and the others and say, "By the way, you've got some gays in there, you've got some lesbians." And the students then are, "Oh! Oh, really!"

This came up repeatedly in the class, that the kids would say, "I never knew that Langston Hughes was gay." "I never knew that James Baldwin was gay." These were names that, if they had read them at all, their sexual orientation was not discussed. . . . Students are surprised that there is a sexual side to these celebrities and artists that they have heard about, and the sexual side is not the standard heterosexual side. . . . And for the students that have those other sexualities, well, you need your role models and you want your list of top-ten gay or lesbian performers, so you feel like you've got some connection: "Hey, there's a few of my people like that who are famous and important!"



Nell Hirschmann-Levy repeatedly taught a course on LGBT U.S. history at Urban Academy High School, a small public school in Manhattan built around inquiry-based learning. In her course, one of the most successful discussions focused on the Hamilton Lodge Ball, an annual drag ball that took place in Harlem for much of the 1920s and 1930s,

Nell Hirschmann-Levy



and drew thousands of participants and spectators, both white and black, and gay, straight, and otherwise. Hirschmann-Levy and Grant both drew on George Chauncey's research in *Gay New York* to give students an LGBT angle on the Jazz Age.

Hirschmann-Levy

The Hamilton Lodge Ball was very interesting to students! What did it mean that there was a space that people were so attracted to, and yet there also seemed to be a disgust for gay people at the same time in this era? How do you explain that? It was a huge gathering of gays and lesbians, but also thousands of heterosexuals attended the ball. So what explains their attendance? Was it just to make fun of them? Does that explain its popularity? . . . And we'd also discuss the fact that there was the participation of white people and black people. What were the race dynamics at the time, in the '20s and '30s, that played obviously into sexuality but also racism? That idea of slumming, of white people going into Harlem, my students see that dynamic now. And it adds to the discussion in a very rich way, where students could bring in their own lives and make analogies.

Grant

I also talk about speakeasy culture, which the kids find interesting because it's a little bit risqué. The idea that speakeasies became these places of social mixture,

and because people were already breaking the law, they start to break the social law, and you get social mixture, gender mixture, and class mixture—and people found that fascinating. I also talk about the Pansy Craze and Gene Malin. It's really fun to let the kids get immersed in it and play with the idea of a socially subversive, but not dangerous, movement of people who decided to push the boundaries. And that, as a result of their pushing, they were breaking down social oppression through entertainment and fun. They really get that at the level of rave culture and parties, and they think, "Wow, these instincts that I've got to be adventurous, maybe they can be socially powerful."

1960s Civil Rights and Social Movements

Even the teachers on the tightest AP schedules felt able to include LGBT content in their 1960s/civil rights units. They did it, though, in a range of ways and for varying amounts of class time. Some of the AP teachers, such as Robert King at Palisades Charter High School in Southern California, were only able to incorporate it into part of a single lecture on "other social movements." Sarah Strauss's school had stopped following the AP U.S. history curriculum for the first time that year, and she was able to devote a full class session to LGBT activism. Strauss, who had been a teacher for over fifteen years, worked in the upper school of the Packer Collegiate Institute, a small private school in Brooklyn, and she taught tenth-grade U.S. history, constitutional law, and criminal justice.



Robert King (photograph by Benjamin Bustamante)

Sarah Strauss (photograph by Sarah Haimes)



Strauss

This year, for one day, we took an article by Alex Ross that was in the *New Yorker*, called, "Love on the March." My colleague and I edited it down so that it was not too much for the kids to read at once. We had been talking about different social movements—civil rights, the women's movement—and then we looked at LGBT movements. . . . We gave them this article to read, we had some guiding questions, and we gave them some key terms to look for. And essentially what Ross does is lay out a sort of popular history of LGBT movements over time, starting with the nineteenth century and early twentieth century, then Daughters of Bilitis, Mattachine Society, and getting to gay rights, marriage, and HIV/AIDS. It's sort of a summary version of LGBT rights history. It's certainly not perfect—it's fairly male oriented, and there's lots of stuff that I didn't necessarily agree with. But several of the kids came into class and said things like, "This is really interesting! I didn't know any of this before." And that validates the risks I take with the curriculum. In essence, I am saying to kids, "You know what? Here's this whole topic that you've never been allowed to talk about before in a high school history class, and we're going to talk about it."



Mark Buenzle had been teaching at the Brooklyn Friends School, an independent Quaker school in Brooklyn, for twenty-five years, working

for the last eighteen in the high school. He taught studio art, art history, and the IB history course on the Americas; he also advised the GSA. Buenzle incorporated LGBT material into the middle section of the IB course, which focused on the black civil rights movement, the women's movement, and the struggle for LGBT equality, and while the bulk of the time was devoted to black civil rights, he spent three or four weeks on the women's and LGBT movements combined.

Buenzle

I find [the documentary *After Stonewall*] terrific to use with kids. I present it in small sections, followed by discussion. I've also given them material on Supreme Court decisions and summaries of the decisions, starting with *Griswold v. Connecticut* and *Roe v. Wade*, and talking about the relationship to the Fourteenth Amendment and the right to privacy. And then moving into the cases that were more specifically LGBT related—like *Bowers v. Hardwick* and *Lawrence v. Texas*. Certainly that part of the course keeps evolving, because of what's happening now. [See the essay by Marc Stein in this volume for further discussion of teaching Supreme Court cases.] Current *New York Times* articles are helpful, and I've used *Making History* from Eric Marcus. I think some of its first-person accounts are good.



Mark Buenzle (photograph by Melissa Eder)



Finally, Kurt Dearie, who taught both the general U.S. survey and the AP survey at Carlsbad High School in Carlsbad, California, had a more elaborate project. Carlsbad High is a large public school in a fairly affluent community in Southern California.

Dearie

The way that I organized the civil rights unit was to look at and compare the goals, strategies, and support for different civil rights movements. We look at LGBT, African Americans, women, Native Americans, Mexican and Mexican Americans, Americans with disabilities, Japanese and Japanese Americans. I feed them documents and videos, and, using their textbook, we create this huge matrix: down one side of the page, all these movements are listed; across the top of the page—goals, strategies, support. . . . And ultimately it culminates with them writing a paper arguing what they believe are the most effective strategies for promoting civil rights.

When I structured this question of looking for effective strategies, I framed it as “either for or in opposition to.” In part what I was doing there was, one, you



Kurt Dearie

always need to look at both sides, because when you're looking at strategies, everybody is always trying to adapt to the other side. But also it was my way of trying to make sure that, if I got calls from parents who want to argue that I'm promoting the gay lifestyle or forcing kids to believe a certain way, that was my out: "No, we're looking at both sides. We're not taking a moral side. We're looking at it through this objective lens." Whether that's the right or wrong thing to do, I do it so I can be ready to defend myself. . . . But when they write their research papers where they are comparing various movements, many students will choose to look specifically at gay rights.

AIDS Epidemic

For many teachers, the AIDS epidemic was the other topic they felt they could easily fit into their survey, and some felt that it was mandatory. Will Grant and Eric De Lora spoke ardently on this theme. (For additional discussion of teaching about AIDS, see the essay by Jennifer Brier in this volume.)

De Lora

You *have* to talk about AIDS and what happened during the epidemic, particularly in the 1980s. You're going to talk about Reagan, and you're going to talk about the Berlin Wall coming down, and all that stuff. To not talk about what happened in the first ten to twelve years of the AIDS epidemic is to not really teach what happened in the history of this country.

Grant

Here's my framing. The dominant narrative is that AIDS was something that was incubated in the gay community and then spread because of the immoral lifestyle of gay men in the 1980s. The counter-narrative that I give [my students] is that AIDS was something that had a three- to four-year incubation period, that it was spread before anybody knew it, and then it was the political organizing among the gay men's communities, supported by the lesbians, that forced the largest, fastest public health reaction in American history. They created whole new models of medical care, they forced safe sex onto the agenda for the nation and the entire world, and they actually stopped the spread of the disease as far as it could have gone.

I use the film *We Were Here* [a documentary about the impact of the early years of the epidemic in San Francisco]. It so beautifully personalizes the story, and it tells the story of that public health reaction. . . . And the thing about the film is that it's so devastating emotionally, and so powerful for the kids to watch. Whatever leftover lingering stereotypes they've got I think just get blown away by it.



De Lora concurred about the power of that film, suggesting that a teacher could easily show twenty minutes of it, or of *And the Band Played On*, the docudrama based on the Randy Shilts book, from which he had also assigned selections.

De Lora

Shilts was a journalist for the *San Francisco Chronicle*, and the book came out of his reporting on what was going on. It's very much taking Reagan to task, and the CDC [Centers for Disease Control] . . . in terms of where's the blame, and who are the guilty parties. And I used that until *We Were Here* came out, which is much more personal in terms of, here's what was happening to us as individuals.

Grant

One year I also did a role-play. The idea was that we are a local community AIDS task force in the mid-1980s. I create different social roles. I've got the straight public health official. I've got the mainstream AIDS activist who's focused on mainstream acceptance. I've got the Queer Nation and the ACT UP contingent. I've got straight folks whose families have been impacted by AIDS. So I create all of these different roles for them. And then they have a debate over the right response to AIDS. It's set at a time when the scientific information was available, but the public perception was very distorted about how the disease is spread and what it means. And what I do is that I have a set of lots in front of me, and the activity runs about half an hour. Every couple of minutes, I pull a number out of the bowl, and that person dies of AIDS, and that person has to leave the simulation and just watch what's happening. The kids said it was one of the most effective things we did all year. Because by the time the fourth or fifth person disappears, the kids all said that they started to get this sense of intensity and panic, and the emotional sense of what was going on.

Contemporary Analogies

A final thought about inclusion was presented by Kurt Dearie. Dearie found multiple ways to make connections to LGBT issues throughout his U.S. surveys without always carving out a moment to discuss “LGBT history.” Because he believed that “you always have to make a past-to-present connection” with students, he regularly used analogies to contemporary issues to explain historical material to his students. He continually pointed to current struggles around race, class, gender, *and* sexual orientation as ways to illuminate issues from the past.

Dearie

For instance, early on in my class, we deal with the Constitution. So there, when we talk about federalism, we talk about gay marriage and issues of federalism. But also for separation of powers, the Fourteenth Amendment, equal protection under the law, checks and balances—I’m always using LGBT rights as examples of those. I do it because it’s ongoing: kids can see it, you turn on the news at night, this is what’s going on. So it’s actually been very helpful [as a way to explain the Constitution].

Similarly, in my AP course, when we look at Seneca Falls, I really like there to bring up the issue of gender and connect the role that gender played in that type of society with the role of gender today—specifically if we look at the issues of transgender people today. I can make the connection to the issue of gender as a contemporary issue that still causes trouble, and that we’re still trying to deal with. Fundamentally, wherever it comes up in that general survey course where I can see connections, I make them with students.

Building a Framework of Respect and Managing Strong Student Reactions

I regularly asked the teachers if they felt worried about bringing this content into their classes and how they made it work. Most indicated that it was important to have ground rules for the students in a course that contained potentially controversial material. For some teachers, this was standard practice at their schools; for others it was something that they added because of the LGBT content. But they emphasized that, with those rules in place, their classrooms became much safer spaces. Michelle Berry, for instance, taught at St. Gregory

College Prep, a small, nonreligious, independent school in Tucson, Arizona. She taught the AP U.S. history survey for tenth graders, narrower electives for eleventh and twelfth graders on the American West and the United States from the Second World War to the 1980s, and the AP U.S. government class. She underscored the work she did with her students at the beginning of each term.

Berry

Part of the key is just laying the groundwork in the very beginning of every course. "We're going to talk about new ideas, things maybe we've never thought about, that might be very foreign to our own values system or our own way of living our lives and how we think about ourselves. And we have to be open to listening and hearing about those ideas, not necessarily agreeing with them. And then also to have a great deal of ability to have a sense of humor about stuff."

We do pretty profound work creating our class norms, which we spend the first entire two classes of every semester doing. That includes how we're going to enter into civil dialogue with each other. We establish processes for, if things get heated or uncomfortable, what are the processes that we are going to go through as a learning community to work ourselves out of that. So if someone says something incredibly offensive to somebody else, we have something called the "ouch rule." The ouch rule is when anyone in the room thinks that what has been said



Michelle K. Berry

would perhaps be read as hurtful by anybody, whether they're in the room or not, you can say, "Ouch." Then the person who said "Ouch" and the person who made the offending remark are totally off the hook. They don't need to say a word after that. And then I facilitate a conversation about why what has been said could be offensive, hurtful, or inflammatory in a negative way.



Mark Rentflejs taught at Forsyth Satellite Academy, a small public high school in New York City designed for students who had failed or dropped out of their original high schools. According to him, most of his students read at the sixth-grade level. He was principally a foreign language teacher, but he regularly augmented the history department's offerings and had recently been invited by the school to teach a course divided between the history of the First World War and U.S. LGBT history. Like Berry, Rentflejs said that he did "a lot of groundwork in the first couple of days" about how "we need to be appropriate" and "what it means to be offensive." That work paid off across the rest of the semester.

Rentflejs

I can only remember a couple of times having to say, "That wording was kind of offensive: can you reword that?" And they did; they found another way to do it.



Mark Rentflejs

And then once I modeled that a couple of times, they really self-corrected often. Or other students would say, "That was kind of mean." "OK, I'm sorry," and they would say it a different way.



Like many others, Eric De Lora described the ground rules that were present in all the classes at his school. But rather than emphasizing how the rules established limits on class discussion, he stressed the value of creating an atmosphere where students could freely express their range of reactions.

De Lora

It really is about being open to their questions and their comments. . . . Because we're a seminar-style school, as teachers we're very comfortable saying to a student, "What did you think about that?" And we're also prepared for a student to say, "Here's what I thought about it: it was nuts!" or "It was goofy!" or "I really hated it!" The follow up question is "Why?," and that's where the conversation starts. Just trying to be really open to their questions, that was the best choice that I made, because they all came with dozens of questions. . . . As a teacher, I'm not afraid to say, "I don't know." I think that's a valid response. And coupled with that you say, "Let's go find the answer." Then it becomes a joint exploration that we're doing.



Uniquely, Will Grant saw no need for special class preparation to talk about LGBT content. He described his approach to me in discussing how he incorporated LGBT content into his ninth-grade world cultures course.

Grant

I just start talking about it in the midst of a lecture, and actually I don't give the kids any notice. What I do is when we're studying ancient Greece, and we're talking about different elements of the society, without breaking my stride at all, I start talking about the fact that homosexuality was part and parcel of Greek society, that there were significant elements that could be equivalent to civil unions that were called "collateral adoptions." And the reason I started doing that was

that I wanted to normalize it. I wanted to make homosexuality a part of history, just as when I talk about marriage and gender relationships in Greek society. . . . What I find is that there is a little bit of a blip in the class, in terms of the energy of the students, when I say that, and then they simply keep taking notes. And eventually one of them will get up the nerve to ask a question about it.

There's a lot of concern among teachers about teaching [this material to] younger students. But what we've got to remember is that these kids are totally immersed in the media world, and they are very familiar with homosexuality. There are gay characters on television; they are all on the Internet, there's stuff on Facebook. Where maybe in our generation a teacher teaching on homosexual history would have been introducing the topic, we're not introducing anything to these kids. All we're doing is normalizing it and indicating that it had a place in history.



Even the best ground rules, however, cannot stop students from having strong reactions, asking uncomfortable questions, or even making the occasional hostile comment. Researchers have underscored that teachers often feel overwhelmed at the idea of introducing discussions of sexuality, let alone homosexuality, into their classrooms. Their fears circulate around their ability to manage the discussions that will ensue, the possibility of needing to confront homophobic remarks, and the ways they will feel vulnerable as a result. Because of that, I repeatedly asked the teachers if there were homophobic outbursts in their classes and what they did about them. For instance, I asked Mark Rentflejs if there were declarations in his LGBT history class like “I don’t think gay people should be allowed to get married!”

Rentflejs

Yes, of course! But most of the time it was the students who would challenge each other's views. . . . And I would totally validate the students' views. “I don't think gay people should get married!” “OK, why not?” I would say. And I would let them explain that. And then I would say, “OK, well, imagine this scenario. How would you feel about that? Or how about this scenario?” Based on whatever argument they were making, whether it be religious or constitutional, I would lay out other options to help them see where their line of logic would go—and if their argument was a consistent argument or a prejudice. But I always invited

them to argue and said, "I'm not going to take it personally, because as a teacher it's my job to make you think."



Kurt Dearie said his corrections were usually around students' tone, not content, and he had a clear response ready for someone shouting out something inappropriate.

Dearie

I'd say, "You're certainly entitled to have whatever beliefs you want, in support of gay rights or against gay rights. But we're not going to shout out any kind of homophobic remarks, or other remarks, because that's not appropriate behavior that we're going to show in my classroom." So I steer that towards behavior. Because behavior is what I can control, and what the law allows me to control, and what I expect to have control over in my classroom. And if they use certain words, I also explain why these are inappropriate words, and why they can be hurtful, and that there are lots of words that can be hurtful to a lot of people, and we're not going to use *any* of them.



But Dearie, who also helped found the GSA at Carlsbad High, stressed the importance of the teacher responding to whatever was said and not ignoring it.

Dearie

Everybody in class is going to be waiting to see what you do, and you better deal with it. Because one of the things that I discovered when I started working with my GSA students is how many teachers seemed to be deaf, dumb, and blind: they are hearing all of these words in their classroom, and they are pretending that they don't. And the signal that they are giving the students is that this is perfectly acceptable. But as soon as the teacher intervenes, and intervenes consistently, with the right tone and education, it starts: students adapt, and they change their behavior.

There is, right now, a huge negativity. We have all these LGBT students sitting in classrooms wondering if it's safe in here. And as soon as they hear a teacher

who doesn't intervene in a remark like that, well, then they know it's not a safe place. And if you're going to change things, as a teacher, you have to first create a safe place, and that's really important. If you're going to bring in any of this material, you need to create a safe environment for all students in your classroom.



Michelle Berry, who embraced seminar-style teaching at St. Gregory, also stressed that it should not come as a surprise if something controversial is said.

Berry

You have to recognize that it's going to happen. That's the most important thing: to recognize that these *are* controversial issues for these kids, these are things that they've never talked about before [in a classroom]. . . . And you have to meet these students where they are, and recognize that that might happen. But there's a way to get around that in a very civil, kind way. And we have to create a learning community that is full of trust and full of respect, and therefore everybody has to feel safe, including the most conservative student who thinks that homosexuality is a sin against God. They have to feel safe also. Finding that balance is not easy, and it is scary. But it's well worth doing, because inevitably what you see is students meeting each other halfway, with lots of care and consideration for one another, and you really watch students become beautiful discussants in the course of all of this.

Grant

In terms of the homophobic comment, I think it's important for the kids to be able to disagree with what I'm saying, but to show that they can do it in a way that isn't homophobic. I think giving the kids that permission is important. So I can say, "Look, if you want to debate whether or not our society is ready for gay marriage, let's totally have that debate. But the one thing that I need to have is that there is no question about the full humanness of everybody involved on both sides. The question as to whether or not anybody should have the right to marriage, we can discuss that. But you can't question the humanness of the people on the other side of this debate. Other than that, I'm really interested in having this debate."

One of the things I found was that the kids were terrified of being labeled as homophobic if they wanted to raise questions like “Well, didn’t gay men kind of spread AIDS?” So it’s important to let them feel like they can ask that question. What I’ve found is that it also, de facto, shows the kids what I mean by homophobia and what the problem is, if they’re saying that somebody isn’t fully human.



Will Grant also felt clear about how to keep discussions of sex out of his classroom.

Grant

I call it the “bright line.” I explain it to the kids that what I’m talking about is sexual identity, and not sex, and sexual identity is the way in which their sexuality impacts a person’s psychology, politics, their standing in the community, their political rights—that’s sexual identity. Sex is something else, and I say, “That’s for health class, not for this class.” And I say, “We don’t need to talk about sex in order to talk about sexual identity.” And somebody inevitably says, “Well isn’t it impossible to talk about homosexuality without talking about sex?” And I say, “No. We teach history all the time, and sexuality is a part of it, but it’s just normative because it’s heterosexuality, and we don’t talk about sex.” And the example I give is Queen Victoria and Albert—how their children became the ruling family of Europe, and World War I in many ways was a family feud between all these cousins who were all related. So their sexuality, their normative heterosexuality, was clearly a part of that history, but we never stop and talk about sex. You don’t need to.

Laying the Groundwork with Colleagues

With the exception of one teacher, all the others emphasized the importance of talking over this venture with colleagues—both fellow teachers and administrators—before beginning. Almost all suggested clearing the new content with the principal, head of school, or department chair. But most emphasized these conversations as a way to build support and community within the school. Sarah Strauss, for instance, emphasized the value of creating “a support structure” within the school by engaging in multiple conversations about the curriculum in advance of doing the teaching.

Strauss

Talk to people, teachers, administrators within the school who are supportive. Try to let them know “This is what I’m doing” and try to get them onboard. Have an open meeting with parents. I think it really depends on your community, in terms of what is necessary. But at least then you’re setting up the conversation about what’s going to take place, and this is why. . . . And you can also say that there is not just a “teaching history” reason for doing this, but there are other reasons—like this is a way of fighting bullying. In other words, there is an expansive reason for doing it that is about kids.



Will Grant’s department chair at Athenian had approached *him* about teaching a course on LGBT history and culture in the wake of the passage of the anti-same-sex-marriage Proposition 8 in California in 2008. Grant followed the kind of advice Strauss offered before he began teaching in order to build consensus among his colleagues.

Grant

Once we got approval from the administration to create the course, I did a lot of work at our school. I had several meetings with the Gay-Straight Alliance, with teachers, with my department head, to talk about the course and the idea of teaching it. And I asked folks at the school, “What do you feel comfortable with me teaching, what do you not want me to go into, and what are the gray areas? Let’s create a process as I set up the course because I want you to know I am not flying off in a direction you don’t want me to. I recognize as a school that we are taking a step forward with this course, and I want everybody to be really comfortable with the content of the course.”



In some communities and some schools, cultivating that kind of support can be very challenging work, to say the least. About six years before Kurt Dearie started including LGBT content in his U.S. history classes—both the general one and the AP—he joined a group of students to establish a GSA at Carlsbad High. Dearie grew up in Carlsbad and described it as a “very conservative Christian community” that

voted overwhelmingly in favor of banning same-sex marriage. When the students' efforts were initially blocked by the school, the group had to file a lawsuit to force the school board to allow the GSA to operate, and Dearie himself met with various forms of retribution: vandalism, being called a "pedophile," and having the school targeted by the Concerned Women for America. Dearie, who is a straight married father, was very proud of how Carlsbad High changed after the GSA started. But because of his experiences, he thought it was very important that teachers understand clearly what legal support (in states such as California) or curricular support they have for incorporating LGBT content. And Dearie, who had also done teacher training for AVID (Advancement Via Individual Determination, a program that guides kids from lower socioeconomic groups into college), emphasized that teachers must rely on those frameworks as they present their proposals to school administrators.

Dearie

Any teacher that is going down this road has to deal with educating the administration, other teachers, and the community. . . . In California we have very specific laws. So I explain that we're going to look at LGBT rights and the contributions of LGBT people, because that's what the law requires us to do. . . . For our administrators, that really freed them. Literally, when they get calls or complaints from the community—which they have in the last ten years—they can simply say, "We're following the law, but I appreciate your concerns." That's all that needs to be said, and then move on.

But also, when introducing [this content] into the classroom, you have to tie it to your state curricular framework or to the AP and their new framework. You've got to legitimize why you're doing what you're doing in the classroom: that it is educational, that it is part of our history, that the framework requires it. Outside California, if I were introducing [LGBT content], it would be in terms of the things that are identified in that state's framework—and which always include civil rights. Because when you're connecting ideas of civil rights—whether it is goals, strategies, support, etc.—and you connect past to present, gay rights are always there. You can't ignore the one civil rights movement which is in front of your face and going on at the time!

That's something that's really critical to any teacher in bringing this material into the classroom: that they be ready to defend it. Because they will have to defend it, and you can't defend it based on people's beliefs or your own beliefs.

You have to have some legal grounding or some educational grounding. I think that's a critical lesson that has really served me well over the years.



Inevitably, Sarah Strauss suggested, there will be questions raised about what is being dropped from the syllabus in order to include the new material. Given that, Strauss underscored that teachers should also feel okay about taking small steps first.

Strauss

In spite of the rise of social history over the last half century, most people still believe that the “important” topics are traditional political, economic, and military issues. If you choose to focus on sexuality, race, and/or gender, you will necessarily “neglect” the more canonical curricula. And if teachers are in a situation where they have standardized tests, APs or state-mandated curricula, that’s a lot to push back against. So the initial focus can just be on where can you find those places to create little wedges to start important conversations about LGBT issues.

I go back to the idea that just using the words *gay*, *lesbian*, or *transgender* in a positive or neutral way is a big thing. Because in some ways it’s about exposing students to the information, and on another level it’s about saying to kids, “You know what? If this is you, if you think this is you, if this is someone you love, it’s okay.” To me, honestly, it’s as much about *that* as the actual content.

Engaging Classroom Strategies

Teachers offered a variety of additional strategies for engaging students with LGBT history, including the use of dynamic sources, guest speakers, field trips, and, surprisingly enough, tests.

In Michelle Berry’s post-1945 course, gender and sexuality was one of the three major themes she explored with students, and she saw exciting primary sources and selected secondary texts as essential to that work.

Berry

For me the sources are what unite us all in common conversation, even scholarly articles that are appropriate with that particular age group. For instance, I assign excerpts from Chauncey’s *Gay New York*. . . . We actually read some of the Kinsey

report—that always gets them going and is a lot of fun. I pick some excerpts from a terrific book on Pachucas in LA in the '40s. Of course we read big excerpts from Betty Friedan. . . . Then we've got this beautiful document from which we're working, and from there we can have bigger conversations. "Well, how does this apply to today? . . . Are we in a Kinsey moment or in a 1950s moment or what historical moment?" And if you have that common reading—be it one primary source or an academic article—then you can begin to have these bigger conversations. And that's just enough for high school students to get them going, to get them excited, to get them really engaged. Because then they're like, "Holy crap! This is so new!" Just giving them that little bit gets them fired up, because it is so new for them—and it's so not the Bank War or Andrew Jackson!



Nell Hirschmann-Levy loved having speakers engage with her students.

Hirschmann-Levy

I always incorporated speakers into the class. That was a pretty crucial part of the course, being able to really talk to people. . . . One of the best parts of the course for the students was when we would go to the home of this woman, Joan, who was ninety-six and lived through most of the eras that we were talking about. She talked about being a Trotskyist, about working in a factory in Detroit for the first time during World War II, about the first time she took off her skirt and wore pants. She had a front marriage, had a kid. She was really open with the students and talked about her life in an incredible way! And for the students to see someone in the flesh talking about experiences that they had read about in Chauncey and [Lillian] Faderman just made the texts and the history come alive. You should have seen their faces: it was like they were watching a movie!



Eric De Lora said that his Berkeley students were electrified by a Saturday field trip into San Francisco to see some of the history they had been discussing.

De Lora

There's a visceral reaction. It makes it real for kids. Maybe in the age of Internet technology and social media, we don't have real conversations and real

experiences: we have cyber-conversations and experiences. Getting out of your head and into the practical, it helps you understand that it was real, that it happened, that these people actually existed. And that's what kids respond to. . . . Getting out there really connects them to the real world.



Likewise, Hirschmann-Levy described taking her New York City students to a few of the sites described in Chauncey's book and my book of LGBT history walking tours, *Stepping Out*.

Hirschmann-Levy

Those walks always helped ground the text in real experiences. The students got, in some ways, to experience the areas through the lens of the twenty-first century, and it always kind of made it come alive. . . . Students would go up and touch the brick, and say, "Oooh, I'm touching something from 1900!" They would talk about how different the neighborhood was. They would say, "I can't believe we're standing in front of a clothing store when it used to be" X, Y, or Z. They start to feel that there was a real history to this neighborhood, and that it's changed dramatically. . . . It allows the students to feel that the history is not just on paper, but that it's more alive than that.



Finally, several teachers talked about testing as a way to signify the importance of this material. For instance, Dearie pointed out that the College Board would begin testing on LGBT history in the 2014 AP curriculum—which would encourage more teachers to incorporate the material. Buenzle hoped that the IB might do the same, noting that if it did "it would . . . allow us to explore this content in more depth." But even without those external tests, Grant emphasized that any teacher's own tests can help underscore the significance of LGBT history.

Grant

It's important to test the kids on this information, and to make a test question or an essay question where the kids can weave this knowledge into a larger discussion. So if you ask a question about the social impacts of World War II, then one

of the things that should be in the kids' complete answers is the creation of strong gay communities along the coasts because of demobilization. It's important for teachers to think not just about the *presentation* but the *assessment* of it as well, and to angle the questions towards showing how these were social movements that impacted U.S. history.

Concluding Thoughts

Michelle Berry, Mark Buenzle, Eric De Lora, Kurt Dearie, Will Grant, Nell Hirschmann-Levy, Robert King, Mark Rentflejs, and Sarah Strauss changed the way history was being learned at their schools and understood in their communities, and as a result, they shifted the horizons of their students. Some did it with a whole course, some with a class theme, some with a mini-lecture. But all of them courageously altered the landscape around them.

Beyond the insights they shared for this essay, three additional things became increasingly clear to me over the course of these conversations. One is the power of a single teacher to change the whole culture of a school. That was made apparent by the way Kurt Dearie's decision to help start a GSA radically transformed Carlsbad High School into a place where GSA students regularly conducted sensitivity trainings with the faculty about LGBT issues. Similarly, it became clear to me that eleventh graders at Brooklyn Friends School learned LGBT history as part of their standard curriculum simply because Mark Buenzle started incorporating that material into his social movements elective course several years earlier. These teachers' individual actions made a tremendous difference.

Second, even the smallest effort can have a large impact. At Palisades Charter High School in Southern California, Robert King included LGBT content merely as a *part* of just *one day's* lecture in his AP U.S. history class, the day he focused on "the other civil rights movements." That was all he had time to do. Nonetheless, that lecture proved to be transformative. He explained, "We were discussing the Stonewall Inn, and I had mentioned the documentary [*Stonewall Uprising*], and I was doing the best I could do, relating what the story was. And Jack Davis raised his hand and, at that moment, came out to the entire class." In an essay published later, Davis wrote that King had been his "favorite teacher" and at the time he had been "looking for a way to come out to everyone." "When a slide popped up that mentioned Stonewall and that

many people were coming out at this time, I shot up my hand and said, 'I think I'll take this opportunity to come out, and say that I'm gay.'¹ King told me that when Davis came out, "the reaction of the entire class was a round of applause. The kids just spontaneously got up out their seats and hugged him. It was truly an amazing experience." For Davis "that history class may have been the most defining moment of my coming out"; running out the classroom door afterward, "the weight of the world seemingly lifted from my shoulders . . . and I was ecstatic." That was the impact of a single mini-lecture, and for King as well, that day was "a highlight of a twenty-three-year career in teaching."

Third, as King's comment implies, taking these steps, even when daunting or difficult, can also profoundly shift the classroom experience for *teachers* themselves. Sarah Strauss, for instance, made clear that introducing this kind of new material felt risky. But when students entered her class exclaiming, "This was a really interesting article! I never knew this stuff!" she felt reassured. In part, she thought, "they appreciate that I'm taking a risk." But more important, for Strauss herself, "I would say that some of *my* most satisfying or meaningful experiences as a teacher are interconnected to this sort of risk-taking."

Interestingly, Kurt Dearie faced the hardest challenges in doing this work, and yet he also expressed the strongest sense of gratification about it for himself: "You know, you go into education to help kids. And nowhere in my professional career or my personal life have I been able to see the effect of good work as clearly. As teachers we hope that we make change, but I can really see it right in front of me with my own students. It's very rewarding work, and the more you do, the better things are, and that really rewards you. So it's become a passion for me. You can see that it's so needed, and that it really makes change."

These teachers all shared Dearie's passion to help kids, to educate them, and to make change. What made them extraordinary was that every day they were taking concrete steps to achieve those goals. And while I suspect that many of them had never been "interviewed" before about their teaching, I found each of their words and actions inspiring. Their thoughtfulness, their courage, and their insights all impressed me. It was clear to me that they were all working to transform their classes and schools and communities by their efforts. And they all proved generous and even eager to have their experiences shared with other teachers—so that other teachers could begin to imagine how the

LGBT past can become part of the shared past we all teach in our schools.

NOTE

1. Jack Davis, "Gay High School Swim Captain Makes a Splash Standing Up for Rights," *Outsports*, April 24, 2013, <http://www.outsports.com/2013/4/24/4262084/gay-high-school-swim-captain-jack-davis-makes-splash-standing-up-for-rights>, accessed July 22, 2013.

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- After Stonewall*. Dir. John Scagliotti. First Run Features, 1999. DVD, 2005. Focuses on LGBT activism from 1969 to 1999.
- Before Stonewall*. Dir. Greta Schiller. First Run Features, 1984. DVD, 2004. Portrays pre-Stonewall activism.
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- Milk*. Dir. Gus Van Sant. Universal, 2008. DVD, 2009. Eric De Lora recommended this feature film about the career of slain San Francisco supervisor Harvey Milk, portrayed by Sean Penn.
- Ross, Alex. "Love on the March." *New Yorker*, November 12, 2012. Sarah Strauss recommended this article as a brief overview of LGBT activism.
- Stonewall Uprising*. Dir. Kate Davis and David Heilbroner. PBS, 2010. DVD, 2011. Public television documentary focused on the Stonewall riots.

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- Shilts, Randy. *And the Band Played On: Politics, People, and the AIDS Epidemic*. New York: St. Martin's, 1987. Eric De Lora used selected chapters from this account of the epidemic.
- United in Anger*. Dir. Jim Hubbard. Film Collaborative, 2012. DVD, 2013. Sarah Strauss screened parts of this documentary, which focuses on the organization ACT UP.
- We Were Here*. Dir. David Weissman. New Video, 2011. DVD, 2011. Both Will Grant and Eric De Lora recommended this emotionally powerful documentary about San Francisco in the early AIDS years.